

The Friend Behind The Mayor

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On her way to the mayor's kitchen cabinet meeting, Jane Driscoll stops to chat with a cluster of skateboarders who gather at noon on the City Hall steps. The director of the Mayor's Youth Office pats one boy's head and compliments a girl's earrings.

Driscoll climbs the marble steps inside City Hall and rushes to the lunch in a brightly printed billowing suit and a pink T-shirt, a belated Mother's Day gift from her daughter that says, "insanity is hereditary. You get it from your kids." Driscoll wears another gift on the ring finger of her left hand—a garnet and diamond ring—a token of affection from Mayor Bernard Sanders.

Sanders passes her, heading down the stairs. They always change discreet smiles and as Sanders hurries by, he gives Driscoll a playful nudge with his right elbow. She continues on her way.

Driscoll enters the Community and Economic Development Office and sits at a conference table with Sanders' secretary, Linda Niedwestke, assistant city attorneys John Franco and Gretchen Bailey, constable David Clavelle and development director Peter Clavelle. Sanders joins the group with his coat and as they munch from brown bags, the group discusses appointments, budget requests and issues before upcoming meetings of the Board of Aldermen. The closed meeting is informal, allowing each member a chance to learn what the others are doing and to add suggestions about issues outside their purview.

This summer Driscoll's major concern is a controversial teen center planned for Memorial Auditorium. But she also voices opinions on the school budget, housing development and other topics that affect city chil-



Jane Driscoll makes point during weekly brown bag lunch meeting of aides close to Mayor Bernard Sanders.

dren. Although Driscoll's office operates on relatively meager funds, her presence at the weekly kitchen cabinet meetings reveals her broadening influence at City Hall.

"Jane's views are valued, not in proportion to the size of her office's budget," says Sanders.

Since Sanders was elected in 1981, Driscoll has become the mayor's companion, confidante and connection to the city's youth. She has turned her City Hall office into a gathering place for teen-agers, who she says have rarely found a voice in government. Driscoll's office has launched many projects: a day-care center in Memorial Auditorium, a newspaper produced by teen-agers and a summer work camp for international youth.

For the last three years, the National Conference of Mayors has honored Burlington's youth programs and Driscoll credits her office for the awards. But as an influential member of the Sanders administration, Driscoll, her projects, the source of her power and the measure of

her accomplishments remain controversial.

"At the beginning, a lot of people questioned whether I was a political liability," Driscoll says. "I wasn't judged just on my performance."

Driscoll and Sanders say they prefer to keep their private lives private and Driscoll backs away from the question about whether the two are planning to marry. She holds up the ring on her hand. "It doesn't signify anything to be. It signifies what is."

Questions about favoritism from the mayor constantly plague her. Whenever the Youth Office proposes a new project, such as the Memorial auditorium youth center, accusations of cronyism and inappropriate politicking surface among the opposition.

"If I was to appoint my wife to a paying job, would that be inappropriate?" asks Alderman Paul LaFayette, D-Ward 5. "Now she (Driscoll) is a girlfriend. But how much closer can you get? I'm not saying she's not qualified. But the mayor's no different than any

other guy. He's putting people around him that he's comfortable with. If that's not cronyism, what is?"

Sanders and Driscoll met in 1981 during a mayoral election debate in the Unitarian Church, arranged by Driscoll who was working at the King Street Area Youth Program.

"He blew everybody away," she says about that first encounter. "To me, he embodied a lot of things people believed. I told him he had my vote."

While Driscoll wasn't swayed from her independent stance to become a socialist like Sanders, she did find his political views to be the highest form of democracy. "I have learned a great deal about socialism from Bernie," she says.

Whether higher office such as the governorship is the right thing for the mayor to pursue is something Driscoll isn't sure of yet. "For us it would take a lot more thinking," she says. "It's

Continued on Page 4