

# VERMONT

M A G A Z I N E

THE BURLINGTON FREE PRESS

SUNDAY, JULY 7, 1985

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Jane Driscoll

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## The Friend Behind The Mayor

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## On the Cover

Listening to the recent Richie Havens concert in Battery Park, Jane Driscoll, director of the Mayor's Youth Office, and Bernard Sanders took time out from the rigors of city government to enjoy an evening of music.

Photo by JYM WILSON

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Since Bernard Sanders won his first mayoral election in 1981, Jane Driscoll was on hand to work for his administration. She soon became the volunteer director of the youth office and later a salaried city official. Driscoll's influence has extended to the Mayor's advisory kitchen cabinet where she offers her views on a range of city matters. In this issue, John Gittelesohn explores the sometimes controversial scope of Driscoll's role in the Sanders administration.

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Vermont is published weekly by the Burlington Free Press, P.O. Box 10, Burlington, Vt. 05402. Editorial and advertising offices are at 191 College St. Address all correspondence, including letters to the editor, and freelance articles, to that address. Work is paid for on publication.

# The Friend Behind The Mayor

Story By  
JOHN GITTELSON

Photos By  
JYM WILSON

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 exchange 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 table with Sanders' secretary, Linda Niedweske, assistant city attorneys John Franco and Gretchen Bailey, constable David Clavelle and development director Peter Clavelle. Sanders joins the group with his lunch 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

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very stressful being in politics. There's been no decision yet."

Driscoll and Sanders became personal companions at a victory party the night after a recount confirmed Sanders' election to mayor. "That's when I got to know him in a different capacity, on a social basis," Driscoll says.

Driscoll joined a task force on youth created by Sanders shortly after the election. She soon took control of the group and established a working relationship with Sanders.

**D**riscoll, 34, credits her tenacious nature to her healthy Irish-American upbringing. Like Sanders, Mary Jane O'Meara Driscoll was born in Brooklyn. From childhood, she wanted to work with children and this urge intensified after she gave birth to her first daughter.

She attended the University of Tennessee in 1968, but left school one and a half years later to marry her high school sweetheart, David Driscoll. After stints in Brooklyn and Virginia, where he worked for International Business Machines Corp., the couple came to Vermont in 1975.

"I heard about Vermont through Mother Earth News," Driscoll recalled on a recent afternoon while sitting in City Hall Park, her eyes as blue as turquoise, her hair curling down to her shoulders. "I remember thinking it was a great place with town meetings where your decisions counted. As soon as a job opening (for my husband) came up, I was for it."

The Driscolls lived on a farm in Milton. They raised goats, built their own barn and a pool. They had three children: Heather, now 14, Carina, 10, and David, 9. They also cared for 13 foster children and Driscoll says she became a foster grandmother at age 29.

Driscoll's marriage broke up in 1978. She moved to Burlington and worked at a string of human services jobs, including time with the Burlington police juvenile division and as a community organizer for the King Street Area Youth Program. "... It seemed natural to get involved in politics," she says.

Driscoll now lives with her three children a few blocks from Sanders in Burlington's South End. For enjoyment, Sanders and Driscoll go to dinner, shopping, movies or bowl-



*"I heard about Vermont through Mother Earth News. I remember thinking it was a great place with town meetings where your decisions counted."*

*Jane Driscoll*

ing. Often they spend their time away from City Hall talking about work, Driscoll explains.

"He discusses everything with me," she says. "He thinks about young people in the city. You can't say that about all the aldermen. Bernie's always coming up with ideas. Sometimes too many. That's his bent of mind."

"Bernie's and my relationship is built on trust, respect and understanding," she says. "What more can you ask for?"

**T**hrough 1981, Driscoll served Burlington as a volunteer. In the next year, she received \$4,900 as a youth council coordinator. In 1983, Sanders requested that the position be fully salaried. The Youth Office coordinator's post was not advertised and no applicants were considered aside from Driscoll, according to Sanders.

"The office that existed was her creation," says Sanders. "She had done it on a volunteer basis. I was asking and received from the Board of Aldermen financial support for

the work she had done."

The Aldermen approved Driscoll's appointment, funding the Youth Office with \$30,000 in Community Block Development Grant funds. Driscoll now earns \$22,000 a year from a total office budget of \$55,050. Of that, \$40,000 comes from city coffers while \$15,050 is derived from outside sources such as ticket sales for the Battle of the Bands, advertising revenues from the Queen City Special newspaper, tuition to Summer City Campus classes and small donations.

Around the time Sanders requested a salary for Driscoll, he also proposed a salary for the director of the Mayor's Council on the Arts. In that case, aldermen demanded that the post be advertised. Doreen Kraft, a friend of Sanders who had previously volunteered as arts council director, was the only applicant for the \$15,500 position.

Sanders came into office saying he would eliminate the cronyism he felt typified his mayoral predecessor. Yet he says he doesn't see creating a special post for Driscoll in City Hall, without considering others for the position, as cronyism

because he believes Driscoll has proven her qualifications for the job. He cites the fact that she basically volunteered her time for two years and built the office from scratch before receiving an income from the city.

"What most people judge isn't whether somebody is a friend of the mayor — which I don't deny — but whether somebody is doing a good job or not," Sanders says. "If Jane wasn't successful at her job and she was hired because she was my friend, that charge (of cronyism) would have stuck. But it hasn't."

Driscoll asserts that skepticism about receiving special favors from the mayor has diminished as she has built a successful track record. She claims, in fact, that Sanders often scrutinizes her funding requests more than those from other departments, bending over backward to avoid the appearance of impropriety.

"He decides the budget. And when my office comes up I can't look at him as someone special," Driscoll says. "If anything, I get less than others. No, that's not true, but I feel that way."

Sanders adds, "I try to treat her requests as objectively as I can. Examinations of allocations toward her office indicate that we're as tight with that office as any in the city. I might also add that she's been as successful gathering funding from the outside — from private funding sources — as through city funding. An objective look at what she's accomplished would indicate she's done an excellent job in her own way."

Sanders says Driscoll's income, which doesn't provide health and pension benefits, is in line with other city posts. But some directors of youth facilities around the city say that Driscoll's salary is high for the field. The Sara Holbrook Community Center runs preschool, after-school and summer programs for children. Sara Holbrook director Maggie Green earns \$15,680, according to the center's financial statement.

Yet Driscoll says she deserves her compensation. She points out that Ray Tanguay, director of recreation for the city Parks and Recreation Department, earns \$29,053 for his youth-oriented job. "I don't come to work at 8 and leave at 4:30," she says. "I work almost all the time, except when I'm with the kids or alone with Bernie. I work a good 60 hours a week. Everybody in the office is that way."

"Working with the Youth Office isn't just the Youth Office," Driscoll says later. "I wouldn't have stayed on with no pay and a lot of frustration if I wasn't part of something bigger, if I wasn't participating in overall policy making."

**O**n a recent morning a dozen teen-agers gathered in Driscoll's office near City Hall's Church Street steps to make suggestions for the proposed youth center. The students at the meeting brought their skateboards and ghetto blasters. Some of the boys wore earrings and Mohawk haircuts. Some of the girls wore pantaloons and graffiti-covered T-shirts. One boy entered the City Hall office by climbing through a window over the steps. After the meeting, many of the kids performed dances for the public on the City Hall Park lawn.

The youth center meeting verged on anarchy. The kids spent as much time chewing gum and cracking jokes as

doing business. Yet a teen center was important to the students in the room. They would run it. They would decide what it looked like, what to call it, what people would do there and who would be allowed inside.

They batted around ideas for possible food to serve. "We ought to have healthy food, neat food. We could have sushi," said Selene Colburne.

"I could Xerox some food," said Chris Reid.

They drew up a list of uses for the 1,600 square-foot space: a stage for plays and rock bands, a food counter, a big screen TV, a skateboard ramp. Driscoll had an architect's plan for the space spread across the table, but she wanted to hear design suggestions from the kids.

"The design is absolutely wide open," she said. "There are some things we have to do because of the fire code. But today we want to brainstorm."

One question was who should be able to use the space. Many of the kids had been asked to leave the Burlington Square Mall for loitering and they didn't want to act like heavy-handed cops in their own place. But they also worried about letting in undesirables who would scare away younger children or their parents. Someone suggested membership cards. Finances also came up. So did staffing.

"I'd like to see it eventually become a youth-run business," Driscoll told the group. "I'd like to see it as a place where the people working there actually make decisions, not another McDonald's kind of job, not another dead end."

Driscoll's latest major project, a teen center in Memorial Auditorium that would cost \$37,000 to construct and an estimated \$10,000 to operate annually, won the Board of Aldermen's approval in May. The proposal rekindled accusations of duplicating existing services and centralization of power under City Hall.

Critics charged that children in outlying neighborhoods need more services than those in the center of town, which already has the YMCA, the King Street Area Youth Program, the Boys Club and Sara Holbrook Center.

"I'm never against programs, I'm just against their placement, their location," says Green of the Sara Holbrook Center, who argued that



Continued on Page 6 Jane Driscoll, on the steps of Burlington's City Hall, meets with a group of skateboarders.

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the New North End and the South End have nowhere for children to go after school. "But you're taking the taxpayers' money to bring kids downtown for entertainment. My philosophy is that neighborhood centers are the answer."

Other critics fear that any project might wither if Driscoll should leave office. Sue Luck, senior program director for youth and families at the YMCA, says that the Youth Office's direct line to the mayor often leaves other groups out of the running when funding offers arise.

"I'd hate to see any youth development fled to an administration or any sort of politics that might die. That would hurt the kids of this city a lot," Luck says. "The YMCA is an old institution. We're going to be around a long, long time."

Other Youth Office projects have sparked debate. Last year, the Youth Office opened the Burlington Children's Space, a day-care center for 40 children and infants which provides services for sliding-scale fees, to allow child-care for low income families. The center has become an autonomous, non-profit operation. Driscoll sits on the center's board of trustees.

Creating the day-care center was one of Driscoll's hardest fought battles. It took nearly two years of wrangling with aldermen to receive the seed money. Members of the day-care community said the plan for a sliding-scale program for infants, which requires a caretaker for every three children, would never make enough money to survive. The recent announcement by the Elizabeth Lund Home that it would discontinue for financial reasons its 30-place, child-care program bears out the precarious nature of such projects.

But Sue Kuntz, director of the Burlington Children's Space, says that for the coming year, "We're financially sound." Kuntz adds that the space's financial stability relies on fund-raising beyond tuition.

Kuntz says demand for day-care is underscored by the space's large applicant pool. "The waiting list for infants includes people who are just planning on having babies," she says. Infants under 3 years old are charged \$63 to \$84 a week for full-time care. Preschoolers pay \$53 to \$74 a week.



Jane Driscoll and Mayor Bernard Sanders chat at Trinity College in January of 1982.

*"She's not a particularly good bureaucrat. On occasion she's offended people, but I'm not sure that's a bad thing."*

*Bernard Sanders*

"Whenever you do something different, like sliding fees, they say it's impossible," Driscoll says. "Now a lot of people are talking about doing the same thing. It's having a ripple effect."

The Youth Office publishes the Queen City Special once every three weeks. It is written, photographed and edited by high school students from around the Burlington area. The 7,000-circulation paper earns three-fourths of its cost — more than \$5,000 through May — with advertising revenues, Driscoll says, while the rest of the money comes from the Youth Office budget.

Much of the paper is devoted to previews and reviews of local rock groups and cultural events. The paper also has delved into nuclear disarmament, education, the drinking age and other issues of concern to youth. Its controversial editorials have been widely criticized, but Driscoll takes pride in the initiative the student journalists have shown in producing the paper.

"It's made a difference in the image of young people in the community," Driscoll says about the paper. "It gives the

kids a voice. I'm concerned about youth empowerment. Unless they have a voice, they have no power."

The Youth Office recently ran Summer City Campus, two-week seminars in art, photography, creative writing, video, graphic design and journalism. Driscoll hoped to use some of the journalism assignments as articles for the Queen City Special, but she expressed concern that the teacher had too many article ideas of his own.

David Hilberg, a Burlington High School graduate who works as the Queen City Special arts editor, came into Driscoll's office to find out where the journalism class would meet. Before he left, Driscoll put her hands on Hilberg's shoulders. "Remember," she said, "I want the ideas to come from the kids."

For the past two summers, the Youth Office with the Burlington Peace Coalition sponsored the International Work Camp, bringing teenagers from Western and Eastern Europe and Latin America to the Burlington area as a gesture of international cooperation. The office has orga-

nized a job recruiting program for area youths and businesses. In the winter, it operates Operation Snowshovel, employing students to clear snow from the homes of Burlington's needy elderly.

The Youth Office has put on the annual Battle of the Bands, teen concerts in Battery Park, a New Year's Eve teen dance, roller skating trips for hundreds of children and several drama productions. The office also played a major role in starting the Old North End Little League.

Much of Driscoll's work involves advising people how to get things done. Members of the Vermont Skateboard Association who were planning a skate-in and rock concert for Battery Park came by her office, not to get money, but to pick up a list of people who could help promote the event. A man from Sacramento

dropped by to get information about starting a newspaper for students in his city. Sometimes children come in just to talk.

"Kids always take precedence," Driscoll says about the times when she is busy. "If the phone rings and it's a kid, I take it. If it's an adult, I tell them to leave a message."

Before Sanders created the Youth Office, children often were overlooked by city government, Driscoll says. Their problems were handled by private groups, schools or the parks department. City Hall served as a site for adult activities: registering deeds, purchasing marriage licenses, requesting zoning changes.

Driscoll sees a special need for teen programs. "Adolescence is one of the roughest stages people go through in life," she says. "It's often very lonely. I've noticed that adults will do everything for children to make them happy, but when they get together with teen-agers, it's like they don't know how to talk (to each other)."

Driscoll has drawn heat for taking stands on issues that fall outside the Youth Office's auspices. She speaks out at school budget hearings, Board of Aldermen hearings and even on international issues. One of her earliest journeys into the spotlight arose after an emotional speech she delivered to Aldermen following a talk by a Catholic activist from Northern Ireland whom Driscoll supported.

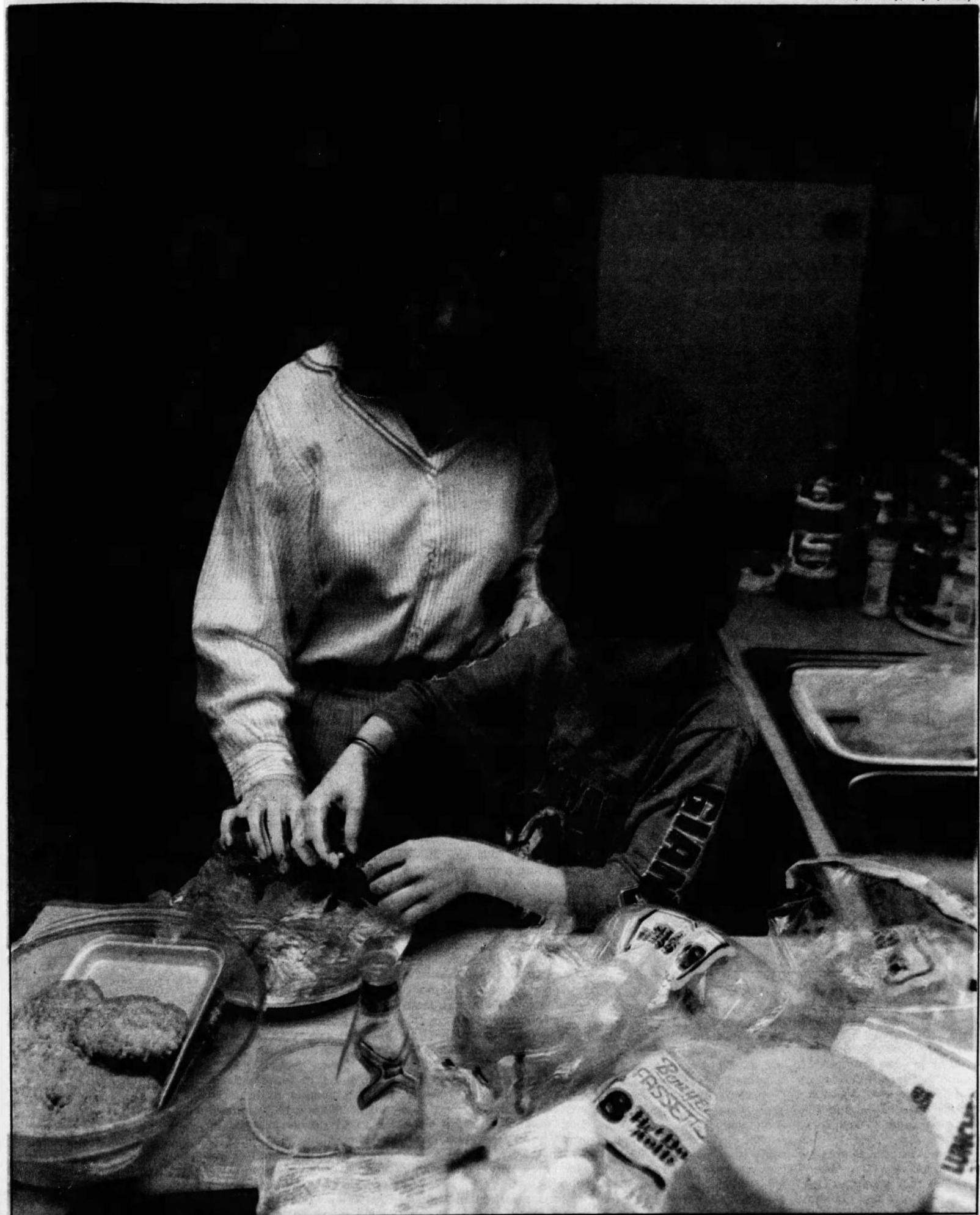
"I was surprised at the amount of press I got, but it was interesting to see how seven minutes of impassioned speaking could create such a stir," she says. "If it were yesterday, I'd do it again. I definitely temper what I say now, though. My feelings about the school department are much stronger than what I say publicly."

Sanders says: "She's not a particularly good bureaucrat. On occasion she's offended people, but I'm not sure that's a bad thing."

Driscoll says a life outside politics attracts her. She talked about taking a six-month vacation in Ireland. Becoming a journalist interests her too. She is an editor of *The Progressive*, a forthcoming newsletter published by Burlington's Progressive Coalition party. She hopes the Youth Office will endure after her departure from City Hall; she doesn't want to work there forever.

Before the last mayoral election, Sanders agonized over whether to run or not. He has hinted about his aspirations for higher office such as the governorship. Would Driscoll follow him elsewhere?

"I don't know yet," she says. "It depends on where he's going."



Jane Driscoll, along with her 9-year-old son, David, prepares dinner at home.