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Meeting on Pride turns contentious

by Fred Kuhr
Bay Windows staff

Over 200 people packed into the Arlington Street Church in Boston's Back Bay neighborhood June 19 for the first in a series of meetings sponsored by the Pride Committee to gather input from the community in anticipation of Pride '97.

Expectedly, however, most in attendance were more interested in discussing the controversy surrounding two incidents that occurred during this year's parade: a man on stilts flashing members of the crowd, and two topless women on a rolling bed simulating sex acts.

Few remained silent during the two-and-a-half hour meeting, which was held town meeting-style, with members of the crowd invited to line up and take individual turns at the microphone.

Many sported stickers stating, "I was on The Bed," and "My tits and I were out at Pride."

Steve Tierney, one of this year's Pride grand marshals, acted as facilitator.

"I remind you that we are one community and we are here to take from what we've done over



Heather Janules and Jing Marcos of the Lesbian Avengers read from a prepared statement during a meeting called to lay plans for next year's Pride celebration — a meeting that nonetheless turned into a debate about lewd displays at this year's Pride celebration that made headlines in the gay and mainstream press.

the past 26 years and build new for next year," Tierney told the audience during one of his early attempts at crowd control.

"Being angry is great, [but] being pissed off at each other and not treating each other with respect and dignity ... is not why we're

here tonight," Tierney continued. Despite these words, many did not hide their anger. Perhaps the most heated mo-

ment of the evening came when Michael Greene, president of the Massachusetts Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights Lobby, demanded an apology from those responsible for The Bed.

"[Our] fight is about a lot of things, but the fight is not about who gets to ride in the parade on a bed or on a pair of stilts," Greene said.

"The antics of the groups that came to this Pride parade and made a sideshow of it did not help us address some of the issues that we're working very hard to fight for. Anybody here who thinks our movement moved one step forward in any of the real houses of power, whether you want to acknowledge that or not, is shortsighted," he continued.

"If we had community meetings like this with this many in attendance we would knock the roof off the Senate. But most of you are here today because a bed was strolled down Boylston Street," Greene concluded. "You all owe us an apology for what happened at that parade."

A majority of the crowd greeted Greene's comments with boos, hisses and expletives.

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PHOTO: MARLYN HUMPHRIES

June 19 meeting called to discuss Pride celebration turns angry

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One group of activists stood up on the pews and held up their middle fingers.

Others felt that the Pride Committee owed them an apology for inviting Mayor Thomas Menino and the Boston Police Honor Guard to head the parade.

"We can agree or disagree from conservative to radical, but strategically, it stands to reason that if you have politicians who march in your parade, they are going to be embarrassed by things that we do," said audience member Byrna Aronson. "They shouldn't have to answer for our politics."

According to organizers of this year's Dyke March, who passed out a prepared statement before the meeting began, Pride Day has become too conservative.

"There is a long history of mainstreaming, marginalization, and exclusion in Boston Pride Events. Has Pride, Inc. forgotten the roots of gay liberation — Stonewall, protests, marches and grassroots organizing?" they asked.

"Yes they have — by agreeing to collude with police and city government to set standards for lesbian and gay Pride Day behavior. This, unfortunately, is nothing new. Pride, Inc. has continually marginalized lesbians, people of color, working class queers, and other politically active people," the statement continued.

In another crowd-pleasing moment, audience member Adrien Sachs called gay men who did not support The Bed "hypocritical."

"What's disappointing to me is when I see gay men saying horrible things about lesbian sexuality. Has anybody seen the Ramrod float? I love the Ramrod float and I love gay male sexuality, but it is absurd then to turn around and say, 'Oh my God, there are breasts.'" said Sachs.

"Furthermore," he added, "this commu-

nity is small enough that I know everybody's sex life in this room....I know you guys, I've seen you prowling around. I know what you're up to. What's going on here?"

Another point of contention was the presence of children at the parade.

When audience member Sean Cahill told the crowd that, despite his support of The Bed, he was unsure how to explain it to a child, one woman shouted, "Since when do we define a gay pride march by what's appropriate for five-year-old children?"

In response, another voice shouted, "They are our children, and they are part of our community."

Through the evening, speakers scolded the Pride Committee for allegedly telling the press that they would help the Police track down the man on stilts as well as those responsible for The Bed.

"I strongly encourage everyone to go back and read every article that they have written. The Pride Committee has not apologized for anyone and we will not be helping any type of institution find anyone else," said Pride co-chair Sabrina Taylor.

Taylor said that she and her fellow co-chair Gregg Fraker had been "misquoted."

Although Taylor said she was disappointed in how the media handled the incidents at Pride, she was also upset by the community's subsequent reaction.

"I'm a little disappointed that [conservative columnist] Joe Fitzgerald threw a bone into our community and we have not stopped fighting like dogs over it," said Taylor.

Taylor, who is African-American, also spoke to those critics who say Pride ignores issues of diversity.

"If you feel like you are not welcome, we have welcomed you and we will welcome you time and time again," said Taylor. "If you choose to think that what has been part of the institution of Pride for many years is

still present with this institution you need to take a hard look at me because I'm anything but a white male."

In an attempt to put the matter in perspective for the crowd, Tierney commented, "If

we only knew back in 1970, when we went down Charles Street for the first time, that it would all come to whether or not we could be in a bed. It seems a little confusing." ▼

Gov. Rowland refuses to sign proclamation for Conn. Pride events

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — Gov. John G. Rowland has refused to sign a gay pride proclamation, citing its reference to "people who do drag and transgender people."

"The bottom line is the governor feels any official statement or proclamation issued by him should be able to be read to a second-grade class," said Nuala Forde, a spokeswoman for the governor. "There needs to be a line drawn somewhere."

It is the second year in a row the Republican governor has refused to sign the proclamation to declare June "Gay Pride Month."

Former Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. signed a "Gay Pride Month" proclamation during his years in office, and both present and former mayors of Hartford have also approved it, said Rick Stillson, a Hartford resident who organized the campaign.

"I really feel the underlying thing is [Rowland is] using people who do drag and transgender people as a convenient

out for him. I think he does not support us as a people," Stillson said.

Rowland's decision rankled gay rights activists, who said the governor has promised in the past to sign any proclamation that crosses his desk.

"This one did not cross his desk," Forde said. "It did not even get that far. It was raised with him in draft form and it did not proceed beyond that point."

Forde said a proclamation that advocated teaching the principles of the Church of Scientology to children also did not pass Rowland's muster.

The gay pride proclamation was to be read at a gay pride parade in Hartford on June 22.

Stillson said he offered to negotiate the language of the proclamation with the governor's staff, but was refused.

"We don't negotiate proclamations," said Forde. "Either we agree with the spirit of a proclamation or we don't."

In any case, references to people who do drag and transgender people would not have been deleted, Stillson said. ▼

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