

Boston's annual Dyke March, held June 9 the evening before the main Pride march, drew hundreds of smiling, raucous women who demanded that Pride be more political than it has become in recent years.

Boisterous women chant, laugh and clap their way through Dyke March 2000

by **Laura Kiritsy**
Bay Windows staff

With the raucous chant "We're here, we're queer, we're beautiful, don't fuck with us!" a festive crowd of about 580 lesbians, bisexual women and transgender lesbians put the politics into Pride at Boston's 6th annual Dyke March from Copley Square onto the Boston Common on June 9.

By 7:00 p.m. a huge crowd of drumming, rattle shaking, whistle blowing women had already gathered at the Square in preparation for the march's 7:30 kickoff. "I'm kind of inspired to see so many people here," commented one woman as she prepared to join the swarm. Curious passersby stopped to take in signs reading "Kiss in Public," "Or-

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ganize,” “Lick a Dyke,” and “Increase Dyke Visibility.”

Mostly by means of their thundering voices and unbridled enthusiasm, increase dyke visibility is exactly what they did — although minus the bare breasts that are traditional at many dyke marches across the country — Boston marchers were wary of being arrested, as has been threatened for exposing themselves at local Gay Pride parades in the past. As the roar of the Moving Violations motorcycles that led the march reverberated across the green at Copley Square, the dyke march took center stage on Boylston Street, as waiting cars tooted their horns in support and evening strollers stopped to see what the commotion was about.

Dyke marches grew from the desire of lesbian activists to better address women's issues in what they charge is the mostly male-dominated gay subculture and because of their dissatisfaction with the de-politicization in recent years of traditional gay pride marches. The Lesbian Avengers, a renegade direct-action group, along with the National ACT UP Women's Committee and other Washington, D.C., groups, produced the first dyke march, which happened before the 1993 March on Washington, attracting 20,000 women. According to “Dyke Marches: A Herstory” by Yolanda Retter, acclaimed author and activist Sarah Schulman, who co-founded the Lesbian Avengers in 1992, called that march “the largest lesbian event in the history of the world.” That same year dyke marches in San Francisco and New York drew 10,000 and 3,000 marchers respectively. The movement also spread internationally — Japanese lesbians dressed in karate uniforms or black suits marched in Tokyo in 1997 and Ireland held its inaugural dyke march in 1998.

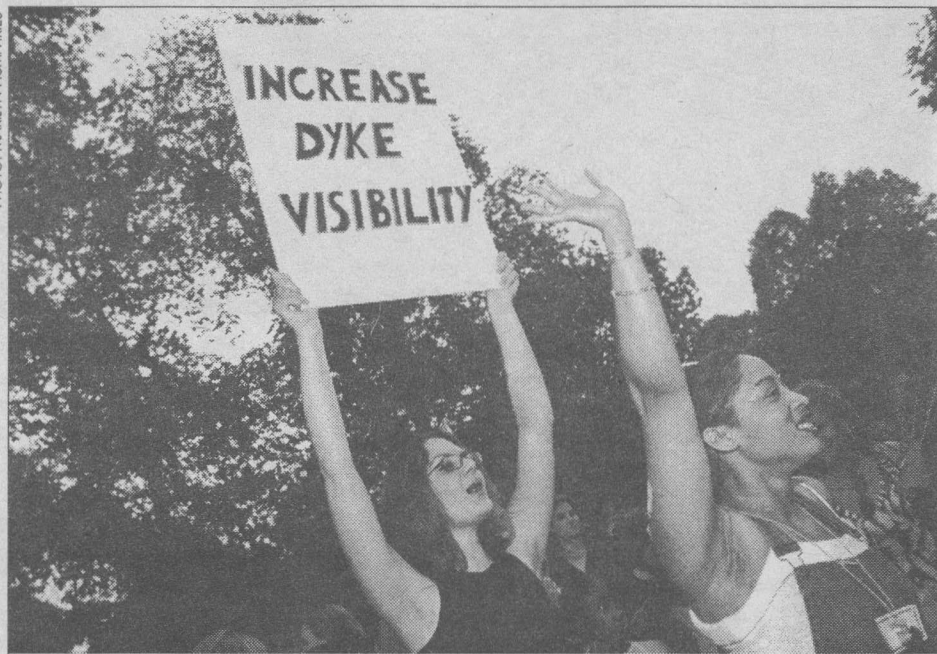
Organized by a 12-member committee consisting of local Lesbian Avengers and other

lesbian, bisexual and transgender activists, the Boston dyke march continues what organizers say is a tradition of grassroots political activism and community-building that has long been vital to empowering the lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities. Said committee member Jaclyn Friedman prior to the event, “I’m marching because we all need to come together. We need to understand that we are a community and come together around the issues that affect us all. The [gay pride] parade is getting more and more taken over by corporate interests, by boys, by ‘really fun party floats’ ... There’s still a lot of political things that we need to achieve and a lot of the people who are involved in putting on Pride don’t seem that interested in attending to those issues. But I think that we here in the grassroots of the dyke community are really interested in attending to our own needs and we’re the only ones who are going to take care of them.”

Among the issues and needs to be addressed, Friedman continued, are women's access to appropriate health care and safer sex information. She also emphasized the need for the gay and lesbian community to deal with gender-identity issues. “A lot of information needs to get out about gender diversity that’s not even out within our own community — about really understanding how we can all be part of the same community and be in different places with our own gender whether we’re talking about trans[gender] issues, bisexuality issues, polyamory, that sort of stuff. I think there’s a lot of stuff that we could really be coming together around. To demand understanding and rights from the greater world we need to do our own work internally and that’s part of this too, to bring everybody together and have a common conversation.”

Friedman acknowledged that the dyke march exists primarily as a political gathering, but gestured at the crowd of women around her and quickly pointed out that “if you look

PHOTO: MARILYN HUMPHRIES



One woman holds a sign near Boston's Park Street Station June 9 that sums up one of the major goals of Dyke March 2000.

around you'll notice a total, total plethora of cute girls ... You can be political and cruise at the same time.”

As the march landed by a fountain at the edge of the Boston Common near the Park Street T station, neither the crowd nor its enthusiasm waned as several speakers armed with a bullhorn took over a park bench for a rally hosted by Gunner Montgomery-Scott, a Lesbian Avenger who also works for the Network for Battered Lesbians. Speakers energized the crowd with brief, but hard-hitting messages that emphasized making positive changes through active community participation.

Echoing Friedman's sentiments, long-time activist Sabrina Taylor called the mob to

action to fight for equal and appropriate health care for lesbians and the acceptance of bisexual and transgender people within the gay and lesbian community. “No one should be above respecting all individuals for who and what they are. And, yes, even if it's an organization masquerading itself as a gay and lesbian, bisexual, transgender organization, if they're not supporting you, it's a call to action!” she declared to the cheering throng.

Taylor concluded her speech by challenging the group to get involved and make an impression on the community. “Don't let the dyke march organization come looking for you,” she implored. “Find them. Offer your

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A raucous, happy Dyke March 2000

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assistance ... Be involved. Make this community exactly what you want. It will give back to you."

Former Cambridge City Councilor Katherine Triantafillou marveled at the number of "young dykes" who turned out to march and told them they would be the ones to make changes in Boston's traditional gay Pride parade, which she feels has become more conservative and less political. Triantafillou invoked the words of renowned breast cancer surgeon Dr. Susan Love, who stated in a lecture at Radcliffe College earlier that day, "It's the women in the world who are going to change it. ... It doesn't take a lot of money, it doesn't take a lot of time, what it takes is the commitment of each and every one of you to make a change in this world. All of you must do it, each one of you, one at a time."

"Believe in yourselves and know that you can do something. ... Say you can!" she thundered as the women chanted, "Yes, yes, yes, yes!"

Speaking up for the Asian-American community was the spirited activist Leah Eckelberger, who pointed out the contributions of Asians to community activism. "The Asian community has long been viewed by others as silent and submissive. This is far, far from the truth!" she said. "Asian and Asian-American activists have constantly been on the forefront of organizing. I've witnessed connections made through the politics of health, labor, environmental justice, culture, nationalism, racism, queerphobia and patriarchy — connections on issues that have often eluded mainstream activists or even hard-core radicals. Silent and submissive? I think not!"

The rally's more sobering speech was delivered by Beth Leventhal of the Network for Battered Lesbians and Bisexual Women, who called attention to the problem of domestic violence in the community. Leventhal stressed that there are numerous local resources avail-

able to women who are currently in abusive relationships, in addition to calling on those who may not be directly affected by violence to also take responsibility for the problem. "If we do not recognize that domestic violence exists among us and do something about it, people in our community, our friends, are going to continue to be injured and some are going to die," said Leventhal. "Batterers feed on our silence; in fact they depend on our silence to continue."

Leventhal suggested that fighting the abuse of power is not limited to fighting domestic violence. "We need to remember that none of us is safe until all of us are," she concluded,

As darkness settled on the Boston Common, the dyke march and rally concluded with the Lesbian Avengers' fire-eating ceremony — a tradition going back to the birth of the Lesbian Avengers in the early '90s. It commemorates the deaths of Hattie Mae Cohens, a lesbian, and Brian Mock, a gay man, whose Salem, Oregon apartment was firebombed by white supremacists on September 26, 1992.

As a circle of about 15 women tilted back their heads and swallowed golf-ball sized bursts of flame that danced at the ends of kerosene-soaked matchsticks the crowd worked itself into a near frenzy. "Burn baby, burn!" yelled one spectator as others chanted "We take the fire within us, we take it and make it our own. The fire will not consume us, we take it and make it our own."

Downing a ball of fire, however, is not without after its after-effects. "I feel really, really empowered," said Nina Selvaggio of Somerville soon after her first public fire-swallowing experience. "I was really, really nervous before and then afterward it's just fun." As Selvaggio spoke with Bay Windows about the experience she then prepared to swallow a Tums antacid tablet, and explained, "Then you don't have the kerosene indigestion." ▼

