

News & Comment

Clash takes place among gay leaders

Powerful political divisions bared in wake of parade

By Joseph Mont
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'Don't go topless' That was the backlit slogan atop a taxi cab that drove past the Arlington Street Church last Wednesday night.

The irony of the display, soliciting rooftop advertisers for the city's cabs, was noteworthy because the church it passed was filled with nearly 200 people debating, among other things, that same message.

This year's Boston Pride parade and festival, an annual celebration of the region's gay and lesbian community, drew an estimated 180,000 people to Downtown Boston on June 8 according to a city Police Department estimate, the largest crowd ever for the event. But the parade and festival's success has been overshadowed by controversy about several instances of public nudity and semi-nudity along the parade route.

Boston Herald columnist Joe Fitzgerald was the first, and most

visible, critic of a group of women who took turns riding topless atop a mattress, and a sometimes-nude man on stilts who, according to witnesses, fondled himself in front of onlookers, including a number of children. The actions criticized by Fitzgerald subsequently drew the ire of politicians, including Mayor Thomas Menino who had led the parade with the Boston Police color guard.

In subsequent days, City Council President Jim Kelly demanded a public hearing on the behavior of parade participants and the controversy was further expanded by the local media. Television and radio stations harped on the events for several days, the Herald and Boston Globe both stepped up their coverage, much of it critical, and CNN took the story nationwide. Even the gay press, notably the weekly newspaper Bay Windows, chastised participants and organizers alike for allowing such behavior. Just as the Herald's letter page was filled with critical voices, Bay



The dominant tone of the 1996 Gay Pride Parade was upbeat and decorous — but a couple of marchers have sparked heated debate.

Windows letters page was similarly packed with condemning voices.

In some ways, the critical take on the event by Bay Windows may have been the most significant because it illustrated a divisive debate amongst the city's gay and lesbian community, a split between those who espouse more conservative and conventional assimilation and those who say

radical, in-your-face action is necessary in an increasingly homophobic environment. While one camp boos the incidents that made this year's parade so newsworthy, the other side, while downplaying the actions of a mere handful amongst a huge crowd, is calling for more such uncivil disobedience.

Putting the two sides together, as was done at a community meet-

ing on June 19 at the Arlington Street Church, proved a volatile mix.

For most of the two-hour plus discussion, speakers in both camps were loudly jeered and four-letter words were tossed plentifully at all sides.

But by the end of the evening, tempers had cooled enough to give way for some constructive discourse and more such meetings.

are planned.

Some, like Michael Greene, president of the Massachusetts Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights Lobby, drew scorn from many for his views.

"We are in the battle of our lives, for some of us literally," he said. "We need to know who our political leaders are and what kind of political statements we want to make as a community.

"The fight is about a lot of things, but the fight is not about who gets to ride along the parade on a bed or a pair of stilts. That does not do anything for the hard-working people in this community who are fighting for the real issues of HIV and AIDS funding and child care issues. Those are the issues we are fighting for and the antics of a few who came to this year's pride parade, and made a sideshow of it, did not help us address those issues we are fighting very hard for.

"Anyone here who thinks our movement moved one step forward in any of the real houses of

power, whether you want to acknowledge them or not, because of the antics of that parade are shortsighted. You all owe us an apology for what happened at that parade."

Others, of a more radical orientation, after hissing Greene, took the microphone to say that Pride Inc., the organizer of the parade and festival, owed them an apology.

Among the complaints, were that Menino and the Boston police should never have been allowed to march in the parade, in part, because their very presence had a stifling effect on participants.

A prepared statement by the group Dyke March, further chastised Pride Inc., for trying to shape the parade in a more conservative mold.

"There is a lot of history of mainstreaming, marginalization and exclusion at Boston Pride events," the statement read. "Has Pride Inc. forgotten the roots of gay liberation, the Stonewall protests and grassroots organiza-

tion. Yes, they have by agreeing to collude with police and city government to set standards for lesbian and Gay Pride Day behavior. Unfortunately, this is nothing new. Pride Inc. has continually marginalized lesbians, people of color, working class queers and other politically active people. The dominant corporate culture of Pride Incorporated has rendered diversity invisible despite this year's theme of 'Pride without Borders.'"

Mary Ellen Bachman, who identified herself as a member of the Massachusetts Socialist Party, offered a similar call for Pride Inc. to get more political.

"No matter how many balloons or floats or whatever there are, this is not a parade like any other," she said. "It is a protest regardless of whether or not you want to hide the fact of what it is. It is a public, political protest and it should have been more of one."

Sabrina Taylor, co-chairwoman of the committee that organized the parade and festival, defended

Pride Inc. and blamed hysteria for occluding facts that would support its actions.

"Go back and read every article that was written," she urged the audience. "The Pride Committee has not apologized for anyone and we will not be helping any kind of institution find anyone else."

Taylor said a prepared statement Pride Inc. issued to the media, unfortunately, may have implied that if parade organizers knew who the man on stilts or women on the bed were their names would have been turned over to police.

That is not true, she said.

"We would not apologize for you guys," Taylor said. "It is not our position to do so and we wouldn't turn you guys in.

"There will not be a dress code and being topless is welcome in the parade."

Gregg Fraker, Taylor's co-chairman, said the parade was intended to be inclusive.

"We encouraged people to take on issues this year," he said. "We

wanted that and we are trying to be as inclusive as we can possibly be. We have been misquoted. We are not on any hunt to track people down nor would we participate in any hunt.

"Joe Fitzgerald threw a bone into our community and we have not stopped fighting like dogs over it. We need to come together. We need to realize that."

Taylor urged those who don't think the parade is political enough to get involved and shape it to their ideal.

"If you don't like the way a parade looks, get involved," she said. "If you don't think Pride Inc. is political enough get involved. If you stop marching, the way you want it to look will not be there. Whether you believe it or not, the Pride Committee supports every single facet of this community."

In a further attempt to calm tensions in Boston's gay and lesbian community, the Pride Committee plans to hold two other similar community meetings later this summer. □