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Pride and prejudice

Parade controversy creates rift among gay activists

By Joseph Mont
TAB Staff Writer
BOSTON — Some members of Boston's gay and lesbian community, seeing little advance coverage in either of the city's two daily newspapers for the annual Boston Pride parade and festival, worried the event wouldn't get much media play.

Those worries have been replaced with confusion and dismay over what some are calling an unexpected case of media overkill — and what some have described as gay-bashing.

The June 8 event, initially considered a successful celebration that drew between 100,000 and 150,000 people to the downtown parade route, almost overnight became a stormy scandal, complete with saturated coverage in local radio, television and newspapers. The reason? Reports that the parade featured two topless women cavorting on a bed and a nude man on stilts.

The incidents probably won't fade as quickly as some might expect or hope. The media — led by Herald columnist Joe Fitzgerald — have ferociously engaged the events, first- and second-hand. In the wake of this coverage, an event designed to promote tolerance has instead produced homophobia, some activists say.

But the biggest aftershock may not be the controversy of damaged relations between the gay and straight communities. The incidents have also developed divisive fault lines within the gay community — damage that may be much more difficult to mend.

At first, The Boston Globe and The Boston Herald treated the public nudity of some participants as an aside, a splash of color in a predominantly upbeat story. Raised eyebrows, not pounding fists, was likely the intended result of accounts of women who pushed and pulled along the route atop a mattress, rolled about topless in a foreplay frolic. Less was made of a man who ambled at least part of the route nude atop stilts and the duo of male marchers who periodically paused to lift their grass skirts and declare a preference for neither boxers nor briefs.

Although these incidents were noted in press accounts, they were downplayed. By Monday, however, they would be played-up, particularly by Fitzgerald.

In what would be the first in a series of columns, Fitzgerald criticized both daily papers for treating the displays of public nudity and "bare-breasted lesbians who taunted shocked observers in the presence of young children" so lightly. He condemned the "perverted exhibitionists who took delight in flaunting their deviance" as "evil, sick and wrong."

The column led to follow-up stories in both the Herald and Globe and nearly nightly segments on the area's local newscasts. Radio talk shows have been swamped with the topic. Politicians, from Mayor Thomas Menino to City Council President Jim Kelly, have taken turns to denounce those who misbehaved along the parade route and call for inquiry.

In response, Pride Committee co-chairmen Gregg Fraker and Sabrina Taylor issued a press release that blamed the incidents on "unregis-

tered participants."

"We have responded in what we believe to be an appropriate manner to move forward in the future," they wrote. "The Pride Committee has been asked to identify the participants in question. The participants were not registered and we have no information to offer."

"While the Pride Committee does not condone unlawful behavior, neither can we condone an atmosphere of homophobia created by this story. This year's 26th annual parade consisted of more than 220 contingents and thousands of people. Less than 1 percent of the people should not represent 99 percent of the other participants."

The committee has also scheduled a community meeting to discuss what happened during the parade for Wednesday, June 19 at 6:30 p.m. at Arlington Street Church.

Former City Councilor David Scodras, a longtime gay activist, said he sees little need for apologies following the parade unless they are directed toward the gay community for an overreaction to minor and isolated incidents.

"The actions of three or four people in a crowd of 100,000 normally wouldn't warrant much attention," he said. "The story here is, 'Why is this a story?'"

Scodras said there are usually arrests made at any parade in the city. Typically a fistfight or two will take place, and there is no shortage of drinking and public urination, he said, describing some events as "piss and puke parades."

The annual gay pride parades, however, have never been marred by an arrest, he claimed.

"There has never been a police report," Scodras said. "I go over them. Zero. None. Nobody arrested."

"Here you have an event that happened that didn't bother the police and that they felt wasn't important enough to arrest anyone. That tells you that there is something more going on here than meets the eye."

"Why is this such a big story?" Scodras asked. "If you go to New Orleans during the Mardi Gras, one of the interesting pastimes is that heterosexual men stand on balconies up and down Bourbon Street and throw down necklaces to women who will lift their skirts or show their breasts. And yet that never seems to have made the front page of any New Orleans paper. If you go to either the San Francisco or New York gay pride parades, it's difficult to count the number of naked people."

"In Boston we have had MIT students streaking naked through the streets and many parades have been interrupted by streakers or flashers. It's even happened in the St. Patrick's Day parade, but people have pretty much ignored it and it certainly didn't get front-page coverage. The only reason such a big thing was made out of this parade was precisely because it is gay pride," he said.

"If you were to have a policy of categorizing neighborhoods or entire communities of people in any gathering of more than 100,000 people by the actions of anything more than three people, then you could literally categorize any group in the city anyway you want. There could be a murderer in a crowd of 100,000 people. Does that make

them all murderers?"

Some observers predict that while Wednesday's community meeting might assuage some, more feathers may be ruffled than smoothed among gay and lesbian activists. Some of the city's more radical activists are expected to use the forum to voice their dissatisfaction with the Pride Committee's generally conservative approach, citing the controversy and homophobia that surfaced following this year's parade as ample reason to return to more confrontational tactics.

Already, some are discussing the possibility of launching a new gay pride parade next year that, unlike the Pride parade, will impose no restrictions on marchers and, in fact, encourage the sort of in-your-face behavior now being frowned upon.

"There is a trend today toward corporatization," said Deena Liebowitz of the Greater Boston Lesbian-Gay Political Alliance. "Take the Fleet Center, for example."

"The gay community is part of the larger world and we are also affected by corporatization. Over time, many people have felt that Pride has become less of a political event and more of a corporate event. That is one of the more interesting dynamics operating here. People no longer feel that pride is a political statement — and that it should be. The issues are access, inclusivity as well as the old tensions in the gay community about how much outrageous sex behavior is OK."

"I think this stirred up something. There are a lot of people who feel the Pride Parade must become a politicized event once again. I mean, we are under attack nationally by the Congress. Things have escalated to the point where we are being singled out. We have anti-gay marriage legislation in several states and we are being used by the Republican party as a replacement for the Communists."

"And with all this going on, the Pride Committee wants us to have a conservative, nondescript march? I think there is something wrong with that approach."

Jing Marcos, a member of the Lesbian Avengers who marched alongside the controversial mattress float, offered a similar call for a renewed radical spirit. She said the float, in part, was intended to make a statement that the parade had become too mundane, non-political and non-confrontational.

But she admitted that neither she, the women on the float, nor the Lesbian Avengers, anticipated the ensuing controversy.

"I guess the idea is that the Pride Committee is becoming more conservative," she said. "I don't know where the pressure to become more conservative came from, but my theory is that, unfortunately, most of the radicals have died."

Marcos said the mattress float wasn't necessarily the work of the Lesbian Avengers and it was created and executed by another group.

Though Marcos wouldn't say who was responsible, other sources have credited a splinter group of the Lesbian Avengers, which calls itself Chow Box.

Marcos did say, however, that the Lesbian Avengers, while not deserving all of the blame, can take some of the credit.



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PARADE

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"We're getting a lot of crap for something we shouldn't be," she said. "But we're not going to place the blame on anyone else. We do take responsibility, but there were several parties involved."

Marcos said that nearly a dozen women took shifts on the mattress.

"They weren't the same women the whole time and they weren't necessarily part of the Avengers," she said. "The Avengers didn't even build the bed. But that's not the point. The point is that it did go under our banner and we are responsible as well. Avengers rode the bed, Avengers pushed the bed and Avengers pulled the bed. It was under our banner and we do take responsibility."

"I thought it was funny when I heard we were going to help push this bed. I thought it was just a joke. I can't say I was actually riding the bed, but I was walking near it, trying to give them some rhythm and keep the energy up."

Controversial or not, Marcos said the bed episode served a constructive end.

"The only time two women are ever shown together is for straight male jollies," she said. "This time it was for our own and for everyone to see."

"I feel like people are trying to split the gay community and that wasn't our intention," Marcos said. "But that does seem to be the result of the whole action. But at the same time, it is also starting to bring a lot of us together who have never worked together. So maybe some good will come of it." □