

Protests in San Francisco over Dan White's release

by Michael Helquist

It happened at 8 am on January 6th: Dan White, convicted assassin of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and gay supervisor Harvey Milk, became a free man. White was released from prison after serving just over five years of his voluntary manslaughter sentence. All political and judicial efforts to prevent his release had failed. Angry San Franciscans rallied to protest the widely perceived travesty of justice, and several thousand in the city refused to let the day pass with business-as-usual. A number of incidents of civil disobedience occurred, but there were no reports of violence.

The full day of protests began on January 5th just before midnight, the hour at which White became eligible for parole. Two protesters joined the small crowd of reporters camped outside the entrance of Soledad prison where White had served most of his sentence. Health activist and person with AIDS, Bobbi Campbell and his lover Bobby Hilliard carried candles and signs which declared "Dan White Is More Dangerous than AIDS" and "But He Can't Kill Gay Pride." Campbell told reporters that AIDS currently has a mortality rate of 40% whereas Dan White has a fatality rate of 100%.

The California State Parole Board announced the next day that White had already been moved from Soledad to another prison facility for his release. Authorities cited concern over White's safety as the reason for the unprecedented security surrounding his release.

Two major protest rallies drew thousands of San Franciscans during the day. The Ad Hoc Committee to Protest the Injustice had issued a call to all city workers to support a work-stoppage and not to go to work that day if possible. About 500 demonstrators rallied at noon at Union Square in downtown San Francisco. Speakers included lesbian activist and attorney Mary Dunlap and recent candidate for city supervisor Sister Boom Boom. Attorney Dunlap called upon the demonstrators, "to turn against the government that permits us to be illegitimized and that allows us to be turned out of our houses and jobs." Dunlap underscored the feelings of many of the protestors when she addressed the issues of violence. "We demean our movement, our lives, and our values if we join in the chain of violence begun by Dan White. It is to the death to his ideas and actions that we must dedicate ourselves."

Sister Boom Boom, a member of the politically active gay male group Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, also refrained from any calls to violence, but he did indulge in some plausible conjectures about White's future. He stated, "Yesterday was the last day Dan White could be assured he'd live through the whole day. Today he begins his life sentence, and I'm sorry to say it's going to be a

short one." Sister Boom Boom brought a light moment to the protest when he explained, "I don't call for violence, but who knows, maybe one of us someday will be a little depressed, maybe off our diets, and who knows what may happen." At this point he began eating a Twinkie, symbolic of White's successful defense of "diminished capacity" due to too much stress and to a diet of junk food.

After a half-hour of speeches the crowd took to the streets for an impromptu march through the financial district stopping traffic for six blocks. Demonstrators blew shrill police whistles and banged pots and pans. The marching crowd quickly swelled to over 5000 as men in business suits and women in fashionable attire joined the casually dressed protestors.

At the same time about 150 demonstrators blocked traffic at 18th and Castro streets. Many of them later walked to the Castro and Market street intersection to sit down and block traffic on that major city thoroughfare. The Haight-Ashbury neighborhood became deafening with widespread whistle-blowing and yelling. Lesbian and gay employees at the University of California San Francisco demonstrated outside the campus student union building. Throughout the city there was a concerted and intense outpouring of emotion.

Frequently during the day the question of whether violence would erupt kept surfacing among demonstrators and observers alike. Most city residents either remembered or

had been told about the violent "White Night Riots" on May 21, 1979 when White's voluntary manslaughter verdict was announced. Many observers suggested that if violence occurred, it would take place during the evening demonstration scheduled for 8 pm on Castro Street. At the beginning of that rally, however, protest organizer Donald Montwill declared the evening a time of celebration. Standing before a huge hand-painted banner splattered with red paint that read "He Got Away With Murder," Montwill congratulated the crowd of 9000, "We have brought this incident into the forefront of thinking in this city. This part of our history must always be remembered. We celebrate our ability to remember and to protest. We will not give up our power to do so."

Cleve Jones, an activist who led the first memorial march five years ago, told the crowd, "Dan White's bullets were meant for you and for me. They were aimed at a movement and a dream — and they missed!" Other speakers included a gay activist from Ireland, a Puerto Rican feminist, popular singer Blackberri — who reminded the assembled media that people of color were also among the protestors — and the new wave group The Dead Kennedys. Sister Boom Boom reiterated his message from the noon rally and concluded, "Dan White, remember this is 1984, and Big Sister is watching!" Finally, at 10:30 pm the crowd dispersed, Dan White was burned in effigy, and Castro Street was opened to traffic.

San Franciscans were not alone in their

protests. When midday news reports told of White's release within the city limits of Los Angeles, residents of that city — gay and nongay alike — reacted angrily to the presence of the convicted assassin in their community. White will serve out his one year of parole in Los Angeles under the scrutiny of parole officers. During that time period, White is barred from visiting San Francisco. After the one year, he is free to live as he chooses.

The focus of attention wasn't on White alone on January 6th. For many, White is an unimportant figure who symbolizes the inadequacies and injustices of the judicial and political systems. Much of the protest was directed at those in power who perpetrate these perceived injustices. For many, gay and nongay alike, the assassinations and the trial verdict underscored the problematic nature of the judicial system. White's release simply focused attention once again on the issues of justice and power in this country.

The intent of the day of protest was just that: to protest an injustice. In a sense, there was nothing more to be done. The assassinations, the trial, the sentence, the political maneuvers had all been played out. And the conclusion remained the same: Dan White would be free. Many demonstrators expressed the belief that the very least they could do was to protest and ensure that at least on this one day business would not go on as usual.

Foundation created to stamp out dangerous heterosexual disease.

A foundation, named after comedian Eddie Murphy, has been formed to cure the dangerous disease of homophobia. The foundation was named after Murphy since he justified a six-minute attack on gay people because he is afraid of contracting AIDS from girlfriends who "hang out with gay people." The verbal attacks were parts of a Columbia record album and an HBO television program.

The Eddie Murphy's Disease Foundation stated, "Yes, Eddie Murphy, like millions of his friends, suffers from homophobia: an irrational and uncontrollable fear of homosexuality. Too many people are confusing homophobia with other diseases, like hemophilia, so from now on let's just call it Eddie Murphy's Disease."

The Eddie Murphy's Disease Foundation advocates a letter writing campaign to Columbia Records and HBO to protest Murphy's anti-gay jokes and let them know that Murphy's "faggot jokes" are as unacceptable as a white comedian telling "nigger jokes." They also suggest returning the album or video disk if buyers find it offensive. And, the foundation wants people to spread the word. "You don't have to be black to help



Eddie Murphy: new symbol for homophobia. Photo courtesy of Django Records.

stamp out racism. You don't have to be gay to help eliminate Eddie Murphy's Disease."

Murphy said on the HBO special, "I'm afraid of gay people. Petrified. I have nightmares about gay people." And Murphy also said that, during his performances, he tries to avoid the "faggot section" of his audiences because "faggots aren't allowed to look at my ass when I'm on stage."

The Foundation is distributing bumper stickers which read, "Eddie Murphy's Disease can be cured!" To get one, send a self-address, stamped envelope to The Eddie Murphy's Disease Foundation, Box 691585, Los Angeles, CA 90069.

Lesbian/gay pavilion at New Orleans World's Fair

The Crescent City Coalition of New Orleans are planning to open a gay/lesbian pavilion in conjunction with the 1984 World's Fair, scheduled to run from May 16 to September 16 in the Louisiana city.

Roger Nelson, a member of the coalition, first conceived of the idea to set up a pavilion in the French Quarter, which could later be converted to a gay community center. The coalition later adopted the idea as a group project, calling the pavilion "Stonewall + 15."

The Crescent City Coalition has leased a 17,000 square foot building to house exhibitions, "illustrating our lifestyles and reflecting the best of gay people, illuminating our past, present, and our expectations for the future," according to Nelson.

The Coalition is soliciting ideas and material from gay men and lesbians across the country for inclusion in the exhibit. For information: Crescent City Coalition, 720 Kerlerec St., New Orleans, LA 70116.

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