

## Gay Pride past and present

by Billy Russo

My first Pride March was in a little town outside of Newark, New Jersey in 1973. Although I had moved to Los Angeles the year before, I found myself back in the metropolitan area that summer working for one of New York City's produce wholesalers, George Tiefer, Inc.

Morris Knight, whom community services center (GCSC) in L.A., was the Grand Marshal of the NYC march that year. He contacted me through my father: "Will you chaperon me while I'm in New York, dear? You know the city so much better than I."

I mean, what could I say. My father lent me his old Chevy station wagon, and my boss gave me the week off. Anyway, Morris had heard of this march in the outskirts of Newark and simply had to be there.

It was a spur of the moment decision. And the more I thought about it, the more frightened I became. As we headed down the Major Deagan towards the George Washington Bridge, I shared my fears with Morris. "Why do we have to go to some little hick town in Jersey, of all places?" I asked.

"Because we're needed there," this founder of gay liberation responded. I knew he was right, but I was scared.

Growing up gay in New York had its advantages. So many of us were "Out." When I was 15 I discovered a gay collective in the neighborhood I grew up in. I had known one of the men for years. He was one of my father's trade union buddies. He was a



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wonderful role model for me. I trusted him and he never betrayed that trust. Through him I met a lot of wonderful faggots and dykes who lived in defiance of homophobic taboos. When I got involved in the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) in the early Seventies, I

discovered so many more homophiles of high consciousness: queers with pride. Many of us were Out in those days. We were Out when in the gay ghettos: Christopher Street, Washington Square, Brooklyn Heights. . . . Sure, occasionally I held a lover's hand as we strolled through other parts of the city, but that was a bit daring in the early seventies and not something I did every day.

Living a year in Ed Davis's L.A. with his Metro Squad and the youth gangs that preyed on us faggots was a sobering experience for me. I was still recovering from a severe beating I had received at a One, Incorporated dance Christmas eve and I was not emotionally equipped to go through that again so soon. And Morris' words of assurance did little to alleviate my fears.

I was also embarrassed. Here I was with Morris and half a dozen founders of GAA, and I didn't want to show my fear.

It was a Saturday afternoon, the day before the NYC march. There were about 75 members of the homophile community present. I was able to relax once we were in the loving company of our peers, but I was still edgy.

Morris led the little group through the streets of town. A police car led the way. Some of us carried placards and signs. Some of us held hands. There were one or two hecklers and many non-gay couples that watched without comment. There were also a few supporters. We gathered on the stairs of the town hall and Morris made a speech about the importance of standing up and being counted. The rally was over before I knew it and we were on our way back to the Big Apple. I was relieved to be heading towards familiar turf.

The courage of my sisters and brothers

who lived in that town had a strong influence on me. Some of them were so closeted that they wore paper bags over their heads during the march. But despite their fear of exposure, they got out there in the streets to be counted. And although I was safely on my way back to the Island of Manhattan, they had to remain in that little town and deal with the homophobia that is a major component of life in rural America.

As we drove back to the City, all of us quietly processing the experience of the afternoon, I was troubled: my reluctance to be supportive of that small community was an act of selfishness that conflicted with how I perceived myself. I was ashamed.

I quickly forgot those feelings the next day as I marched with 80,000 through the streets of Manhattan to the cheers of another 100,000 or so. And I never gave it a thought again until I decided to come out publicly in Roseburg. I realized that by not coming out I was fighting my own nature. But knowing that was not enough to take that giant step. Remembering those queers in that little town in New Jersey helped.

Most of us in Roseburg are not ready for our own Lesbian/Gay Pride celebration, but we want to be counted. Last year we marched with you in Portland behind our own banner. This year we're building a float and will once again march through the streets of Portland, celebrating the vitality of our culture.

We are inviting those of you who grew up in rural America to march with us in support of all rural homosexuals. We'll be assembling behind the green and lavender GAY AND LESBIAN ALLIANCE banner. And at the rally we'll be staffing a booth for GALA. Stop by and say hi.

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### EVENTS

June 9th KATE SULLIVAN 8:00 \$2 Cover

June 24th OPEN MIKE Your M.C.: Candy Carr; Auditions for shows at P.D.!!

June 10th RYA: Comedienne: with B.J. Castleman

Cover

Fri. 9-12 \$1

Sat. 8:00-12 \$2

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PRESENTS

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