

a history of diversity

by W. C. McRae

On June 29, 1969, New York police raid the Stonewall Inn, a Greenwich Village gay bar. The patrons fight back.

Thus is born, in most histories, the modern gay liberation movement.

To commemorate the event, communities all over the country celebrate that hot June night with a march and rally.

Portland has celebrated the pride of its lesbian and gay community since 1975, first with Gay Fairs, then with Lesbian and Gay Pride Week.

For the gay-supportive observer, the commemoration of the raid on Stonewall Inn is a positive and important display of unity and pride in gay identities and lifestyles. For members of the community, it is a show of strength in diversity and a reminder of our history as a movement. In the beginning, in

1975 and 1976, a few hundred people celebrated Gay Fair; in 1981, more than 3000 people gathered to commemorate Lesbian and Gay Pride Day. It has become increasingly challenging, as more and more gays and lesbians respond to the advocacy of "gay pride," to meet the demands of planning a celebration that, by its success, has incorporated a wider and wider range of people.

As changes have occurred in Portland's gay community, so the need has developed for the gay pride celebration to acknowledge and reflect these changes.

To organize L/GP is to expose the strengths, adversities and diversities of our community.

Some issues surrounding L/GP refuse to be resolved. Lesbians and people of color have felt that the celebration has not always reflected their concerns. When these needs are addressed, less political or traditional groups within the community have felt as if they were left out. Whether or not to include "lesbian" in "Lesbian and Gay Pride" is still an emotional issue for some. Is the event political or festive? Whether or not to charac-

terize the Pride event as a "parade and celebration" with beer or as a "march and rally" with speeches and beer is a controversy re-deliberated each year.

By choosing to represent and not ignore the diversity in our community, individuals and groups who have little or nothing in common politically or socially volunteer to cooperate in the planning of the celebration.

Over the course of 11 years, individual egos, ambitions, and agendas have focussed on the commemoration of the Stonewall rebellion. Apathy, historical antagonisms, and burnout have taken its toll on one generation of activists. And a new generation of young gays and lesbians may find that the politics and history of "gay pride" doesn't speak to their experience as the post-Stonewall gay movement approaches its twentieth year.

The following interchange takes place in a short story by a 23-year-old.

"... I think this kind of public display [L/G Pride] doesn't do any good to anyone. It's ridiculous."

"It does the marchers a lot of good. It does

the world a lot of good to see people who aren't ashamed of who they are... In any battle for freedom of identity there can be no distinction between the private and the political."

"... You know what's wrong with your party-line political correctness? Exactly what's wrong with your march. It homogenizes gay people. It doesn't allow for personal difference. It doesn't recognize that maybe for some people what's politically correct is personally impossible, emotionally impossible. And for a politics which is supposed to be in favor of difference, it certainly doesn't allow for much difference among the 'different.'"

David Leavitt
"Dedicated"

The challenge each year is to compromise these two positions. And when the compromise is struck, neither side is happy.

Lesbian and gay pride is an important event for all gays and lesbians and their friends. Because of our differences. And in spite of them.

where do we go from here?

By choosing to represent and not ignore the diversity in our community, individuals and groups who have little or nothing in common either politically or socially volunteer to cooperate on the planning of the celebration.

We asked past organizers of Lesbian/Gay Pride (L/G Pride) events to comment on L/G Pride and the directions that future gay prides might take.

Larry Copeland (1975-77). Even in the early years L/GP was an object of discussion: was it a media event for non-gays or a celebration for gays and lesbians? "In the beginning the preference was to see it as a community gathering. It had the feeling of family." As more people got involved, planning became more difficult: "Diversity is contention. Internal bickering is a safe thing to do because it means you don't reach out to other people." There may be nothing wrong with changing the way we celebrate. "In some respects it's out-dated. The politics of confrontation no longer seem appropriate. Maybe the gay movement should become Yuppie."

Susie Shepherd (1975-77). In the early days, there was no division in the community about the planning for L/GP, and in-fighting has been magnified because of the size of the minority. Attitudinal change in young people about L/GP "is an attestation to the progress we've made. They don't know what we've been through." In the old days,

there was a lot more reprisals from the religious fringe. "It wasn't Gay Pride unless Mr. Turn-of-Burn was there." Shepherd hopes there'll always be L/GP. "If we stop, they'll think they have power to stop us. It's important for those coming out, and a chance for others to see it's a big deal." It's also a continuing consciousness raising for straight people: "We're just as fun loving as they are."

Jerry Weller (1975-81). "In Chicago, it's a real circus atmosphere, floats and

marchers and tons and tons of politicians. In LA they have camels and elephants in the parade." Young people forget that in the early days people felt threatened walking down the street in the march. It's best to organize people around people's needs, and for men now the overriding issue is AIDS, not civil rights. "Concern about AIDS needs to be translated into civil rights and political issues."

Mary Forst (1980, 84-85). Fights in the community get fought out in the planning for L/GP. "People don't want to be invisible in the only community-wide celebration held each year. It's like the distribution of a scarce resource — people are used to competing for resources, not cooperating for them." Every year an ad hoc committee has to work out all the things the rest of the community didn't bother to work out during the year. "We should decide either to have a standing committee that doesn't have to deal with the same issues year after year, or agree that the steering committee is where things get worked out year after year, and allow time and energy for it."

Daniel Dallabrida (1981-83). Dallabrida characterized disputes within the planning for L/GP as being from "two elements, both vocal and rigid, who continue to butt heads and reinforce stereotypes." There's talent and expertise in the gay community to change with the times; the model of L/GP as "angry and defiant posturing is outdated." People have grown past the need to hear the same speeches as 10 years ago. Demographically, the gay community is getting older and making more money. "The Performing Artists for Life Benefit was a wonderful display of gay pride. The picture in the *Oregonian* of two men dancing was worth a thousand angry speeches."

Cathy Seimans (1982). TKO was very conscious about creating a new format for L/GP. "one that has been followed ever since." They made themselves accountable, published and posted minutes of the meetings, scheduled a full week of events. But now "we have standardized thoughts about

L/GP." We need new thinking to go into it. "The march is political and important, because people are willing to be noticed as gay people. It lets everyone know there's a strong and proud gay constituency." As we approach the 20th anniversary of Stonewall, part of our responsibility is to educate youth. "Young gays don't have a sense of their own history."

Jerry Deas (1984-85). Deas wonders "if there's any gay pride in Gay Pride anymore. We're the second gay Mecca on the West Coast and we don't have diddly for a Gay Pride celebration." Deas feels instead that Portland has a Lesbian Pride. "What has this steering committee (1986) done to get gay men out of the West Hills? This steering committee works very quickly to stymie any diversity." Recent steering committees have not had community support "because people who are involved on the steering committees aren't involved in the community." There's no reason for young people to get involved because "we don't give them a reason to. They come to the steering committee, see the bickering and don't want to be involved. *Forward Together* (this year's motto) doesn't mean they come together and vote off members the Steering Committee doesn't agree with." Deas favors an elected steering committee (the court system already has the mechanisms in place to hold elections in the gay community) and a locally focussed celebration with speakers "that would make people proud to be gay in Portland."

Cliff Jones (1982, 84-85). Gay Pride is now "something between ourselves." For everyone, including non-gays, it's just part of the summer schedule. "No one's surprised anymore when it happens — it's just what happens after Rose Festival." It's not so much a place "to reclaim pride" as a gathering for gay men and lesbians. The days of it as an effective agent of change are over. "L/GP has positive effects, but not the power to make significant changes in gay male and lesbian oppression." Perhaps one way to make L/GP more politically effective would be "to coordinate the political elements in the community that are beginning to be rebuilt." The Steering Committee needs to attract politics back to the event. To do so would require the Steering Committee to be more of a coordinating body. "We need a community organizer and perhaps a board of directors to pay year round attention to L/GP. The Steering Committee needs to be more effective in building coalitions in the community. Until it happens, L/GP is in jeopardy."