

Voices in the wilderness

What if Jesse Jackson was white and Oliver North was black?"
— T-shirt seen at the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta

Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did. She just did it backwards and in high heels."
— Ann Richards, state treasurer of Texas, keynote address to Democratic National Convention, July 18, 1988

Act up, fight back, fight AIDS."
— ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a nonpartisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action in the face of the AIDS crisis

We believe that we honor our multi-cultural heritage by assuring equal access to government services, employment, housing, business enterprise and education to every citizen regardless of race, sex, national origin, religion, age, handicapping condition or sexual orientation."
— Civil rights plank of the Democratic Party platform

Visibility

The gay and lesbian presence at the 1988 Democratic National Convention was the strongest it ever has been. More than 100 openly gay men and lesbians were delegates or alternates to the convention, and they came from such states as Georgia, Kansas, Nebraska, Florida, Texas and Maine, as well as states with more traditionally progressive populations such as California, New York and Massachusetts.

Oregon's only openly gay delegate, Randy Sullivan, quickly became the touchstone of gay visibility for television crews. Sullivan took full advantage of his position on the floor of the convention hall by displaying signs and placards



B Y J A Y B R O W N

that called attention to the lesbian and gay constituency and to the AIDS epidemic. Sullivan and his messages were broadcast by ABC, NBC, CBS and CNN as well as (we assume) the dozens of local television stations covering the convention.

Sullivan used his visibility to educate. He reports that his mother asked him to explain the meaning of *SILENCE = DEATH*, which she had seen on a button he was wearing when his image appeared on her television screen. Millions of other people may now be asking for an explanation because of his visibility.

During coverage of the closing session on Thursday night, CBS cut to Sullivan when presidential nominee Michael Dukakis said that AIDS will be a priority item in his administration. And on Friday, coverage of the previous evening's session by the *Today Show* included shots of Sullivan and his messages.

Randy Sullivan exemplifies the positive aspects of being openly gay in the best sense of the term. He should be applauded by all for his diligence in getting the word out.



Photo by Jay Brown

Fighting for our rights

Press briefing, Atlanta City Hall, Thursday: Mayor Andrew Young takes a card from his shirt pocket and says, "I must apologize to AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power."

Mayor Young's apology followed three days of negotiations that involved members of ACT UP of New York City, gay activists of Atlanta including Georgia AIDS Lobby Chairman Chris Hagin, Shirley Franklin, Mayor Young's top lieutenant and the city's chief executive officer, and the public safety establishment. Ironically, Mayor Young's action on Thursday followed a badly botched "apology" at his press briefing on Wednesday in which he said that any group calling themselves ACT UP "should expect trouble" from the police.

ACT UP's "trouble" did come from the police — a solid line of men in full riot gear. ACT UP had organized a "kiss-in" on the sidewalk in front of the Omni, the site of the Democratic National Convention. The sidewalk was outside the so-called "free speech area," a parking lot directly across the street from the Omni. The parking lot was enclosed by a double row of portable fences with the entrance on the side farthest away from the entrance to the Omni convention hall. The "free speech area" was isolated; any activity

within it was neither seen nor heard by anyone outside the enclosed parking lot. ACT UP's purpose in holding the "kiss-in" on the sidewalk was to involve people other than themselves.

The "kiss-in" was organized as an aggressive demonstration of affection and to challenge repressive conventions that prohibit displays of love between persons of the same sex. People participating in the action moved along the sidewalk in opposite directions while embracing and kissing as they passed. The police, chanting "move, move, move" and equipped with bullet-proof vests, shields and shielded helmets, formed a phalanx and in half-step pushed the demonstrators a block and a half away. The police captain then closed off the street.

About 15 minutes later, the "kiss-in" resumed at the original site — ACT UP outflanked the police by going around the block. The phalanx formed, the shields went up, in half-step and chanting, the Atlanta police pushed the "kiss-in" through the fence.

And for that, Mayor Andrew Young apologized to ACT UP — twice.

The aborted "kiss-in" resumed at 3 pm Thursday under the watchful eye of Shirley Franklin. And a good time was had by all.

Symbols

The Gay and Lesbian Caucus at the 1988 Democratic National Convention failed in its bid to nominate Perry Watkins as a candidate for vice president of the United States. Watkins is a U.S. Army staff sergeant who received a favorable ruling from the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th District in his suit against the military ban on homosexuals for which he was discharged seven years ago. In less than 24 hours, caucus members gathered 237 signatures of the 300 (10 percent of total delegates to the convention) needed for nomination.

The only openly gay man to be nominated to the nation's number-two office was the late Melvin Boozer, a civil rights activist who lived in Washington, D.C. Boozer's name was placed in nomination at the 1980 Democratic National Convention.

Attempts to include the "G" and "L" words in Michael Dukakis's acceptance speech also failed. However, Dukakis forces took great pains to assure the gay and lesbian caucus that a

Dukakis administration would be sensitive — and responsive — to lesbian and gay issues.

Melinda Daniels, a delegate from Georgia, was voted the Guts Award by the Gay and Lesbian Caucus for her courage in asking her state delegation to approve a resolution formulated by the caucus. The Georgia delegation turned down Daniels's request. Daniels, a lesbian, made her presentation in the full light of television cameras. She reported that the next day her boss told her to "stay away from the cameras."

About 20 percent of state delegations approved the resolution that urged Dukakis to issue an executive order and to show a clear commitment in the fight against AIDS and homophobia, among other issues. The Oregon delegation approved the resolution, as well as a resolution written by gay Oregon delegate Randy Sullivan that condemns Measure 8, the Oregon Citizens Alliance's attack on human rights. Secretary of State Barbara Roberts made an eloquent speech in support of Sullivan's resolution, which was unanimously approved.

Snapshots of Atlanta

As my silhouette was being drawn at the "die-in" on Monday morning, I heard a voice reading the names of what seemed an endless number of people who had died from AIDS who shared my surname. I left a few tears in the outline on that pavement as I wrote the name of Jerry West.

Maxine Wolfe of ACT UP facilitating the meeting at City Hall. Maxine, Frank,

Neil, Heidi and all the other ACT UP of New York people leading the fight for our rights and fighting back against AIDS and homophobia. All these people are heroes — they are fearless, exemplary individuals.

Atlanta's commissioner of public safety leading gay and lesbian demonstrators from the state Capitol to City Hall past a large group of epithet-chanting Christian fundamentalists.

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