

# Pink Panthers

## *New York City sets an example for a lesbian and gay community policing group*

by Rich Flowers

**I**ncreasingly, it isn't safe for gays and lesbians to walk the streets. A tidal wave of crime is sweeping the country bringing with it an increase in anti-gay violence. "I've lived here all my life and I've never seen so much bashing," said Joe Ruscito, 33, a lawyer. "Even on the trains to Fire Island, the conductors have been harassing gay people. It's a real problem." Bias-related assaults, gay bashings, are up 82 percent in the first seven months of 1990 (316 cases) according to the New York Anti-Violence Project. Gay bashing is an aspect of the overall increase in violence at its most terrifying—being attacked by a stranger. The randomness also strikes a note of horror and epitomizes assault's senseless cruelty.

*Que pasa?* What's going on here? Sociologists say many things contribute to the increase in anti-gay violence including, recession, lack of job opportunities and an alarming increase in drug use, crack in particular. Specifically, the Village is home turf for gays and lesbians. Add to that, dozens of bars on every block, interaction at all hours (the city that never sleeps) and a mecca for tourists and you've got the setting for most of the reported cases of anti-gay violence. More importantly, gays and lesbians are increasingly more willing to be open. "As gays and lesbians gain more political power and visibility, gay bashing will increase as more people feel threatened. It's definitely a backlash," commented Brigitte Weil, 25, Panther member and pastry chef.

In response to the increase in gay bashing and fueled with outrage at the city's indifferent response, a citizen foot patrol was organized by gay and lesbian activists to roam the streets in an effort to take back the streets. Their first patrol was Aug. 4, 1990. The Pink Panthers patrol the streets in coed groups of 8 or 12, Friday and Saturday nights from midnight to 3 am. Patrollers wear black T-shirts with a paw print in a pink triangle on the front and "PATROL" in English, Spanish and Chinese on the back. The T-shirts are eye-catching. "We've always been perceived as well dressed," commented one member. Each member of the patrol has a specific duty. One carries a walkie-talkie and maintains contact with the home base. One is responsible for dialing 911. One photographs and records incidents. They all carry whistles while walking the beat.

The Pink Panthers patrol unarmed. Though all members receive martial-arts training, they don't perceive their duties to include dealing with weapons. If weapons are involved, the police are notified immediately. Their primary goal is to defend the person being attacked and not necessarily to go after the attacker. If someone calls them "faggots" while they are on patrol, they are likely to respond in the affirmative and engage in some form of dialogue. Another patrol group may encircle the provoker and ask different questions rapidly from different "sides" of the circle ("When was Joan Crawford born!?!") in the hopes of disorienting the person and leaving him/her dazed and dumbfounded.

Lesbians and gay men have come together on this patrol to help stop anti-gay violence. "Right now, the Panthers are equally divided between



men and women," said Weil. Some join the Pink Panthers because they have been beaten up. Some join because it's cool. Some join because they feel its politically correct. All are genuinely concerned. Panther member Carol Anastasio, 28 a public relations director remarked, "I've personally escorted lesbians, not because I wanted their phone number but because I was concerned for their safety."

Anyone can join the Pink Panthers. The only requirement is a firm time commitment to patrolling. "It isn't like a comfy planning meeting in a friend's apartment or a one time 'zap' or a letter-writing campaign on letterhead stationery. It's getting out on the streets and putting your own safety on the line," said Phil Montana, 27, a gourmet cook and Panther member. Unlike their counterparts, the Guardian Angels (a non-gay foot patrol that stakes out the same area), the Pink Panthers make themselves walking political statements by openly identifying themselves as gay and lesbian. They see the patrol as an opportunity to affirm their gay or lesbian identity and community and to raise consciousness. "As far as wearing our sexuality on our shirts, I think that's important," said Montana. "We've traditionally been targets and [people think] we won't fight back. That's wrong. We will fight back." Asked about wearing her sexuality openly, Panther member, Gerri Wells, 32, construction contractor thought and replied, "Well, I feel I do that all the time anyway."

Zealous newcomers are encouraged to check out the patrol first instead of attending the

weekly Tuesday night meetings. The Panthers feel its important for people to realize they're a patrol not a discussion group. But the Tuesday night meeting is a discussion group run more like a support group where everyone gets to air an opinion. "We need to be more gay-and-militaristic, not gay-and-artistic," a member recently commented. By allowing all opinions, the group hopes to avoid sexist, homophobic and paternalistic structuring. But all opinions don't carry equal weight. Priority is given to members who actively patrol. "I don't want people who are not actively involved having input into it," said Montana. "We want people who make decisions for us to be people who are out there patrolling."

The Panthers also don't seek help from the police though the police department is supportive of the group. "They're an excellent group. Anybody who is willing to go out on the streets and fight crime is okay in my book," said a police officer from the sixth precinct, which covers the Village. The police have offered to make the Panthers a part of the auxiliary police but they were turned down. "We voted against it," said Wells, "a lot of us have been strip searched. In a way we don't trust them." As it is, the Panthers feel the police department needs sensitivity training but the gay community doesn't have the time to wait for them to get sensitized.

The Panthers also feel the police don't respond urgently enough to reports of anti-gay violence. "They aren't quick about it," said Weil, "they wait sometimes before jumping into an assault in progress because they think the at-

tacker is right and on some level they are living out one of their fantasies. This attitude is prevalent." The police sometimes have a hard time separating their professional duties from their personal issues. Most police officers know how to handle bias-related assaults but don't, or don't classify the assault as bias-related unless a prominent gay activist is involved.

According to the New York City police department, in order for an assault to be classified as bias related, a verbal epithet must be said prior to the start of an assault but not during or after. This definition cuts down on the number of assaults classified as anti-gay and bias related and so most gay bashings go unrecorded as such. "We need those numbers," said Neil Peck, 23, a writer, "at present there is no bias-related crime bill in New York (eight states, including Oregon, and several cities do have them) and in order for a bias related crime bill to pass, we need to show there is a strong need for one. The fact that we don't have one sends out the message that it is okay to bash gays and lesbians."

So far, patrolling the streets hasn't exposed the Pink Panthers to much trouble. A lot of patrons of the Village are familiar with the group, and everyone relates to the name they've chosen, Pink Panthers, in a favorable way and this is an unexpected plus. It's different to start a fight with a group that's named after a likable and popular cartoon character. Although members insist that the group's name alludes more to militant groups like the Black Panthers of the 60's and the Gray Panthers of the 70's, the association with the cartoon character should be a welcome one. Inspector Clousseau is always foiled in his attempts to bash or sabotage the Pink Panther and the voiceless panther is never deterred from his duties. The Pink Panther theme is catchy, too. Once a group of rowdy drunks came across the Panthers on patrol. When they could make out their name, a smile came across their faces and they proceeded to "sing" the theme while walking away in an imitation of how they thought a panther would. A potentially dangerous situation had been averted.

Another way of defusing potential conflict is by using coed patrols. This lessens the likelihood of attack because of the unwritten code of honor among men that you don't ever hit a woman (a majority of bashers are male between 15-26 years of age). It doesn't keep people from commenting though. One patrol came across a disturbed man yelling anti-gay clichés. A straight bodybuilder and his Farrah-Fawcetted girlfriend passed by and he looked back grinning and smirked, "I could take them all on and wouldn't break a sweat." But for the most part there is a lot of spontaneous praise and admiration. Every once in a while a group will cheer from across the street or an admirer will shout encouragement from a passing taxi. A married telephone worker repairing cable lines under the street peered up as the Pink Panthers passed by and said to his co-worker, "Will you look at that. That's the Pink Panthers, they're all gay and they're out protecting the streets for everybody. Isn't that something?" They both looked at each other and then went back to work.