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national news

"Dildos for sale, not dildos in jail"

Arrests of 15 people in Atlanta for selling sex toys leads to a street protest by gay and lesbian activists

by Richard Shumate

To paraphrase the famous commercial, if you come to the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, bring your Visa card and your own sex toys.

Because the Olympics doesn't take American Express—and you can't buy a dildo in the capitol of Dixie.

Atlanta police recently busted six stores, including two with a mostly gay and lesbian clientele, for violating a state law against selling any device whose primary purpose is to stimulate the genital organs. The stores' owners and employees, 15 people in all, were taken away to jail.

On June 15, the same day those arrested were appearing in court, members of two direct action groups, the Lesbian Avengers and Queer Planet, held a "Free the Dildos" demonstration, standing in front of police headquarters on a busy Midtown street waving dildos, vibrators and even a zucchini or two at rush-hour commuters.

"Dildos for sale, not dildos in jail," chanted the 20 demonstrators, who included the Avengers' new Ladies' Auxiliary, made up of men in skirts. "Don't waste time, sex is not a crime."

While the protest was somewhat tongue-in-cheek (tongues almost anywhere else would have been illegal in Georgia), protesters insist their message is more serious than silly. Police in recent months have also been putting undercover patrols in gay cruising spots, and, coupled with the sex store raids, activists believe city officials are promoting a sex-negative mindset that takes aim at gay men and lesbians.

"One would have to be a major idiot not to notice somebody in the police department had to make a choice about this," says Gwendolyn Dean, spokesperson for the Avengers. "Somebody had to make a choice to invest time and energy in chasing little rubber toys around the city."

"To prioritize [dildo sales] in the same week

that Atlanta was named the third most dangerous city in America is absurd, and it is unacceptable," says Joe DeRose of Queer Planet. "It creates a very queer-negative environment."

Police officials insist they conducted the raids only after complaints from residents and other business in the neighborhoods where the stores are located. All were located in commercial zones, and one was near a day-care center.

Georgia law makes selling dildos and vibrators illegal, although possessing them is OK. The differences in mores and laws between the city and the state has created some strange contrasts in Atlanta, where some bars stay open 24 hours a day

and totally nude dancing establishments are perfectly legal, but people can't rent pornographic movies or buy package liquor on Sunday—or dildos any day.

Not everyone is convinced that Atlanta's lesbian and gay community should expend its time and political capital complaining about raids on sex shops or cruising areas. Dean says some people she approached about participating in the protest said thanks but no thanks.

"They said they don't want to be associated with sex toys," she says. "But I don't think we can separate gay and lesbian

politics from actual discussions of sexual activity and sexual behavior. That is a mistake. Our goal shouldn't be to share white, middle-class mainstream values."

Dean says the activists now plan to formally request a meeting with Atlanta Police Chief Beverly Harvard to air their grievances.

In court, owners of three of the six stores pleaded guilty to charges of running a disorderly house and were fined \$500. Charges against two other stores were dropped because of technicalities, and one owner decided to plead not guilty and fight the charges in Fulton County State Court. A trial date has not yet been set. Charges against the store employees were dropped.



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