

After the Games

Visitors to the Summer Olympics enjoyed the gay and lesbian center, but lack of corporate support has left organizers in debt

by Richard Shumate

Amid the graffiti scrawls—in English, in Russian, even in Arabic—on the walls of Atlanta's gay and lesbian Olympic visitors center was this expression of thanks: "Austria loves y'all."

"And by the way," another hand added beneath, "we have no kangaroos."

During the 1996 Olympics, an average of 250 to 300 visitors a day, about 5,000 in all, came through the doors of the gay and lesbian visitors center set up in Atlanta specifically for the Games. As part of their experience, they were invited to take pen in hand and leave a message on the wall for the rest of the world.

"Could someone please start one of these in Indiana?" "We found the way from San Jose all the way to this center, and we're glad we did."

"People have been moved and motivated and surprised that this is here," says Julie Rhoad, who put together the center in a vacant theater just north of the Olympic center. "What we've heard from them was that it was exciting for them to have a point of contact."

During the Opening Ceremony, visitors watching on television cheered as Greg Louganis was honored in Olympic Stadium for his achievements. They snapped up a triangular pin with a rainbow flag that some crafty designer managed to get through official Olympic channels to sell as official Olympic merchandise. For one excited young woman who met with center volunteer Aida Rentas, her visit became her coming out experience.

"I wish something like this had existed to be my coming out experience," says Rentas.

Put together by a handful of mostly volunteers in a matter of months and promoted via a World Wide Web site, the center appeared to be on its way to a controversial debut when organizers found out that Fred Phelps, the militantly anti-gay Kansas pastor best known for picketing the funerals of AIDS patients, planned to protest at the center on the afternoon before the Opening Ceremony.

Security officials were concerned enough about Phelps that they alerted tenants in a high-rise office building across the street that there was a protest scheduled that could turn violent. Phelps, however, was a no show.

Those who did come up the steps, painted in rainbow colors, found a cafe, a concierge service providing information about the location of gay and gay-friendly businesses, and several exhibits, including "Shared Heart," a moving photographic

exhibit featuring the stories of gay and lesbian teens.

Atlanta's gay history—and how far gay men and lesbians in the South have come—was also on display in a giant time line, from a photo of the city's first drag show in 1962 to a 1968 newspaper article entitled "Deviates Gain Tolerance" to mostly sympathetic coverage of the effort over the last three years to move Olympic events out of Cobb County because of its anti-gay resolution.

Local gay organizations were also allowed to use the center to host fund-raising efforts during the Games. The Metropolitan Atlanta Foundation's gay and lesbian funding initiative raised \$10,000 in a single event.

"A number of groups are benefiting from our being here, and that was one of our goals," says Rhoad. "We've also

gotten people from around the world into our community."

But the center itself has left behind a trail of financial problems. With only about six months to solicit corporate funds, few gifts were obtained. And the world premiere of a musical comedy, *In Stitches*—the box office from which was supposed to subsidize the center, which charged no

admission—drew sparse crowds.

However, the gay and lesbian visitors center wasn't alone in that regard. A host of cultural events held in the city during the Olympics drew smaller-than-expected crowds. Even Jessye Norman sang to empty seats.

"If she had trouble bringing people in, I guess I don't feel quite so bad," says Rhoad. "Nobody bought tickets to anything this summer except the Olympics."

The budget for the center, which will remain open through Labor Day, is \$500,000, a majority of which came from Rhoad and her special events company, Candler Creative. Some skeptics in Atlanta were wary of the center, thinking Rhoad was trying to use the Olympics and the community for personal financial gain.

"I think now we've proven that I wasn't doing it to get rich," says Rhoad, who says she has poured her life's savings into the venture.

"It was probably not the best business decision. But I still feel that it was not a bad emotional decision," she says. "I think I would do it all over again."

To contribute to the Olympic gay and lesbian visitors center, contact Candler Creative, 460 Candler St., Atlanta, GA 30307 or call (404) 681-5354.



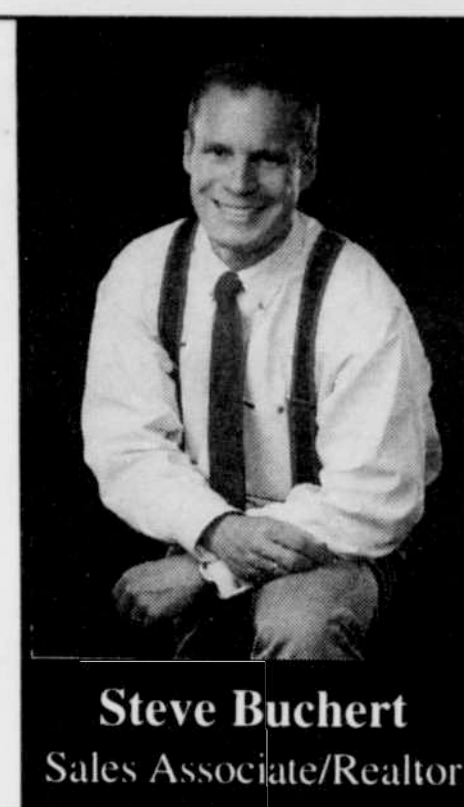
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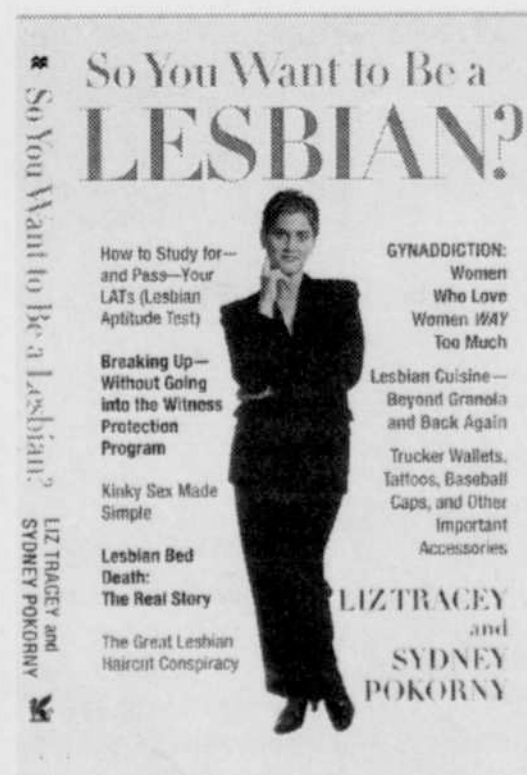
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