

national news

In defiance of the bone-soaking weather, record numbers of people turned out for the seventh annual Washington D.C. Black Lesbian and Gay Pride Day Festival on May 25.

"It's really nice. Black folks rarely come together like this where I come from," says Ryan Canty, 21, of Ohio. "It's really affirming."

"To spend the day with other black lesbian and gay people," says D. Magrini, 42, of Washington, D.C., "it just feels good to have yourself reflected."

Organizers estimate at least 5,000 people attended the main festival at Banneker Field near Howard University.

Which makes this year's festival the most successful ever, according to Carlene Cheatam, president of Black Lesbian & Gay Pride Inc.

"It was a blessing," Cheatam says. "It rained all day, but the people stayed out there and the numbers were large."

The rain taunted festival-goers all day. It wasn't until 5:30 pm—just one hour before the scheduled end time—that the lightning and rain got the upper hand and the festival had to be closed down. But the temperature was warm, and throughout the day more people were coming into the park than were leaving.

"The weather reminds me pretty much of home, but apart from that, it's excellent," says Trevor Hinds, 33, of London, England.

After three consecutive years of rain, festival-goers seemed prepared for anything. Some people were in raincoats; others seemed happy in shorts. Several people sported raincoats and shorts.

At the main stage, a constant procession of more than 50 speakers and performers entertained the crowd of people who danced beneath a colorful canopy of umbrellas.

Several local drag queens hosted the show, including Tina Tuna Adams (Din Adams) who—you guessed it—impersonated Tina Turner in classic style. Adams danced and lip-synched to Turner songs while wearing a disheveled red-blond wig with black roots.

Seeing we're here

Black gay men and lesbians converge on Washington, D.C., for their own show of pride

by M. Jane Taylor

Dana Terrell stole the show with a church-lady routine, donning a red choir robe lined with African kente cloth and working the crowd for tips using a good old-fashioned church collection basket.

Half way through, Terrell's robe dropped off to reveal a skintight black dress and red-and-black tiger-striped heels, eliciting applause as well as a few catcalls from the excited crowd.

But the excitement of Black Pride really started days before the festival, with official and unofficial activities surrounding what has long been a D.C. Memorial Day tradition among black gay men and lesbians.

"It's wonderful," says Michael Gary, 36, who was down from New Jersey for his first festival weekend. "It's the acknowledgment and awareness that we didn't have as a child—that there [are]



The Rev. Rainey Cheeks

other black gays."

People began arriving in town on Thursday and Friday to attend parties thrown by several bars throughout the city. Black Lesbian and Gay Pride will receive proceeds from at least two parties—held at the Circle and at the Edge, Cheatam says.

The only complaint of Beverly Moss, who came "straight out of Brooklyn" with a busload of other women, was that the bars in D.C. close way too early.

"They threw us out right after they took our money," says Moss—who added that she and her partner Leslie White returned to the

hotel for a romantic evening and didn't really mind the early night after all.

The weekend also consisted of several religious and cultural activities.

Jennifer Holliday, best known for her perfor-

mance in the Broadway musical *Dream Girls*, was the featured artist for a Gospel Concert sponsored by Inner Light Unity Fellowship Church of Washington, D.C.

Black Lesbian and Gay Pride board member Courtney Williams greeted more than 125 people who assembled for an early morning prayer breakfast.

"Our faith community affirms us all. This is where we go to lift us up," Williams says.

The worshipers were inspired by the preaching of several D.C. gay religious leaders, including the Rev. Philip Mathews of the Metropolitan Community Church of Washington, the Rev. Michael Moore of Faith Temple, and the Rev. Rainey Cheeks of Inner Life Unity Fellowship.

Cheeks spoke to the assembly about being proud black gay men and lesbians.

"We have to really work at learning how to love ourselves," he said. "Because if you love yourself, then you can 'love your neighbor.'"

The Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League also had a table at the festival.

"The majority of our youth are people of color, and we need more volunteers of color to address their needs," says volunteer Reese Isbell.

The organization with the biggest presence was Us Helping Us—an organization which provides HIV support and prevention services to black gay and bisexual men.

In anticipation of rain, Us Helping Us set up a tent large enough for a deejay, several vendors and scores of people. The tent was a big hit and, at the end of the day, the organization had taken in \$1,100 in donations.

Other organizations present at the event included Black and White Men Together, the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum, and Gay Men of Color (a division of the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention).

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Celebrating the lives of black lesbians

The acronym was tough to remember, but the women who attended say the event will not be forgotten.

As part of this year's D.C. Black Lesbian and Gay Pride festivities, CLOAVE (Collective Lesbians of African Descent Voices Everywhere) gathered to discuss what it means to be a black lesbian. More than 100 women attended an afternoon of panels and performances.

Organizers say they planned the event to give black lesbians a place to celebrate themselves outside of the bars.

Organizers were CLOAVE co-founders Wanda R. Alston and Rebecca Helem, Friends for Friends (an HIV/AIDS prevention organization) founder Lisa Gray, and Amikaelya Gaston, organizer of Sistah Summerfest, a women's retreat.

The panels addressed a range of issues, including black lesbian visibility, access to health care, political participation and racism.

There were performances by singers Evelyn Harris (formerly of Sweet Honey in the Rock) and Angela Head, and poet R. Erica Doyle, and even a two-minute skit on safer sex.

During a discussion on health, lesbian health advocate Beverly Biddle reminded the crowd

that lesbians of color are less likely than other women to get proper care.

The average time between Pap smears for women in general is nine months, says Biddle, but for black lesbians it is 34 months.

"Homophobia is a health hazard because it has an impact on our comfort with the system," she says.

Many women spoke about comic Ellen DeGeneres' coming out and its impact on black lesbian visibility.

"We can't forget what it did for the country," says longtime activist Mandy Carter. "But where are the black lesbians on television?"

Carter praised the portrayals of black lesbians by Queen Latifah in *Set It Off* and Whoopi

Goldberg in *Boys on the Side*. Those films, she says, were good beginnings in terms of putting images of black lesbians in the mass media.

There was also a discussion on where black lesbians are politically and spiritually.

"We got where we are because someone celebrated," says the Rev. Carol Johnson of Boston. "Someone celebrated loving as a black lesbian and someone saw that, got sparked; someone interrupted the process of hatred."

Darice Clark

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