

About 125 activists and academics gathered in San Diego on Nov. 13, the official opening day of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's annual Creating Change conference, to organize against what they see as a new "sex panic."

Participants in the first National Sex Panic! Summit said gay men are under attack from politicians, law enforcement and, most disturbingly, gay "neo-conservative" writers who disapprove of promiscuity, sex clubs, back rooms, cruisy adult bookstores and so-called public sex at such places as parks and beaches.

"A sex panic is a moral purity crusade," said gay historian Allan Bérubé, who opened the summit with a "History of Sex Panics" presentation.

"Sex panics usually take place during politically conservative times, election years, world's fairs, epidemics, anti-crime drives and religious revivalism, and often as a response to the successful political activism of targeted groups," he explained.

"Sex panics are started up by morally outraged, 'right-thinking' crusaders, usually politicians, religious leaders, journalists or professional experts," Bérubé continued. "These leaders first expose a frightening 'new' problem, such as 'epidemics of unsafe sex,' satanic cults in day care centers, homosexual rings in Congress, or academic lesbian 'sex conferences.' The media jumps on the bandwagon with lurid exposés, labeling those in the stigmatized group as dangerous perverts, deviants or degenerates who need to be identified, controlled and contained with drastic action to restore order and protect society."

The current sex panic, Bérubé said, "demonizes gay men...for stealing moments of sexual semi-privacy with other men" in places such as parks, public baths, gyms and, most recently, cyberspace.

Bérubé defended the men, dubbing them "erotic adventurers and nonconformists [who] have created some of the most imaginative, creative, varied, unruly and long-lasting forms of gay sexual culture."

Speaking from personal experience, he said, "These cracks in our antisexual society have offered me creative moments of intimate sexual adventure with strangers I never saw again. These erotic spaces have been little utopias of Whitmanesque camaraderie—places where I could imagine living in a world that deeply valued the varieties of erotic desire among men."

He then urged, "It is absolutely essential that I and my peers find a language much richer and truer than lifeless words like 'public sex' or 'multiple



Brenda Schumacher (left), Tony Valenzuela and Eric Rofes at the Sex Panic! Summit

Sexual sovereignty

Activists gather to protest threats to gay 'sexual culture,' and to organize a united resistance

by Rex Wockner

partners—a better language to describe, honor, defend and critique this remarkable thing we have been creating together against impossible odds for such a long, long time."

Throughout the day, several speakers denounced either directly or indirectly gay authors Gabriel Rotello and Michelangelo Signorile. Outing inventor Signorile has a new book out chronicling drug abuse and "barebacking" (anal sex without condoms) among gay men who attend circuit parties.

Rotello's new book attempts to prove that core groups of promiscuous urban gay men are transmitting HIV at a high enough rate to keep the AIDS epidemic alive.

"A growing number of openly gay columnists—mostly white and mostly male—have been writing for mainstream corporate publications," Bérubé said. "Unfortunately, some of these new columnists have used their power to take up the formerly straight task of initiating anti-gay sex panics, publicly attacking gay-male sex, calling for an end of promiscuity, and for the closure of gay baths, sex clubs and even gay bars."

In a 10-page letter distributed to Creating

Change attendees, Rotello defended himself.

"I am not a 'neo-con,' or any kind of con," he wrote. "I consider myself a progressive, and any look at my record and my writing will confirm that. I am also not 'sex negative.' I wrote columns in [New York] *Newsday* against New York's campaign to ban porn shops, against the harassment of gay discos and bars (which has gone on for years), and in favor of transgendered rights and queer power."

Following Bérubé's history lesson, University of California at San Diego literature professor Judith Halberstam linked the current gay sex panic to feminist sex wars over pornography in the 1980s. Australian politics professor Dennis Altman offered an international perspective on sex panics, and writer/activists Alex Garner of San Diego and Scott Tucker of Philadelphia presented an analysis of "gay antisex critiques."

The participants broke into groups and came back to propose a plethora of projects—including issuing a manifesto and forming a loosely structured organization.

"I think we're looking for three things," said summit co-organizer Eric Rofes, an instructor at the University of California at Berkeley. "First is

to increase people's understanding and analysis of the context in which the current crackdown and critiques of gay-male sex culture are occurring. The second is the establishment of some communications networks between people who share visions of the kinds of sexual cultures we want to form and the kind of relationships we'd like to have with both the mainstream community and the mainstream gay community. And the third are some specific organizing projects to fight the right-wing attacks on gay sex."

San Diego activist Tony Valenzuela said he was inspired that participants "are very invested in this issue in their own home towns and are talking about how to not only nationalize but to improve on

what they're doing in their own locations.... And people are very serious about having some kind of organizational body or networking alliance that takes this on."

Jim Baxter, publisher of the North Carolina gay newspaper *The Front Page*, noted that North Carolina isn't participating in the new sex panic—because it never finished the old one.

"It's a continuous thing that we live with all the time," he said. "But it's interesting to see these things framed in this context. It's a whole different way of looking at things that we just take for granted—the hassles of public-sex spaces or adult bookstores, which is the closest we get to sex clubs."

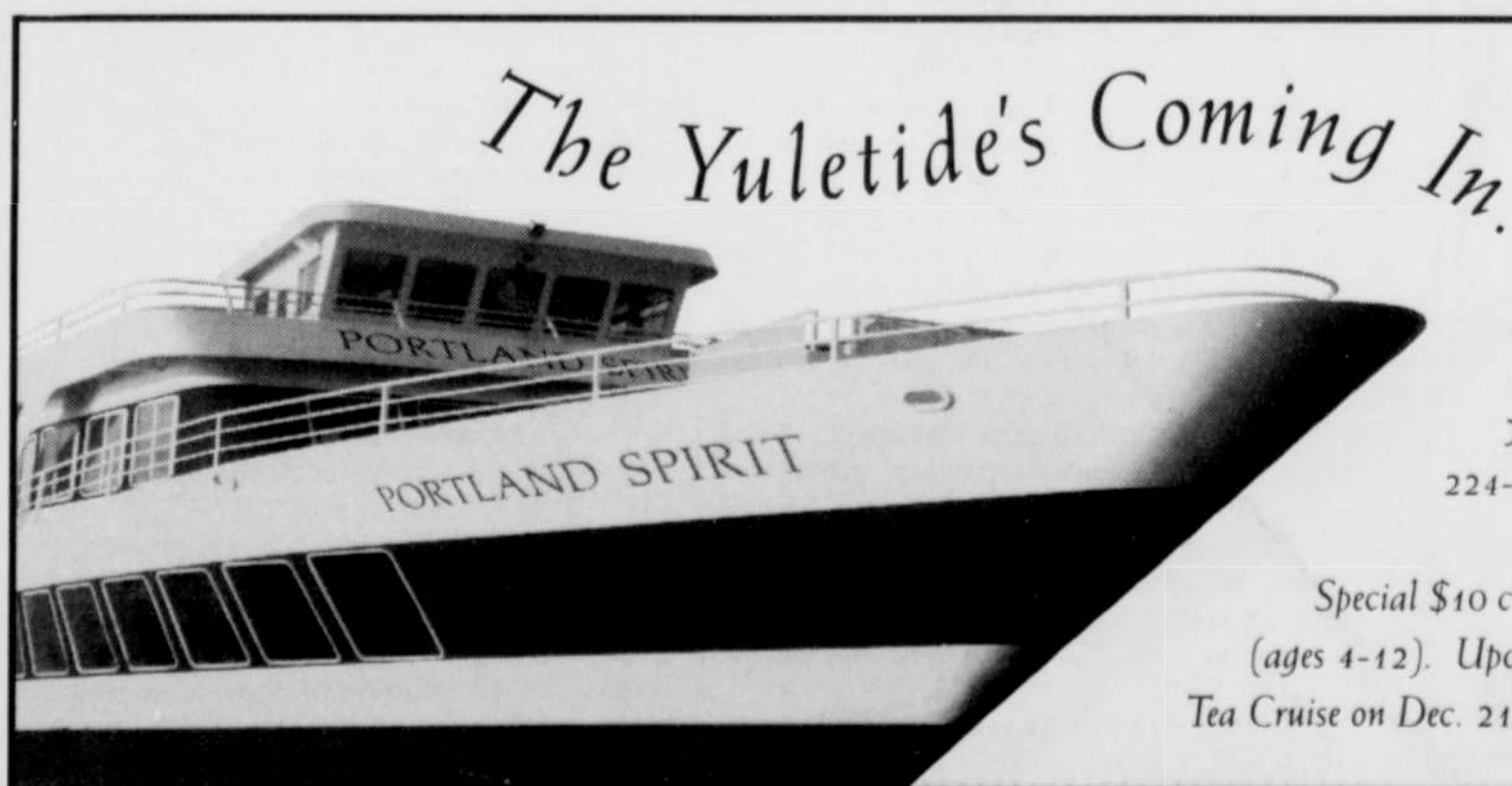
A number of women attended the summit even though it was inspired by events taking place in gay men's sexual culture.

"There's a number of reasons women are affected by the sex panic," said San Diego activist Brenda Schumacher. "One way would be to look at the current sex panic and the way it presents a single lesbian identity—as in Gabriel Rotello's book, in which he states that gay men should be more like lesbians. And just by saying lesbians, he means monogamous, long-term relationships."

"And really, not all lesbians are interested in monogamy or serial monogamy, and yet, through his argument, we're kind of boxed into one identity, and that's quite unhealthy for women of course."

She added, "Lesbians can also bring a lot to this movement in that in the '80s lesbians experienced the sex panic around pornography, and we really don't want to see that replicated."

For more information on anti-sex panic organizing, e-mail Tony Valenzuela (tonyhiv@aol.com) or Eric Rofes (erofes@uclink2.berkeley.edu).



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