

PRICKLY PAIRS

Every rose has its thorn when young men compete for femme and butch drag titles in the 22nd Rosebud and Thorn Pageant by Patrick Collins

In the beginning even Lanny Swerdlow, proprietor of the downtown all-ages dance club The Rage, was uncomfortable with the idea.

"I wasn't at all thrilled with drag queens," he says now, 21 years after the first Rosebud and Thorn Pageant was held at Mildred's Palace, the first nightclub he owned. "At first I thought drag queens were very insulting to women. But I began to realize that the biggest fans of drag were women, and that I'd been misreading the whole thing."

For the purposes of this pageant, the Rosebud is the drag queen, while the Thorn is the male incarnation of a drag queen. Not exactly a woman portraying a man, but a young man showcasing his hyper-masculine side—a

Centennial High School in Gresham, sees a larger purpose to the pageant, as well as the club itself.

At 18, he's already been out for three years, a process he says he couldn't have endured without the support of the community he has discovered at The Rage.

According to James, his father and stepmother had no problem with the news, but his mother was another story. Last year, however, it was James' mother who accompanied him to the club, which attracts many queer youth, to celebrate his birthday.

"A lot of kids aren't that lucky," he says. "I'd like to do something to help kids who are coming out. This seems like a good place to start."

Swerdlow says Rosebud and Thorn is the

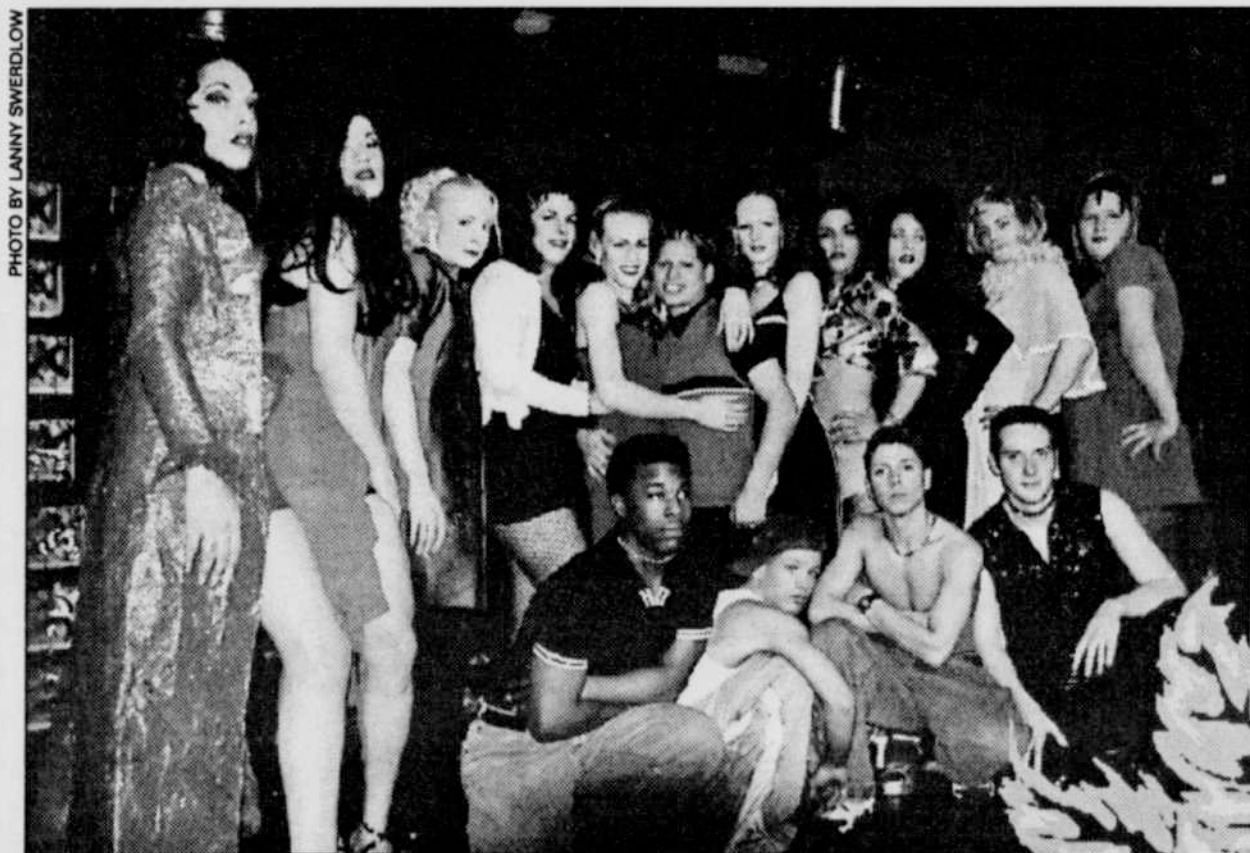
an envelope and answer a question for which they haven't been prepared."

Rosebud and Thorn are crowned via secret ballot, offered to everyone in attendance at the final pageant.

"Performing has become a big thing," Swerdlow says. "The clientele at my club really want to do shows."

Accordingly, this year's competition features more contestants than ever before—nine Rosebud contestants and four for Thorn. Swerdlow credits the increase in participation to the talent and enthusiasm of last year's court, Mistress Viridia and her Thorn, Danny.

Swerdlow also mentions a performer known as Lady O, a former Rosebud and Thorn titleholder who, he says, sets a good example when



Front row, from left: Thorn candidates Suga Tee, Jade, Brent and Kevin; back row, from left: Rosebud candidates Phoenix DeSade, Sushi Temple, Arorlex Neveck and Roulette; Rosebud XXI Mistress Viridia and Thorn XXI Danny; Rosebud candidates Selene La Velle, Arana, Psychotica Shock, BeQueva and Miss Shauna Quinn

young man portraying a young man, only more so. (For young lesbians, there's Leather and Lace, a competition held each August.)

The first Rosebud, crowned in 1977, was David Ward, who performed under the name Roseanne Charity and currently owns a dance studio in Maui. Portland's late and legendary Lady Elaine Peacock was also an early Rosebud and Thorn titleholder.

While drag may rise and fall on the barometer of social and political acceptability, the Rosebud and Thorn Pageant appears to have established a permanent niche for itself.

Aside from its longevity, what sets this event apart is that all contestants must be younger than 21 at the time of the official pageant. Swerdlow says for queer youth, participating in the pageant is a constructive undertaking.

"It's a real catharsis for them," he says. "Young people love to perform. They perform their fantasies as well as their nightmares. There's a real interaction between the performers and the audience. It's a lot of fun, and it's also very emotionally fulfilling. It's about people liking who they are."

One of this year's contestants for the title of Thorn, Kevin James, agrees with Swerdlow.

"I'd like to win, but basically I'm doing this for the fun of it," he says.

Fun aside, James, a 1997 graduate of

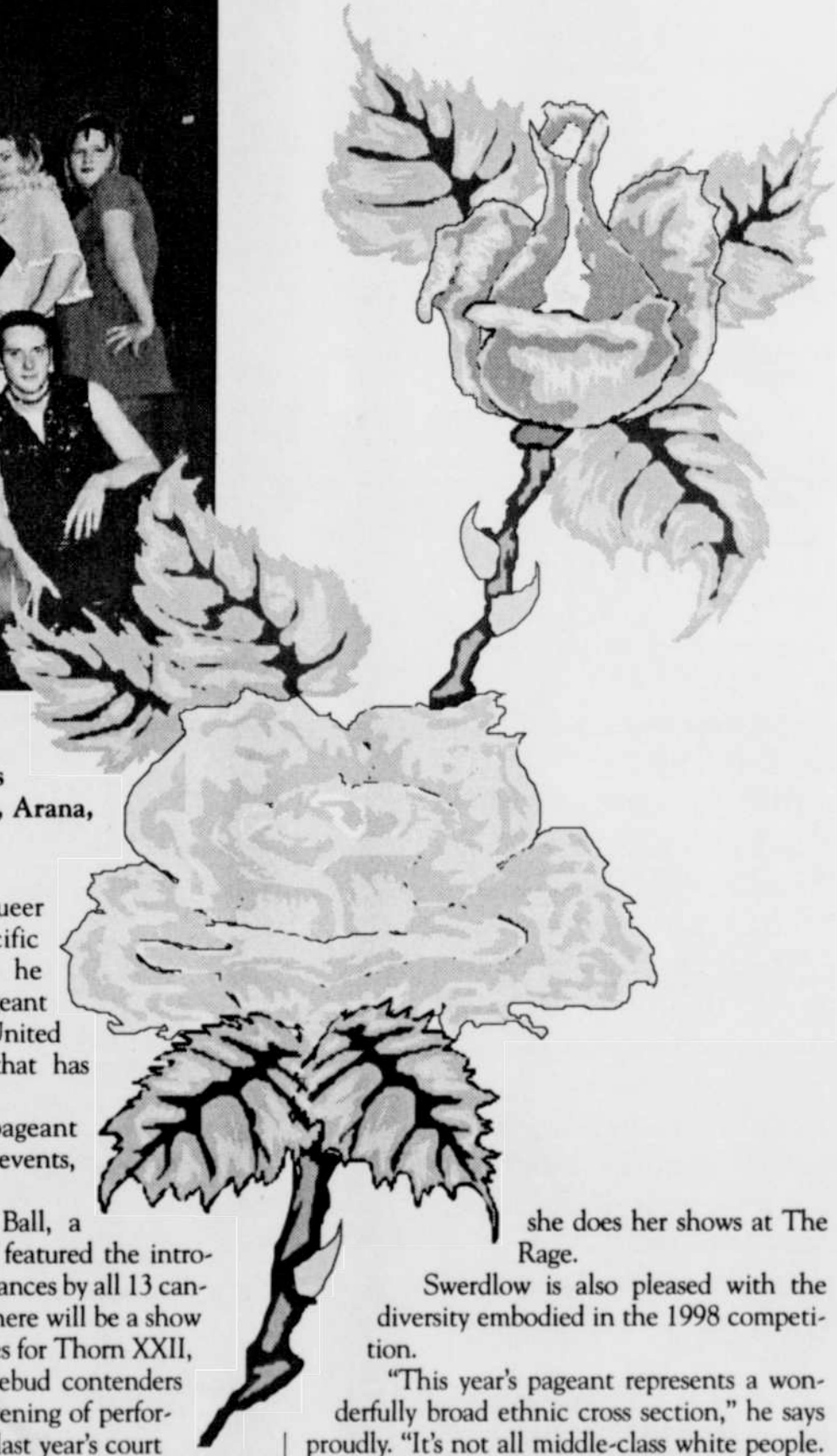
largest event for queer youth in the Pacific Northwest. He adds he knows of no other pageant of its kind in the United States or elsewhere that has survived as long.

This year the pageant comprises a series of events, all held at The Rage.

The Sweethearts' Ball, a Valentine's Day show, featured the introduction of and performances by all 13 candidates. On March 7 there will be a show featuring the candidates for Thorn XXII, on March 14 the Rosebud contenders will have their own evening of performances, on March 21 last year's court will offer a farewell performance, and, come March 28, the official pageant and coronation will take place.

Swerdlow describes the pageant as an exquisitely orchestrated evening featuring looks that range from the Queen of Sheba to professional tennis players.

"There's an entrance," he says. "And it's a big entrance, very choreographed. There's a fantasy-look segment, where everyone has a chance to get up and do their thing, and a talent performance. All contestants have to pick



she does her shows at The Rage.

Swerdlow is also pleased with the diversity embodied in the 1998 competition.

"This year's pageant represents a wonderfully broad ethnic cross section," he says proudly. "It's not all middle-class white people. This club is very open and accepting, and I'm glad that minority youth feel comfortable here."

■ THE RAGE is located at 333 SW Park Ave. between Oak and Stark streets in Portland. Doors open at 9:30 pm for the March 28 ROSEBUD AND THORN PAGEANT, with ceremonies commencing at 10:30 pm. Tickets are \$8.50.

Tickets cost \$7 for the related events on March 7, March 14 and March 21. For more information, call 242-2899.

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