

Fasten your seat belts, boys and girls, we're going for a ride! Pride Northwest Inc., the force behind Portland's pride parade and festival, has traded in its polyester for a sassy new look.

An estimated 40 energetic people showed up at Portland State University for a recent Pride Northwest volunteer meeting—a marked jump from the seven individuals who attended the group's community meeting in October. It's also an improvement over the traditionally dismal number of volunteers who get involved this early in the game. (Pride is slated for June 17 and 18.)

Much of the burgeoning interest can be linked to Rose Empress XXXVIII Misha Rockafeller, who has, through her charitable works and fund-raising activities, influence and loyal friends in the community.

Just Out spoke recently with Misha at Boxxes, a gay nightclub on Portland's bustling Southwest Stark Street, where she has played Cupid every Tuesday night since 1994 in Misha's "Make-A-Date" show.

Clad in hiking boots and green khakis, she led a reporter from the Brig bar, through the labyrinth of hallways and rooms that connect Boxxes, Fish Grotto Seafood Restaurant and Panorama, to a dressing room where she talked about pride 2000, giving to the community and, well, herself.

While running an electric razor around her face, Misha says, "Pride is an expression of our talents, of who we are as people, and that hasn't been done."

Essentially what Pride Northwest does, she adds, is "throw a party for 50,000 of our closest friends."

As the newly appointed chair of the group's entertainment committee, Misha replaces Janna MacAuslan, who chaired the committee for eight years. Misha also serves as Pride Northwest's board secretary.

"I thought there was a real need for me to be there," she says of the totally volunteer-driven organization. "I felt we were 20 to 25 years behind. We could do a lot better."

Misha's experience in grass-roots politics has given her the training to solve problems and pull resources together. She has promoted environmental causes and once served as a field manager for Greenpeace.

She sits in front of the mirror, bare-chested, with numerous items from her makeup kit spread out in front of her.

"We are planning some incredible entertainment for Pride 2000," Misha says. "We want folks to leave pride this year saying, 'How incredible was that? I never had so much fun!'"

She adds: "This is a crucial changing point

PARTY GIRL

Rose Empress XXXVIII Misha strives to pump new vigor into Portland's pride parade and festival By T.K. Mantese

for pride. It should have happened a long, long time ago."

"The entertainment committee is huge," says Christopher Webster, board chairman of Pride Northwest. Indeed, the committee is at capacity—24 folks—quite a difference from the usual two or three.

And major changes are in the works for this year's pride celebration, whose proposed theme is "In Your Face: Celebrating Queer Art and Culture."

The parade route, which normally begins at the North Park Blocks, will be reversed to start at the South Park Blocks—city approval pending. The parade will wind its way through downtown and pass not only the Stark Street clubs, but the Old Town establishments as well.

Pride Northwest has applied for an expanded permit that would double the festival space at Gov. Tom McCall Waterfront Park. A second stage, tentatively called the "rally stage" for public forums and scheduled speakers, would be set up in the southern half of the area, where non-profit groups' booths would be located as well.

Aesthetic improvements are also in store.



Michael Kennedy, a k a Misha Rockafeller (above)



PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

For instance, lighting and set decorations on the main stage are to be enhanced. Additionally, increased access from backstage will speed up set changes, eliminating down time and moving the show along faster.

Saturday night, after the Dyke March, a dance party will be hosted by five disc jockeys from clubs around the city. Following the parade on Sunday, a 20-minute production number will open the festivities.

"We've got some surprises for people," Misha divulges.

Several entertainment acts have been retained, including the Mamba Queens and an African American feminist hip-hop artist. Production numbers and entertainers will engage the crowd throughout the day. And, Misha says convincingly, "I am determined we are going to have a headliner."

With the city's approval, a community mural will be installed along the sea wall. Fitting in with the theme "Celebrating Queer Art and Culture," each panel will be designed and created by various community businesses and organizations. Panels will be auctioned, raising money for Pride Northwest and providing purchasers with a piece of art and history to take home.

As Misha finishes applying the preliminary layers of foundation on her face, her hairdresser, Scott Alexander, appears with his latest creation: a blond wig with wisps of red, the idea apparently stolen from their "mom," Rose Empress XXV Champagne.

Alexander is Mr. Gay Pride 1999-2000. He calls Misha "Dragula" and shows off the wig. They inspect and admire it—the wig is quite striking. Then Chris, Misha's "crush," steps in to join the banter. He leaves and momentarily returns with what looks like a 30-pound dumbbell in one hand and flexes his bicep, teasing Misha: "This is what you need."

Michael Kennedy, Misha's alter ego, attended the University of Oregon, where he was a member of the student senate and threw javelin on the track and field team. ("Something about a big, long stick..." Misha quips.)

Kennedy says he was outed on the cover of the school newspaper after a debate with well-known writer Ken Kesey—and before he had even had a sexual experience with a man or been to a gay bar. A member of a fraternity, Kennedy returned to the frat house, where the brothers were less than amused and his girlfriend slapped him across the face.

Within a week he moved into a gay co-op house, and on Halloween—after blurting, "Are you insane? No way in hell are you getting me into a dress!"—he appeared in drag for the first time.

Misha finishes applying her makeup, transforming her face from that of an earthy, masculine Pacific Northwesterner into the seductive look of a temptress to be reckoned with. She glues on the wig, looks adoringly at herself in the mirror and bitchily says, "Don't hate me if I'm beautiful—and if you do, fuck off!"

While Misha dresses backstage, about 40 people relax in the Boxxes lounge, where black lights make the white shirts glow. Music plays from a fine stereo system until several small and big screen televisions around the room broadcast a Will & Grace episode.

When Misha appears, she is stunning, adorned in a short black-and-silver beaded dress and black four-inch spike heels. She mingles and jokes with the crowd, which now numbers 60, and plays matchmaker for a group that is a bit shy this early in the evening.

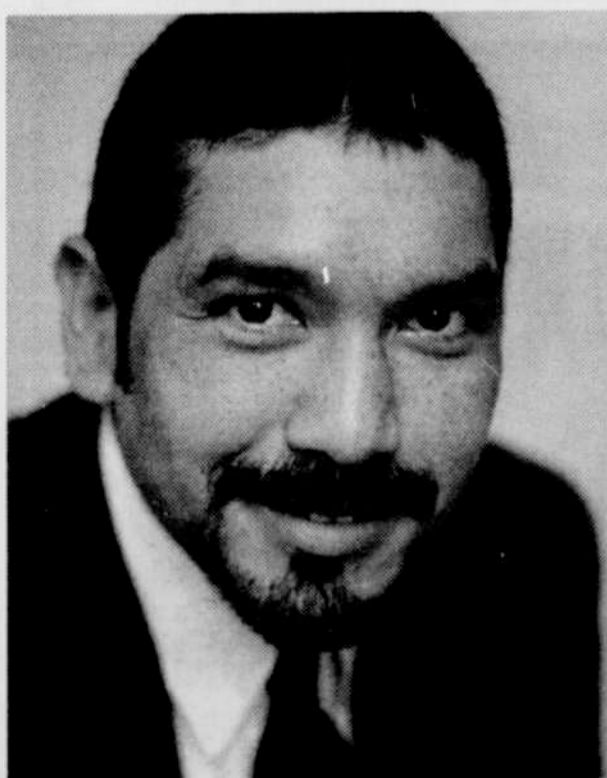
"Walk around with a hard-on," Misha advises the crowd. "That always gets their attention."

Misha, 33, says she is ready to settle down and notes the irony in the fact that she hasn't benefited from her amatory enterprise.

"Misha needs a man," she said while applying her makeup earlier. "I'm ready for a husband. It's not fair to keep all this fun and excitement to myself."

■ For more information, call PRIDE NORTHWEST at (503) 295-9788.

To find out more about MISHA'S "MAKE-A-DATE," check out www.themakeadate.com.



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