

NORTHWESTnews

When Cliff Jones moved to Portland in the early 1980s, he felt something was lacking in the city.

"There was not an organized gay community for blacks," he says. "I had been exposed to a really tight network of black gay and bi men in other parts of the country, and I wanted some of that here in Portland."

Seeking an opportunity to connect with other African American queers, Jones, along with a group of nine like-minded men, worked together to create Brother to Brother. The volunteer-run nonprofit organization provides advocacy and support for black gay and bi men and their families. "We want them to have a voice, to have a home," Jones says.

For the past 10 years Brother to Brother has done just that: created a home for African American gay and bisexual men and their supporters through social and educational programs including monthly potluck dinners and political and fund-raising activities. "It's a way to share black culture in a queer setting," Jones says.

In addition to a full social calendar, Brother to Brother also places heavy emphasis on HIV prevention education. The organization partners with state and local health agencies such as Cascade AIDS Project to fight the epidemic, which disproportionately affects African Americans.

"We know how to reach our community," Jones says. "We know how to draw in knowledge, resources and information, and we want to help health organizations bring their message into our community in a way that works for us."

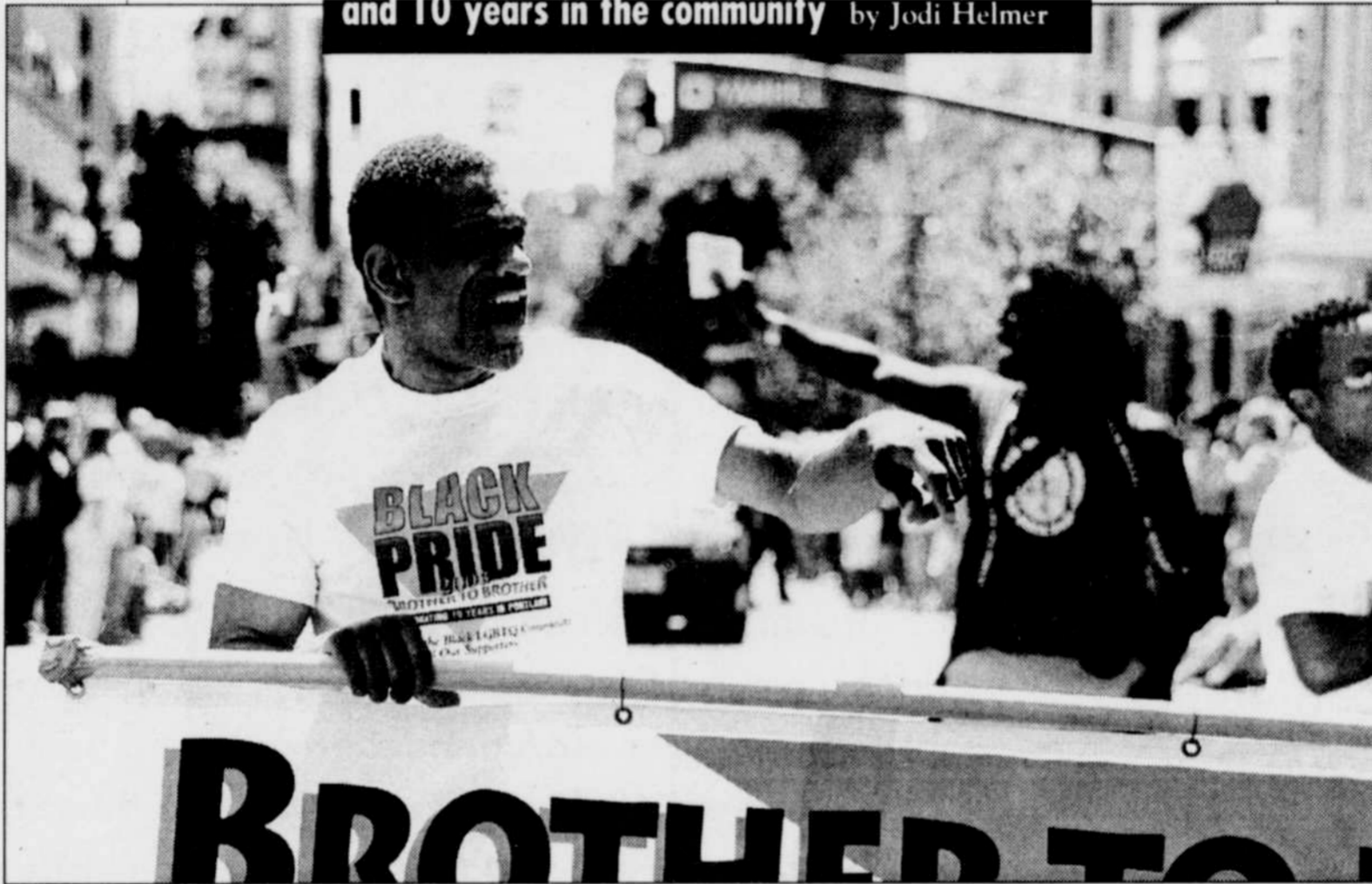
Run purely on volunteer power, Brother to Brother is the only nonprofit organization in Portland offering this depth and variety of services to African American gay men. "We have no competitors," Jones says. "We've made it 10 years because a community of black gay and bi men felt the organization was important."

Reggie Petry, owner of Alberta Arts Pavilion and one of Brother to Brother's founding members, says his interest in creating the organization was simple: "It was a way to meet other people who related to the issues of who I am. I wanted to stop being invisible."

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EBONY KNIGHTS

Brother to Brother celebrates Black Pride and 10 years in the community by Jodi Helmer



Cliff Jones co-founded Brother to Brother in 1993 to provide advocacy and support for black gay and bi men and their families

been anything but invisible. In 2002 alone the organization served close to 500 people through social events, referrals and education.

Jones says he's proud of Brother to Brother's accomplishments during the past decade. "As one of the founding members it was my vision that we would identify the issues of black gay and bi men and create services to ensure they were addressed."

One of the ways Brother to Brother is creating opportunities to come together is through Black Pride parties. This is only the second year Portland has held the event, a full day of celebration for the African American gay community and its supporters. Black Pride 2003 also will commemorate Brother to Brother's 10th anniversary.

"It's going to be a celebration," says Stephan Herrera, the organization's HIV program manager and a lead organizer of the

event. He says Black Pride will include music, food and conversation.

"We're here to empower our community," Herrera says. "Black Pride is about shared vision and shared responsibility. There are not a lot of things in the LGBT community that address African Americans; we're here to create a shared vision in our community."

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—Reggie Petry

Brother to Brother office manager Bobby Foucher adds, "The event provides a safe place for us to gather together as a family." He says that gay men in the African American community have limited opportunities to participate in organized social activities and that Black Pride addresses that need.

"It brings people together," Foucher says. "It's a good event to meet other people in the community and to celebrate the work Brother to Brother is doing."

Herrera is "excited and optimistic" about

this year's Black Pride after receiving positive feedback about the inaugural celebration. "We had great turnout," he says of 2002's two events, "A Night of Flava" at Klub Z and "Ebony Knights" at the Fez Ballroom, which he estimates attracted close to 250 people overall.

Herrera says last year's Black Pride events—which featured both social and educational components, including safe-sex messages, HIV testing and condom distribution—were well received. "The need is there. There was a strong feeling that events like this should be held more often."

This year's Black Pride party, which has taken a six-member committee more than four months to plan, is expected to draw 150 people. "We have a lot of people supporting us, and I'm optimistic that it will be a great event," Herrera says. "The event is to recognize that we're here, to give us a voice."

Herrera believes that when African American men are trying to come out and be accepted into the gay community, they often feel they must lose their cultural identity. "We show them how to maintain their cultural identity and be part of the gay community," he says.

Community is what Brother to Brother is all about, Jones says. "It's a safe environment where we can expect we won't be disrespected, invalidated or stereotyped based on our race or sexual orientation. We want people to get to know each other and break the isolation."

Petry adds: "It's an inclusive event. Everyone in the community is invited to participate."

He hopes the event will create closer connections between African American gay and bi men. "When we celebrate in the community, it helps defray the stigma," he says. "It's one small step in being able to accept who we are."

Petry, who has been active in promoting the Black Pride celebration, concludes, "I hope it continues to strengthen our community." □

Brother to Brother will celebrate its 10th anniversary during BLACK PRIDE 2 p.m. June 28 at Site F of Columbia Park at the corner of North Lombard and Woolsey streets. For more information call 503-417-7991.

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Dignity in Drag!

Community philanthropist Gary Maffei saw the stage production of Hedwig and the Angry Inch last summer and fell head over heels in love! He knew many of his friends at Equity Foundation would too. Leveraging their Equity Foundation donor-advised funds, they joined together to sponsor the return of Hedwig this June at Theater! Theatre!

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