

FEATURE

NEEDLE/WORK: Using ink & steel to create a body of art
p 24

NEWS

NORTHWEST • Code Pink lets peace and justice activists show their true colors; gay man raises awareness about long-term care for the elderly
pp 7-17

NATIONAL • Bush, Democrats dance around marriage amendment
pp 18-20

WORLD • U.S. same-sex couples can now marry in Vancouver, British Columbia
pp 21-23

ARTS AND CULTURE

BOOKS • Marshall Moore digs deep in order to break the surface; searching for sperm
pp 34-35

FILM • *Capturing the Friedmans* proves truth is stranger—and more elusive—than fiction
p 37

ART • Retrospective exhibit by Walt Curtis chronicles a poet's voice in paint
p 39

PEOPLE • Again with your kvetching? Visit Your Jewish Fairy Godmother already
p 40

THEATER • Wade McCollum restores our belief in musical theater
p 41

WHAT'S POPPIN'? • Cinemaniacs documented
p 42

DIVERSIONS • Catch a ride on the Orient Excess; *Rocky Horror* in Astoria; it's pouring queer art
p 43

COLUMNS

MS. BEHAVIOR • Sexual predator or victim?
p 33

EPIQUEERAN • Salt Lick City
p 36

OUT WITH IT! • Bravo to Bravo for two new gay series
p 43

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARC • The queerest month of all
p 45

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GUEST COMMENTARY

BY JACK KEEGAN

Welcome aboard

Pride doesn't belong to the organizers, it belongs to the community

Pride is over for the year. The tents are gone, all the rainbow flags rolled up, the floats turned back into flatbed trailers, and Dorothy has returned to Kansas. Waterfront Park even has grass again. Time for everyone to take a break and recover. Except for the members of Pride Northwest, that is.

The board of Pride Northwest has already had the post-Pride wrap-up meeting and the first meeting for Pride 2004, less than a month after Pride 2003. When I first joined the board five years ago, we had at least a couple of months off before we had to look at each other again.

Not anymore. Pride has become a much bigger and more expensive event, but the way it is put together hasn't changed much. It's still a small group of volunteers working exceptionally hard to organize an event that endeavors to be representative of our entire diverse and varied community. But there have been a few changes that make this easier.

The biggest and most visible change is the fence. Some people love it, saying it makes the festival area seem cozy and more coherent. Other folks hate the fence. They think it separates us from the rest of downtown, closeting us, making us seem like animals in a zoo.

The fence was originally put up to deal with the religious protesters. When a guy with a "God Hates Fags" sign wanders by a beer garden full of proud, inebriated queers, it doesn't exactly lead to peace and harmony. Our security folks have to stand between them and the festival participants to make sure no one gets hurt. There is not much in life more ironic than having to keep the folks who want us to burn in hell safe when they crash our party.

But the fence does have another benefit: donations. In the past, board members and thick-skinned volunteers wandered around the grounds with donation buckets. You might have seen us looking weary and sheepish while we intruded into your conversations asking for money. If you happened to make eye contact, that is. In years past, festival participants and parade spectators donated roughly \$5,000 annually. Doing the math, based on the crowd estimates, that works out to about 9 cents a person.

Putting up the fence and asking for a donation at the gate accomplishes two things. It allows you to enjoy the event without being repeatedly hassled for donations. It also raises a heck of a lot of money. Gate revenues for the past two years brought in about \$30,000 annually.

That kind of money gives the board—and the community—a lot more opportunities.

For one thing, we could hire an event coordinator. Someone who could answer more than 800 calls and e-mails, arrange for insurance and get permits for the event while providing institutional memory. This gives Pride Northwest the time and resources to do some much-needed board development. All these things, along with about a million others, add up to nearly 1,000 hours during the past year.

We could also engage a national headliner, put more into the stage decorations and make things more comfortable for our volunteers. It allowed us to absorb the increasing costs of permits and insurance with a budget based on decreasing sponsorship money.

Even so, the board members still worked really hard. Three-quarters of this year's board had never organized a Pride event before. The new board members climbed doggedly up the steep learning curve and put together a great event.

The board met every other week all year, stepping up to every week in May. The event itself is a 72-hour marathon of exhaustion. It begins on Thursday night with marking the booth spaces on the grass, followed by a trio of 16-hour days, ending with cleaning the park and hauling bags of trash to the Dumpsters until well after midnight.

Yes, Pride is a lot of work, and we couldn't do it without help. We want to give a special thanks to our wonderful volunteers, Ron and Jill from Boxxes, the Olde World Puppet Theater, Deaf & Hearing Out Reach, Just Out, Christopher Webster, Jimmy Yohe, our sponsors and our partners and families who put up with us all year long.

But most of all, we want to thank all of you who come to Pride. Your suggestions and participation and donations keep it happening every year. Pride doesn't belong to the organizers, it belongs to the community. Pride is the one big event of the year that is supposed to have something for everyone. To work toward this, the board needs to develop strategies for outreach and inclusion. But most importantly we need input from the community. Get involved, come to our meetings, tell us what you want to see, volunteer. You could even join the board—we're always looking for other masochists. ☐

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JACK KEEGAN is president of Pride Northwest. For more information call 503-295-9788, e-mail president@pridenw.org or visit www.pridenw.org.

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