

Bubbles and Homos and Bears! Oh My!

For various reasons, June has become my favorite month of the year since moving to the United States. While summer doesn't start in Portland until after July 4 (if we're lucky), the sun is out a little more. Everywhere you look there are signs of new life and people walk with an extra bounce in their step. Above all else, two of my favorite events take place in June—Pride and BearTown.

I love Portland's Pride. Despite any differences we may have, for a few days every year we manage to come together in celebration of the one thing that unites us—the fact we're all queer. In all my years as a raging homosexual, I've never missed Portland's Pride festivities—not even the year I was unceremoniously dumped on Pride Saturday by an ex who then proceeded to profess his interest for one of my best friends. I got up the next morning, put my gay face on and made it to the parade.

My first Pride was in 1997. I had just come out and made some fast friends at The Embers. Our group was a motley crew made up of gays, lesbians, trannies, drag queens, queers and straights. We were young and carefree—all we looked forward to was the weekend and dancing at The Embers.

My new friends took me under their fairy wings and introduced me to queer Portland. In



panda say what?!

BY BENNIE TAN

June, they persuaded me to attend my very first Portland Pride Parade. As a lark, I decided to bring a few bottles of bubbles with me. There's something very gay about bubbles—if you look closely, you can see all the colors of the rainbow in each one. For the duration of the parade, we blew bubbles all over the marchers—it was a veritable bubble bukkake!

This was how the Bubblequeens—the name we gave our ragtag group—came into being, and for a number of years we continued to shower parade marchers with bubbles. The next year, we decided to save our mouths for blowing other things and bought a few bubble machines, and Bubblequeens really took off. One of my fondest memories of Pride is former Mayor Vera Katz surrounded by bubbles—a gigantic smile on her face—giving us big hugs. The whole time she exclaimed, with much delight, "Bubbles! Oh my, bubbles!"

Yep, bubbles make people gay (as in happy).

Bubblequeens grew in size and popularity. We were on television one year and, in 2000, I had special T-shirts made. We even had a website, the motto proclaiming, "Love All, Blow All." We never participated in the pa-

rade itself but stood on the sidelines, blessing marchers with bubbles and cheering them on. It was our way of spreading joy and giving back to the community.

Bubbles are loved by all. It doesn't matter if you're young, old, gay, bi or straight—people simply smile more when they are surrounded by bubbles. Except the religious zealots—we tried and they are beyond salvation, even with bubble power. Bubbles start conversations and forge connections. I still recall a PFLAG mom who came up to me and gave me a big hug, thanking me for the bubbles. She didn't realize they were our way of thanking her for being an accepting and loving parent to a gay child.

Bubblequeens eventually drifted apart and disbanded. Around that time, I started to notice that Portland became a town overrun by bears on the second weekend of June. Little did I know that every June, Portland becomes BearTown.

BearTown is a bear run—a cross between a convention and a circuit party—put on by the Oregon Bears. It was my first real introduction to this fun and furry bunch. The event made

me realize I could easily fit into this community, because BearTown didn't just bring out Bears proper and Cubs; Otters, Wolves, Polar Bears and even a few Goldilocks would all converge to celebrate life and community. I even saw a few Pandas, so I knew I was welcome. Once I discovered it was a party with a purpose—a local charity selected each year to benefit from the proceeds of this weekend-long event—I was sold.

BearTown 14 was the first Oregon Bears event I helped organize, and 2011 marks my third year on the committee. Personally, BearTown and being involved with the Bears gives me the opportunity to do something good and give back to my queer kinfolk. It really reminds me of the philosophy behind Bubblequeens—however small the gesture, it's important to spread happiness and do something positive for your community.

Even though the Bubblequeens are no more, every year when I march in the Pride Parade with the Oregon Bears, I somehow incorporate bubbles into the mix. This way, the group's spirit lives on. ☐

Join BENNIE TAN in this, his favorite month. Where fun and fur go, the Panda will follow. Email him at pdxpandacub@gmail.com. Turn to p. 9 in the insert for more on BearTown 16.

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