

Hide Your Honey

Oregon Bears hold 16th annual BearTown

BY AARON SPENCER

Before you go all feathers and glitter for Pride, here's an opportunity to butch it up a little.

Droves of hearty, hairy men will romp into Portland the week before Pride, like they do every summer. They'll take in our scenery, drink our beer and flirt with our men.

This year, the sleuth of bears will come from all over the world for the Oregon Bears' weekend BearTown event, the group's 16th. As many as 100 out-of-town bears are expected.

BearTown is "kind of an Oregon Bears open house," says Oregon Bears president Brent D. Marr. It's an opportunity for bears to come to Portland and experience the city with like-minded locals.

BearTown isn't the only event of its kind, to be sure: Similar events are held in other cities—from Bear Week in Provincetown, Mass. to BearWatch in Houston, from Honolulu's Lei Bear Day to Germany's Okto-BärFest. Bears with a penchant for migration can attend events pretty solidly from May until October.

But Portland is an especially cozy city for the species. Consider the rugged outdoors, the hippies *au naturel* and the general aura of weirdness where alternative groups like this thrive.

"Portland gives a more welcoming vibe than any place I've gone," Marr says.

The Oregon Bears have planned some sightseeing activities: shopping on North Mississippi Avenue, a night at CC Slaughters and a bridge tour by jet boat. But most of the events will be held at the Jupiter Hotel (800 E. Burnside)—the bears' main den—and Portland's bear bar, the Eagle.

Over the course of the weekend, a new Mr. Oregon Bear and Mr. Oregon Cub will be named, and more than \$7,000 is expected to be raised for the Sexual & Gender Minority Youth Resource Center, or SMYRC, this year's charity. BearTown is the Oregon Bears' biggest fundraiser of the year.

"It's bittersweet because it's been a very successful year," says current Mr. Oregon Bear Don James, "but it's been a long year, and I'm ready to take what I call 'the bear break.'"

The Oregon Bears' have seen difficulties this year. A few chairmen have resigned. The group is also having some trouble getting Mr. Oregon Bear and Cub contestants to commit—the bears even extended the contest's application deadline.

"Volunteering is tough at times, and people say they need to concentrate more on home than on extracurriculars these days," Marr says.

"It's getting harder and harder to get people to sign up, but the guys who are in



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—BRENT D. MARR, ORE. BEARS PRESIDENT

are 100 percent."

Considering the challenges, the bears are proud they've pulled off the lineup as they have. Other long-running events—like San Francisco's International Bear Rendezvous—have flopped. The Bears of San Francisco have said this year's event will be the last.

Marr says he intends to keep the Oregon Bears lively by keeping the group inclusive.

"Anybody can join," Marr says, "no matter how skinny or fat or hairy or not hairy you are."

Of course, the group still has its die-hards—"purists," Marr calls them—but overall the club has become more diverse.

For his part, Marr doesn't fit the traditional description of a bear. He's not particularly large, and he's not particularly hairy (though this reporter did not independently verify that claim).

The shift in the Portland bear mentality started about five years ago, Marr says, for no particular reason other than Portland's growth as a welcoming city.

Now, the bears accept geeks, twinkles, trans people, cross-dressers, even women, Marr says. The group stays unified in its mission to raise money for charity and provide activities for its members.

So what is the thread that holds this eclectic group together?

"Generally masculine, down to earth, generous and kind," Marr says. "As we say, fun and fundraising go paw in paw."

For those of you wanting to take part in some of the BearTown fun, the bears have gobbled up the event packages, but some events will be available *à la carte*. ☐

BearTown 16 runs Thurs.-Sun., June 9-12 with events ranging from a market of products and services specific to the community to "Animal Instincts" at Steam to a Bear Brunch and Bingo with the Portland Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Venues vary; admission is \$5-\$15 for the general public. Find details and a full schedule at beartownweekend.com, and turn to p. 31 for columnist Bennie Tan's take on BearTown.

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