

how uptight and puritanical I am. Sexuality is something that bubbles right at the surface here. It can be unnerving just walking down the street to have people look at me in an overtly sexual way. I come from a culture where that's not something you do on Main Street U.S.A. in the afternoon. Maybe in a club at night, but not all the time.

So I can understand being uncomfortable with the over-the-top sexuality on display at Pride. Out of context, it's a little alarming. But there's a background here.

History of Pride

For those who aren't up on their gay history, in the '50s and '60s the community had it rough. Gay men, afraid of being outed, were being entrapped by police officers in city parks (one of the few places they could go to meet each other), and lesbians and drag queens were being strip searched at bars (one of the few places *they* could go to meet each other). There was no real, safe way to meet other queers and no real, safe way to express homosexuality.

The early "homophile" groups engaged in pickets—quiet ones, in suits and dresses, and white gloves. Finding it important to "fit in," they adhered to strict rules, removing anything that could be seen as offensive or abnormal. Not everyone in the community agreed with this approach (we never do), but the pickets went on for a while.

Something changed the night of June 28, 1969, during a raid at Greenwich Village's Stonewall Inn. The bar was known as a gay bar, the only one in town, and was frequented by the most marginalized aspects of the community: queens, hustlers, homeless youth. Raids had been happening more frequently. Tension was building. That night, when men were asked for their identification, and women were escorted inside for gender checks, somebody said "no." Then someone else did the same—for the first time. A police officer pushed a drag queen. She hit him with her purse.

The bitch hit him with her bag.

A riot erupted, things thrown, police attacked, fires lit. The riot continued the next day, growing from 100 people to 1,000. It continued a week later, in what established Stonewall of immediate and lasting significance to the

community. It was a rallying cry that told us we could stand up for what was important to us, for what was right. And I love that queen for swinging her bag (though I wish she'd kissed the cop instead).

So Pride is important. Beyond the commercialism and the binge drinking, it's a declaration of individuality. It's a nod to the street kids and the hustlers who said no, a thank you to the queen with the purse.

Does everyone in the parade know that? Hell, no. Are they looking for a good time? Yes. A chance to be their most outlandish selves? Maybe. The first time I marched I was scared. Would my family see me on TV? Would this ruin my political career? I made sure I wasn't in a position to be photographed with a partially naked or body-painted person, just in case.

I was also exhilarated. Even now, I get a thrill every time I march, every time I watch, every time I hear the rumble of the dykes on bikes. I tear up every time I see the families of PFLAG marching with their kids, church congregations marching in rainbow colors. Our communities are all diverse. We all have marginalized segments that are told to be quiet. Once a year, the gay community embraces itself—fully and publicly.

I often get the question, "Why does the gay community have to march? The straight community doesn't have a 'Straight Pride parade.'"

No, the straight community doesn't have an annual parade to declare its sexual independence. The straight community has the mainstream media to do that every day of the year.

Here's a challenge for everyone: Take one day and notice every sexual thing you see. Look at the ads in magazines, the billboards, the television commercials. Look at the books, the movies, the sitcoms you watch. Consider what's on the news, and how many people you hear talking about the dates they went on the previous night. And consider how many of those things are presented in a heterosexual way, whether overtly or not.

It's enough to make just about anyone want to put on chaps and dance in the street. ☐

For more history, humor and a how-to Pride video, visit Kristin at askthegay.com.

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