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Gays march with pride

Parade goes off peacefully, despite presence of protests

By Lisa Goldberg and Angela Rucker

Vanessa Rorie sat waiting with friends on the cold brick in Corpening Plaza as the black clouds above threatened a downpour and people speaking in the plaza proclaimed their desire for acceptance.

Despite the protests that dominated the news in the month before yesterday's N.C. Pride '96 parade, she said, the thousands of homosexual men and women who would inarch through downtown were not society's problem.

"We're not trying to get along with everyone. We're just trying to be ourselves," she said. "I'm here for me and the people I know who are gay."

"If we have our full civil rights... then maybe we can stop marching."

Bob Conn, organizer

It was a theme repeated often by marchers and speakers at the afternoon parade and rally, which capped weeks of dialogue and vehement opposition to the march.

Parade organizers estimated the crowd at about 10,000, although others said that the crowd looked significantly smaller.

About 25 protesters showed up at the end of the parade route, still in their Sunday church clothes.

As they chanted "Repent" and waved Bibles high in the air, the marchers chanted back:

"We're here. We're queer. Get used to it."

The presence of the protesters angered some of the marchers, including Chris Meade, one of the volunteers helping keep the parade orderly.

But Meade said that the protesters had as much right to be there as the marchers.

"Yeah, it's free speech. They have the right to it like we do," he said. "We did the whole thing and had a good time and know they're yelling nasty things."

Speakers and marchers used the parade and rally as a political platform to discuss unity in the homosexual community and legalizing homosexual marriage, and to bash Sen. Jesse Helms. One vendor sold "Jesse Helms toilet paper."

Gamett Phibbs spoke as a representative of the families of gays and lesbians. A "Proud Pop" sign dangled on a wire propped on top of his cap.

He said that his gay son did not choose to be gay but was born that way. "Remember my motto, 'If you can be talked out of it, you were never gay,'" he said.

Members of the group also proclaimed unity with the members of Matthews-Murkland Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, a black church that was burned down in an arson fire last week. They passed a collection plate to help the congregation rebuild. Marchers chipped in about \$650.

"We identify with all the victims of hate crimes because we are so often targeted with hate crimes ourselves," said Bob Conn, one of the event organizers.

"If we have our full civil rights, employment rights, no discrimination, and discrimination ends also on the other victims of hate crimes, then maybe we can stop marching," he said.

George Brown of Monroe said he "came out" at Easter 1963 and participated in the Stonewall riots in 1969 in New York City, when police there raided a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn. He said that things have gotten better for gay people since Stonewall.

"It's undeniable. It's acceptance and also the eagerness to liberate this lifestyle," Brown said.

And Rodney Hunter of Durham said that being with so many homosexual and bisexual men and women is comforting.

"You see people comfortable with themselves and realize you're not alone." he said.

Mike Nelson, the mayor of Carrboro and the grand marshal of the march, said that the idea of N.C. Pride is to try to change people's minds about homosexuals by bringing the debate into the open.

"It's the history of our country- People take time to think things through and change," he said.

Nelson said that the 14,000 residents of his town have never made an issue of his sexual orientation. They pay more attention, he said, to his views on development, lower taxes and traffic problems.

"They are far more concerned with the issues than my sexual orientation, as well it should be," he said.



JOURNAL PHOTO BY MEG KUIPILA
Protesters at the Gay Pride parade lined the sidewalks on First Street. Police and volunteers kept the marchers and protesters separated.

Chuck Turner and Chip Willrett of Charlotte said they plan to march in several gay-pride parades this year. The men, who have been a couple for 12 years, tiave already been to one in Columbia, S.C., and intend to attend one in Atlanta later this month.

Turner, who grew up a Southern Baptist, said that his sexual orientation is something his fam- ily just does not discuss.

"My mother is in church praying for me to- day." he said.

But the men's neighbors, who at first looked at them strangely, have come to accept them, he said. "Now their children are calling us Uncle Chuck and Uncle Chip."

A march such as yesterday's shows that ho- mosexuals are no different from anyone else and deserve the same rights, such as the right to marry, Turner said.

The rain threatened all during the pre-parade festivities, but only one brief shower marred the rally.

After the marchers lined up on First Street and the first drumbeat sounded, the skies opened and the rain poured down, drenching the march. Chants became squeals of discomfort as the marchers, most of whom did not have umbrellas, sloshed down the street.

Conn said he thinks that more of the people who lined the parade route would have joined the march had it not rained.

"Probably, just from walking along the route. There probably are several hundred that didn't march, but probably wanted to," he said.

Still, standing at the end of the parade route, he marveled at the number of people filing past. "They're still coming," Conn said.

The marchers included contingents from Temple Emanuel, a Reform Jewish congregation in Winston-Salem, and the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship of Winston-Salem.

"Our denomination does support gay and les bian rights, and we believe in acting on princi ple," said Elizabeth Kennan, the

minister of the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship. "These ... (protesters) use Scripture and religion to advance their own prejudices."

The few people who watched the parade pass on the first part of its route, on Spruce Street, included some silent protesters who held signs with anti-gay slogans. But at the end of the route was a loud group of people who held signs with such sayings as "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

The marchers cheered as they passed, drowning out the protesters. One man walked over and handed a gay-rights pamphlet to a protester, who handed the pamphlet to Lori Moon. Moon had come here from China Grove to protest.

Moon crumpled the paper but stuck it in her purse.

"I'm not a litterbug," she said. "I want to stand against evil and for righteousness."

With his voice cracking and tears welling in his eyes, William Elliot of Lexington said that it was not too late for the gay and lesbian marchers to repent. He said he did not want the marchers to go to hell for their lifestyle choice.

He also said that more Christians should have come to condemn the march. "We need more Christians out here on the battlefield. This is not a playground; this is a battlefield," he said.

Parade volunteers urged the marchers to keep moving past the protesters, who were flanked by several police officers.

"We're trying to get everyone off the street so we can get these morons to go home," said Scott Bennett, one of the volunteers.

Later at the rally, several people debated one of the protesters, Neil Queen of Salisbury, who had walked into Corpening Plaza to talk with the marchers.

"How would you feel if I went to your revival?" Troy Shellito asked. "No man, no woman has the right to tell anyone they're going to hell."

Though most of those watching or marching in the parade did so out of strong convictions for or against the event, Jay and Mary Long of Harrisonburg, Va., showed up out of curiosity.

The Longs were staying at the Salem Inn and attending an elderhostel in Winston-Salem.

Jay Long said that the march reminded him of the protest groups of decades ago. Mary Long said that it was her first experience at such an event.

"It's a bit overwhelming for me. I'm from an older generation," said Mary Long, 72. "I love the peace and love part, I can go along with that."