

Community by Committee - CityBeat (Cincinnati, OH) - June 8, 2000

June 8, 2000 | CityBeat (Cincinnati, OH) | Michael Blankenship

It's nice to have a parade back as part of Cincinnati Gay Pride celebrations. Indeed, it's what makes the event more of a celebration instead of a simple observance. For years, the local gay "community" has languished under a self-imposed low profile, unwilling or unable to express itself in a unified fashion and vulnerable to legal discrimination against individuals who wear their pride in public, due to the city's Charter Amendment 12 (passed by Issue 3).

But thanks to a few people who thought enough to question that silence, the region's always diverse and often disparate gay community is starting to show some signs of life.

Chris Good is not your typical jargonized, sloganeering, PC gay activist. He's an earnest, soft-spoken man who came out himself only about six years ago. Before he started the year-long process that will culminate Sunday in a rally, parade and festival of gay pride, Good was asking, "Why are there no public events except the Drag Races or Pride Night at King's Island? Why are these advertised only in the gay community?" He makes the case that Pride should consist of more than simply "cocooned" or insulated events: "It's kind of hush-hush. How can you call it a Pride event if it's almost secretive?"

Good sought advice from Michael X. **Chanak**, a longtime activist and media-savvy professional in the local gay scene who himself had drifted into "semi-retirement" from activism. **Chanak**, a self-proclaimed "Dowager," now holds court with his dog, LoTessa, via the Internet and keeps the phone wires crackling with his own DNN (Dowager's News Network), from whence he dispenses welcomes, newsbits, advice, gossip and "spray" (catty comments and criticism) to both institutions and individuals alike. The Dowager's advice to Good: "Make sure the door is open to anyone who wants to participate, and make sure your finances are out there." With **Chanak** as his advisor, Good set up the Pride Parade Committee.

Good had never been in a Pride parade himself and had attended just one in Columbus. He got additional advice on the technical aspects of mounting such an event from activists there. He learned a lot in the process about both himself as well as the gay community, and not all of it strikes him as particularly worthy of pride.

"Sometimes the gay community is its own worst enemy," he observes. "There's a lot of anger that we should be directing at our oppressors, but we end up directing it at each other."

Good says people would goad him into fights over trifling matters, such as the insurance issue for parade floats.

"It seems they were angry at our success," he says, "and charged that we were acting alone, without regard to group consciousness."

His words echo an example shared with me a few years ago by a painter in illustrating the nature of Cincinnati's gay community when under attack: "They circle the wagons, but instead of shooting out (from the circle) they shoot in!"

It's the perennial struggle between keeping an open process and actually getting things done. The delicate dance to avoid stepping on people's toes inevitably leads to activist casualties in this queer little minefield. As the burnout spreads, few are willing to venture into the territory again. Someone always feels slighted, ignored or left out. And it's impossible to keep everyone, with all their different agendas, happy.

But here and there, despite the naysayers and backbiting, Good began to put together a team of people he could work with. Some of his earliest supporters were his straight friends.

Crucial support came via the Internet, from subscribers to **Chanak's** DNN and from Rainbow Talk, a chat room at gaycincinnati.com. "The Dowagers," as Good describes them, spurred by **Chanak**, raised the \$600 needed for parade insurance in exchange for gaining control over the kick-off rally in Burnet Woods. **Chanak** then took over organizing the rally, which wasn't a part of the original parade idea, inviting as speakers those fellow "dowagers" who'd contributed financially to the Parade Committee's efforts.

It started as just a parade. "No, you really need a rally," **Chanak** says, "something for people to come to, then a parade and then a place to go to."

Defending his decision to solicit speakers for the rally from contributors, he asserts, "That was my call. We thought we should reflect the people with the courage, the vision and the desire to see these events again. ... They took the risk, opened their wallets and stood up from the get-go."

Previous rallies, even as late as last year's sparsely attended event on City Hall steps, featured representatives of many community organizations, clubs, associations, school and youth groups, churches, as well as gay supportive politicians, typically without regard to revenue sources but as a means of giving the "community" a means to express itself in a unified event. As for these folks, **Chanak** maintains, "they have their own venues, they have their own visibility, all the time." Also, for an hour-long rally, he reasoned that a shorter list of speakers was more appropriate.

In addition to **Chanak**, Kerry Wickstrom did a Web design and poster design and headed up publicity. Another volunteer, Greg Kipp, put up posters and fliers every month, Good says, "to keep it in people's heads that this was going to happen. Not everyone thought it would happen."

But happen it will, after a five-year absence and due entirely to individual initiative and a few people's dedication. "It's been a few worker bees and we're tired, but it's been worth it," says Good, summing up his experience. "My fantasy about the way things work has been diminished quite a bit."

Also, in the parade's five-year hiatus, certain policies and regulations for events had changed. "We had to rebuild the infrastructure to do something like this," **Chanak** says, "because so much had changed."

Not the least of the changes was the choice of the parade route. Instead of a march from Fountain Square through downtown streets, typically deserted on a Sunday afternoon, the route was set to go from Burnet Woods down Ludlow Avenue and finish at Northside's Hoffner Park, in the heart of what's increasingly the gay business district of Hamilton Avenue. There are those who would argue that such a route restricts community visibility to just a single neighborhood, while downtown and Fountain Square are the heart of the city's public events.

"Yeah, but if nobody's gonna see it, then what's the point?," Good says. "We wanted some visibility." He says that, for the parade, "perception is more important than reality. The perception is that Northside is a gay neighborhood."

For the future, and for anyone who might help organize similar events, Good has some simple, straightforward advice: "Do it for yourself. Don't do it if you just want to make friends or get your ego stroked, 'cause it ain't gonna happen."

And to those who argue for a return to Fountain Square and downtown streets, "If you want it downtown, then throw your own damn parade."

Copyright © 2000 SouthComm Publications, CityBeat. All rights reserved.