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Pride in Stride

Gays and lesbians march for equal rights and have fun, too

By Rebecca Lomax

The Gay Pride Parade doesn't get the luxury of the whole road. Instead of completely stopping traffic, participants are instructed to march on the right side of the road while cars pass on the left.

But even more so than most parades, parts of this one are particularly traffic-stopping.

There are the usual pretty girls dressed up and perched atop flashy convertibles. But look closer: Those aren't girls. The woman seated on the rear of the black convertible sponsored by Jacob's on the Avenue was drag queen Miss Viagra Falls.

The big men driving circles in little cars? Those have been replaced, too, with men in leather on motorcycles. The women on motorcycles, as attested by their signs, prefer the title "Dykes on Bikes."

The June 9 parade is the jewel in the crown of Cincinnati's two-day Gay Pride festival. Starting with a rally in Burnet Woods, the parade marched down Ludlow Avenue to Hamilton Avenue, ending at the festival in Northside's Hoffner Park.

A parade is only as good as its marching band, and this year's was the biggest if not also the best sounding yet. Trumpeter Mitch Young was among those from the Lakeside Pride Freedom Band in Chicago who took a bus down Friday night to beef up the Cincinnati members and practice the unofficial Pride theme songs.

The members of the Queen City Rainbow Band -- dressed in uniforms of rainbow tie-dye T-shirts -- numbered more than 50, including the men and women of the flag corps.

"We're doing two songs, 'YMCA' and 'We Are Family'," Young said as the band warmed up at Burnet Woods.

The Pride Parade is primarily about having a good time, but it's also a chance for the gay community to celebrate and show off the diversity within the community.

While drag queens provide the entertaining eye fodder, the gay community also has activists, businesses and social groups.

"We are parents," said Michael Chanak speaking at the rally. "We are singles. We are married. We are employees."

Gay activist groups took their cue to remind participants of ongoing social and political problems. Members of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, chanted, "What do we want? Safe schools!" Members of Stonewall Cincinnati chanted, "Hey hey! Ho ho!"

Homophobia has got to go!"

For some, such as the two high school girls holding hands or the man dressed in only boots and a white string bikini, the parade provided a chance to walk down the street "as is."

The River Bears, a burly all-male group, marched in front of their float, a truck covered in snugly stuffed teddy bears. The group is for gay men who are -- contrary to the skintight white T-shirt stereotype -- big and hairy.

Some of the usual parade trappings were missing. Instead of the more familiar roaring sirens from ambulances, fire trucks and police cars, a lime green Volkswagen Beetle led the parade. Inside, peaking from the sunroof, was 77-year-old Grand Marshallette Peaches LaVerne.

The only police cars were the ones blocking off closed streets. As for the man in his underwear, a friend warned him in advance and he slipped his shorts back on each time they neared a cop. It might have been Pride Day, but this is still Cincinnati.

The usual multitude of hand-shaking politicians was noticeably absent, too. The parade began with a reading of Charlie Luken's proclamation of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Pride Day in Cincinnati, but the mayor was nowhere to be seen.

The only campaigner on site was Greg Harris, making his bid for Congress in 2002.

"Human Rights is one of my core issues," he said.

Harris spoke briefly about proposed federal legislation that would make Article 12 of the city charter -- forbidding anti-discrimination measures for gays and lesbians -- moot.

Church support for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community was out in full strength, including groups from St. John's Unitarian Church and Clifton United Methodist Church. The Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church was the largest outfit, dressed in matching purple shirts, with members singing in harmony, "We are marching in the light of God."

For all participants, the parade was a chance to see and be seen by like-minded individuals. The crowd rewarded the positive energy of the marchers with constant cheering. Crowds thinned between the Ludlow business district and the bridge into Northside.

Once across the bridge, the crowd was at its strongest, replete with a pair of men in drag commentating from a second-story fire escape.

Participants were instructed to ignore any possible protesters, but there were none to speak of.

The Coalition for a Just Cincinnati marched in support, although their numbers were few. The coalition is one of several groups supporting a civil rights boycott of Cincinnati; among its demands is the repeal of Article 12.

What's a street festival without a collection of quirky T-shirts? Alternate chests and backs proclaimed such concepts as "Big Fag," "Boys Will Do Boys" and "Come Out, Come Out Wherever You Are."

In their own way, each repeated the cliché mantra, "We're Here, We're Queer."

And they'll be back next year. ©

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