

Gay Pride Week in Anchorage

## Alaska gays win a few, but conflicts still remain

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First Anchorage Gay Pride March  
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by Patricia Jelley

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### Anchorage

Gay Pride Week, a public affirmation of the "gay, proud and free" spirit espoused by many homosexuals and lesbians today, brought focus to Alaska's developments toward equality here last week. Symbolized in social gatherings, Metropolitan Community Church services and a public parade to City Hall, the activities highlighted progress for the movement in Alaska.

But the issues raised in the week of gay awareness also brought conflict to many here, both in the gay community and among supporters. Despite recent victories in the Alaska Supreme Court and the the Alaska State Commission for Human Rights, gay activities found sharp divisions still remain over methods to be used in pressing for public and legal acceptance.

The Gay Freedom Day Parade through downtown Anchorage was one clear example of the conflicts faced by individuals and of the differing strategies for change advocated within the movement.

Scheduling the parade, the first such ever in Anchorage, caused many personal conflicts for gays and supporters of gay rights. A parade with police escort and media coverage is a public event, and many had trouble deciding whether participation was a commitment they wanted to make,

Despite the rainy afternoon, more than 40 persons turned out with banners and posters for the march from the Gay Community Center to City Hall, and several spectators joined the group as it marched by. A brief ceremony at City Hall saw few hecklers; comments from passers-by generally were supportive.

Following the parade, the mood among marchers was euphoric.

Many gays, however, boycotted the event, fearful of the recognition that could come from the public display.

The reality of the situation is that homosexuals take a tremendous personal and professional risk in

openly admitting their sexual preference. The result is that the gay community is still very closed. Many gays ask themselves, "Why do people need to know I am gay? Does it really matter?" "There are daily incidences of negative reactions to being gay, so why be open?" Others feel that sexual preference is a part of one's

being; to deny it is to lie to oneself and to others. One man explained to me, "Many people do not identify with a gay cause because there is so much more to the individual than his sexuality. That is denying you are a whole person. Then there are others to whom being gay is everything."

This diversity of opinion was evident in the Gay Pride Week activities. Three major groups each sponsored activities. The Metropolitan Community Church had part of its regional conference in Anchorage last week; among its activities was a



church service conducted entirely by women. The Imperial Court of All Alaska, primarily a social group, sponsored numerous activities which were publicized within the gay community; many of these events took place at two local bars. Finally, the Alaska Gay Coalition and the Alaska Gay Community Center jointly sponsored activities including films, a picnic and the Gay Freedom Day parade. These activities were publicized through newspaper and radio ads.

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Gay Pride Week has its origins in an incident which took place on June 28, 1969, in the Greenwich Village section of New York City. Police raided a gay bar on Christopher Street, and as they loaded gay men and women into paddy wagons the people remaining in the bar decided to riot. The police ended up locked inside the bar for three days as gays and their supporters rioted.

The following year gays in New York and in many other cities had parades and celebrations on June 28th to commemorate the Christopher Street incident. Gay Freedom Day has expanded to a week of celebrations and also includes memorial services for gays who have died in tragedies such as the New Orleans fire on June 24, 1973, when 33 gays were burned when a fire started in a gay bar.

Members of the gay community in Anchorage expressed differing views on what Gay Pride Week meant to them as individuals and to the community as a whole, both gay and straight. The overall feeling about Gay Pride Week was positive; it was seen as having educational value to both gay and straight communities.

"One of the significant things that it accomplishes is a statement to the general community that gay people exist," commented Jim McKnight, one of the founders of the Alaska Gay Coalition. "I think that is very important because there are many people who are dealing with homosexuality in their own lives. Because we don't

talk about lesbian feelings or homosexual feelings when we have them, a lot of people are very scared and feel very isolated; they feel like they are the only person around who is having these feelings. When some gay people step forward and say, 'Here we are, we do exist, we experience these feelings too and still lead full lives,' I think it is a very positive statement."

Other gays expressed the feeling that Gay Pride Week is a time to look into oneself and think about what it means in one's life to be gay. It is also seen as an impetus toward solidarity in the fight for gay rights and an opportunity to learn about the resources within the gay community.

One man in a bar had a different opinion: "Gay Pride Week means nothing. Gay Pride in Alaska comes out of a bottle and from drugs." Bars do serve an important function as a place where gays can meet other gays.

At various functions during Gay Pride Week people expressed the feeling that there is a good deal of positive energy in the gay community. Much of this energy is likely the result of two positive events in the past month.

First, the Supreme Court of Alaska ruled in favor of the Alaska Gay Coalition in the Blue Book case. The Coalition had sued the Municipality of Anchorage for the right to have its name and a list of services offered printed in the "Anchorage Blue Book," a listing of social services and organizations in the city.

The Gay Coalition pressed the case because it viewed the Blue Book as a valuable resource tool in the community. Unfortunately, as a result of the court ruling the Blue Books were recalled, and according to Municipal Public Information Officer Kelly Gay, Blue Books will not be reprinted to include the Alaska Gay Coalition and subsequently redistributed.

The second victory was the recent vote by the Alaska State Commission for Human Rights at its June 3 meeting in Fairbanks passing a resolution requesting the state legislature to add sexual preference as a protected right under state laws against discrimination. Commissioner Diana Snowden commented that, "Testimony offered in Fairbanks was some of the best I've ever heard on the subject of homosexuality" and addressed many stereotypes and myths about gays.

Several gays commented that the energy in the gay community needs to be focused; there are no common priorities and no leadership. To an extent this reflects the diversity within the gay community; gays are found in all walks of life and at all economic levels. The only common factor is sexual preference and the resulting oppression. There is no definable "gay lifestyle."

Statistics on the size of Anchorage's gay community vary. Jim McKnight estimates about 3,000 people here think of themselves as members of the gay community. The number of Anchorage residents having homosexual experiences probably is closer to Alfred Kinsey's figure of 10 percent of the population, which would be 15,000-20,000 people.

A sizeable portion of Alaskans are thus in danger of being denied their civil rights solely on the basis of sexual preference. Gays seem to be evenly divided on the best approach to fight for equal rights. At issue is whether legislation or education should be the priority.

Those gays in favor of pushing for legislative changes claim that it takes too long to change people's attitudes; meanwhile, gays are facing discrimination in housing, jobs, public accommodation, credit and military service. One man claimed that if people had been allowed to vote on civil rights for Blacks, it would not have passed. Court battles and legislation won civil rights for Blacks, and the same will be true with gay rights, they maintain.

On the other side of the issue many gays feel strongly that people's attitudes are at the base of discrimination and only education will make the situation for gays better. They feel people attack homosexuality out of ignorance—thus the myths about gays being child molesters and having criminal tendencies beyond those of heterosexuals. One man suggested that if all the gay corporate and civic leaders and powerful politicians came out and acknowledged they are gay, it would have a positive effect on the community at large. Friends and neighbors would be forced to admit they thought the person was fine before he/she came out as gay; is he really a different human being now?

One politically active gay maintained that, "Education is the key; laws can't change people's attitudes. If you want to deny a gay person a job, you will probably be smart enough

not to use as an excuse something that is illegal. I'm more concerned about the criminal code revision than an amendment to the state discrimination laws."

Gay rights have been receiving much attention in the national press. Human rights ordinances were recently rescinded in Eugene, Oregon; Wichita, Kansas; and St. Paul, Minnesota. Yet, an even greater number of cities have gay rights ordinances in effect. While nationally most battles over gay rights are taking place on the municipal level, there is a chance Alaska will be one of the first states to pass a law protecting civil rights of gays when the issue is brought before the legislature next session. Activists hope to be successful by avoiding an emotion-charged campaign, preferring to lobby behind the scenes for passage of the amendment to the state discrimination laws. "There are a lot of people in Alaska who are not gay but who support gay rights. We need to reach those people in order to pass gay rights legislation," said Eugene Haberman, editor of Gay Alaska, a monthly publication.



Gay Pride March June 28 1986

Gay rights advocates in Anchorage hasten to emphasize their feelings of unity with gays in the Lower 48. The gay community raised \$940.00 in one night to send Eugene to help fight repeal of the gay rights ordinance there.

The referendum movement in the Lower 48 is viewed in several ways by Alaskan gays. McKnight claims the overall effect is positive. "The issue has come up, the word had been said, the idea has been put across and it has been discussed publicly and privately. It is not so much a catchword anymore; you can't say 'gay' and cause somebody to freak out. You say 'gay' and they accept that as an idea and as a concept. So I think there is a lot of progress and the exposure has been healthy."

An opposing view is held by Jay. "What happened in Eugene was not a religious bigot reaction. If anything they very carefully screened out that type of reaction. It became a very low-key, anti-gay rights campaign and they won on that appeal." Jay feels referendums on human rights ordinances have encouraged the development of grass-roots opposition to gay rights. With watch-dog groups growing it may be harder to work for legislative changes on a low-key, logical level.

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Being publicly identified as a homo sexual does have serious consequences in Anchorage. There are numerous reports of gays losing jobs, being evicted from housing and being discriminated against in trying to obtain credit. One man says he was so severely beaten by his neighbors that he was hospitalized; co-workers defecated on his desk at work, his car windshield was smashed and "queer" was written on the side of the auto.

Under those conditions, it is difficult to come to grips with being gay. Many gays in the process of "coming out" of the closet and openly admitting their sexual preference say they need to go through a period of being labeled; they need something to relate to so they identify strongly with being gay.

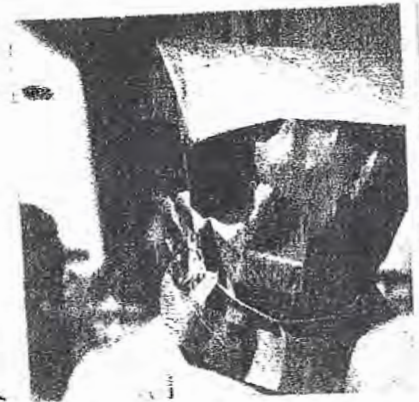
Several gay men and women expressed disgust with this labeling and see the gay rights movement as a way to do away with it. "What we are talking about is freedom for people to be the way they are without being labeled into little categories," one woman said, be they categories of race, religion, ethnic origin, sex or sexual preference.

Admitting to yourself and to others that you are gay is still a step removed from marching in a public parade on Gay Freedom Day. Many people very sure of themselves as gays went through agonizing decisions about whether to march, and, if so, whether to wear a disguise.

The perspective of Gay Pride Week showed a gay community that is very diverse, not quite a community in a wholistic sense. Indeed, only when the term "gay community" no longer invokes negative reactions will the gays be unified—with the community at large.



still a person wearing a bag because of discrimination fears



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