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An upbeat celebration



Members of the N.C. Pride Marching Band march during a gay and lesbian parade in downtown Winston-Salem on Sunday.

Parade and festival rain gay pride

Even the rain couldn't dampen spirits at the first statewide Gay Pride March to be held in Winston-Salem.

BY RICH MCKAY

Staff Writer

WINSTON-SALEM — Dark rain clouds burst just as thousands of marchers and onlookers lined up for the N.C. Pride '96 gay and lesbian parade in downtown Winston-Salem Sunday afternoon. Everyone got soaked — gay and straight alike.

But with hoops, cheers and drum-banging, the parade went on. People danced along the parade route that ran down Liberty Street to the Hall of Justice downtown, some chanting, "We're queer. We're here. We're everywhere." Others waved signs that read "Love is never wrong."

The rain let up after a few minutes and didn't seem to dampen Spirits, as people smiled, hugged and held hands. Parade

organizers estimated the crowd at about 10,000 marchers and onlookers, but others said half that number attended.

Organizers of the three-day festival, which ended with the parade, faced more obstacles than inclement weather. Winston-Salem Alderman Robert Nordlander tried to get a resolution passed in May that would denounce homosexuality — a move he said was directed at the gay and lesbian festival.

And Friday, the day the festival started, 42 area churches ran a full-page ad in the Winston-Salem Journal urging all gays and lesbians to renounce their "awful and unnatural desire."

But overall, festival organizers said they've had a warm welcome, with marchers coming from all over the Triad, and some as far away as Charlotte, Boone and Siler City.

Church members, such as the Rev. Virginia Herring, a minister of Saint Anne's Episcopal Church in Winston-Salem, joined the march to bring a Christian voice that supports the festival.

"We wanted to show another Christian perspective, one of inclusion," she said.

James Jones of Winston-Salem carried a sign that read, "God Loves All." He said that he marched just to "stand up for the rights of everyone."



Tom Copeland News 6t Record

Rain didn't keep the marchers and onlookers away from Sunday's N.C. Pride '96 gay and lesbian parade in Winston-Salem.

Alex Norwood, a gay man and co-chairman of the festival, said he is glad that this festival could be held in his hometown, where gays and lesbians need such forums to encourage them to stand out in the open.

"We've been silent for too long," he said. "Gays and lesbians need a voice and need visibility." He said homosexuals don't want special treatment, just equality and not to be that "dark secret."

"Often it's the case that no one will talk about this unless there's something to spearhead it," he said. "That's what we can do here."

Cheryl Hopkins, a lesbian grandmother from Winston-Salem and co-chairwoman of the 1996 N.C. Pride Committee, said a march was a good way to end the festival, which included three days of seminars, speeches and music.

"Our country has a long history of marching for justice," she said. "Women marched to get the vote, African-Americans marched for freedom."

"This is a context where we can say 'I am who I am. I am proud of who I am.' "

Gamett Phibbs, 74, of Charlotte, marched and wore a sign on his hat that read "Proud Pop." He said he wanted to reach people on the sidelines of the gay issue, as he once was until his son, Bob, told him that he was gay.

"If that doesn't wake you up to reality, then nothing will," he said.

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Phibbs, a retired minister and one of the speakers at the rally, said that at first the news shocked him, dashing his dreams of grandchildren. But then he quickly learned acceptance and understanding.

And Phibbs said he gets hot under the collar if anyone uses scripture to denounce homosexuals. "Every time I see Christians waving the Bible against gays I'll say that my great-grandfather preached on the same King James Bible that slavery was based in scripture."

This is the first year the march was held in Winston-Salem.

North Carolina's first Gay Pride March took place in Durham in 1986 as an honor to the memory of a man who was killed because he was gay.

The march helped some people, such as Ricky Cawlan of Winston Salem, feel more comfortable about being openly gay.

"This is my first time coming here with our kind of people, and I was kind of nervous," he said. "But I came because I'm a human being, and I need to be here to stand up for my rights. Look, people are holding hands. Even though I'm gay, that's shocking because you don't see usually see it."