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Gay pride march puts issues out in the open

Despite the controversy surrounding this weekend's N.C. Pride '96 march and rally, gays and lesbians say they feel empowered by the annual festival.

By Donald W. Patterson
Staff Writer

Thousands of chanting, singing, sign-carrying gays and lesbians will march through the streets of Winston-Salem Sunday afternoon, calling attention to their cause.

When their three-day N.C. Pride '96 festival ends, the marchers will return to their homes across the state feeling empowered, organizers say.

"People who march realize they don't have to live in a world of fear," Says Cheryl Hopkins, a lesbian grandmother from Winston-Salem and co-chairwoman of the 1996 N.C. Pride Committee. "They have a sense of control over their lives. It frees up their spirits.

"In many ways I see the pride march as a giant therapy session. People go home feeling good about themselves."

Just having the 1996 N.C. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Weekend in Winston-Salem — a first for the Triad — gives Hopkins a good feeling.

Overall, she appreciates the response of a city that she once considered "a fairly closed community."

But not any more — not after recent developments on the Board of Aldermen.

"... There is very much a live-and-let-live spirit in this town," Hopkins says. "Our community has supported us much more than we expected. But we did expect some controversy."

And there's been some.

To many, the notion that Winston-Salem would host the annual festival — a series of seminars, dances and speeches capped off by Sunday's march and rally — borders on the repulsive.

Alderman Robert Nordlander represents that contingent.

"It would make my stomach turn to watch them," says Nordlander, a 25-year-old Republican and certified public accountant who represents the southeast ward. "I've seen other gay marches on TV."

Nordlander says he's gotten hundreds of calls and letters from people around the Triad, most wanting to know why the city would allow N.C. Pride come to town.

"I try to explain to them that they have a First Amendment right to be here," Nordlander says. "However, as far as I was concerned they weren't welcomed."

At the May 20 alderman's meeting, Nordlander proposed a resolution that promoted what he called community standards and condemned the gay lifestyle.

Nordlander said he wasn't surprised that his motion died for lack of a second.

"I did what I had to do," Nordlander says. "I think the majority of the community agrees with me in saying homosexuality is immoral. ... If I could sum it up in one phrase I would say that God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

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Hopkins called the defeat of Nordlander's resolution "a watershed day in the history of our community."

"(It) illustrates that our city's leaders have had the courage to take this first step toward a voice in the public life of Winston-Salem for its gay and lesbian citizens. The days of silencing and shaming gay people in Winston-Salem and the Triad have ended."

Hopkins praises Winston-Salem Mayor Martha Wood for a letter of welcome that will be read at Sunday's rally.

"Your visit to our city honors and challenges us," Wood's letter says in part. "I believe you can count on the citizens of Winston-Salem to welcome you in the tradition of genuine hospitality for which we are well known."

But Hopkins says the mayor's letter didn't go far enough.

"We are disappointed that the mayor did not refer to our visitors as gay and lesbian people," Hopkins says. "It shows we still have a lot of educating to do."

That's part of the theme for this weekend's events — "celebrate, activate and educate."

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

Attendance has grown over the years. Organizers say they anticipate that 10,000 people will join Sunday's march. Winston-Salem police say they expect half that number.

Police say they base their estimate on information from cities that recently have hosted N.C. Pride. They add that they expect no problems.

"We're treating this like we would any other parade," said Lt. E.E. Howard Jr. of the Special Operations Division. "It's like the Christmas parade or homecoming."

Howard and parade organizers say they have received no information about a counter march.

"We find that when it comes time to turn out, we haven't seen any organized opposition," Hopkins says. "I think the reason is very clear. The trend is with us in the whole country and in this community. Our right to organize and be heard is very basic."

N.C. Pride selected Winston-Salem for its festival because members from the community put in a bid with a board of directors that manages the group's events.

Durham hosted last year's event.

Organizers say they want to make the '96 version more diverse than ever.

A Friday night dance called Jam '96 will cater to black gays and lesbians.

"Most media pick up Aat gays are white men," says Darnel R. Gay, a black man from Greensboro and an organizer of Sunday's march. "(But) we have all kinds of people — black, white, Asian, poor, rich — just like the straight community. We are just as diverse."

And just as prejudiced.

When it comes to minorities, Gay says, "there is discrimination in the gay community just like there is in the straight community."

This also marks the second year that the Pride event has included transgendered people in its title.

"People don't agree on what the term means," says board of director's member Gail Tonnesen of Chapel Hill w.who was horn male and underwent a sex change operation two years ago. "A lot of peoplewho are gay or lesbian or bisexual do not identify as transgendered."

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Tonnesen says transgendered can include people who cross dress, have attributes of both sexes or who have undergone a sex change.

"The thing that makes this complicated is that gender is very complicated," Tonnesen says. "... Usually, when we refer to people as gay, lesbian or bisexual we are thinking more in terms of having same sex partners. When we are talking about people who are transgendered we are thinking more about people who are dealing with issues of gender identity or expression."

Tonnesen says the transgendered movement began nationally in 1993.

"Initially, there was a lot of resistance," Tonnesen says. "Because people who are transgendered are more stigmatized by society in general there was some fear in the gay and lesbian community that the stigma attached to transgendered people would increase the stigma of being lesbian or gay."

But come Sunday, Tonnesen and other transgendered people will march with those who are gay, lesbian and bisexual.

The march will include floats, groups carrying banners and placards and the N.C. Pride Marching Band.

Groups can chant, sing, dance or carry signs. Awards will be presented in a variety of categories, including most elegant float, loudest cheer, most colorful banner.

Promotional literature for the event says participants may "do just about anything that will make your group unique as long as you are clothed, civil and not abusive to others."

In addition to the rally and march, the weekend will include dances, art exhibits, workshops, dinners, speeches, literary readings and a softball tournament, a first for N.C. Pride.

Hopkins says the weekend will focus attention on gay and lesbian issues.

"We want to assert and have others acknowledge our right to live free of harassment," Hopkins says. "... If any group's rights are at risk I think the integrity of the whole system is at risk. And everyone's rights are at risk."

Hopkins believes gays and lesbians are moving to a new level of involvement in community life, noting that 40 gay and lesbian groups exist in the Triad.

"We expect to have our voices heard in public forums more and more," she says. "It's beginning to happen."