

# "A Vigil, A March and A Marriage" - Gay North Carolinians Congregate As Fundamentalists Fulminate

by Timothy Roberts

Reprinted from Chreative Loafing - Charlotte, June 10,1998

<http://www.creativeloafing.com/charlotte/newsstand/current>

ASHEVILLE -- It is perhaps some measure of progress that the gay pride celebration has expanded from a single afternoon each June, followed by a night at the bars, to a three-day weekend filled with appearances by nationally known comedians, and activists and workshops on how to handle homophobia. The program for the 1998 NC Pride festivities, held in Asheville June 5-7, was markedly sophisticated, including psychologists, a famous writer, the state's best-known gay lobbyist, and the half-sister of the US Speaker of the House. Attending, marching and taking notes were more than 3,000 gay and lesbian people and various friends, not to mention a few dozen Bible-waving exegetes full of fire and brimstone and a clinical fear of Sodom and Gomorra.

It's all a far cry from those days of June 1969 when gay men, lesbians and a good contingent of drag queens decided that they had had quite enough of police harassment in Greenwich Village in New York, and took to fighting back. The resulting melee lasted all weekend. The cops wondered what had happened to this usually easy target. The police had picked the worst possible moment to harass customers of gay bars in New York. Judy Garland, the patron saint of gay camp culture had just been laid to rest, and the folks of Christopher Street were not of a mind to be bothered. It is this riot that is generally credited with the birth of the modern gay rights movement.

Perhaps some day there will be reenactments of that infamous street battle with men in blue engaging in mock combat with the men and women in lavender, heaving foam rocks and stunt beer bottles at one another. There were no injuries reported this year in Asheville. But the hate and venom that are usually suppressed at reenactments of the Civil War were very much real in this mountain city, as preachers and church women and children shook fingers at the people in the passing spectacle, warning of hell and damnation and cried, "Shame!"

The police and a contingent of brawny lesbians kept the two sides in this debate separated. But no one dared prevent one elegant gentleman from responding to one princess of rectitude. "Shame?" he said. "You're wearing those shoes and that dress, and you're telling me, 'Shame?'"

"Love your flag," said another marcher to an unreconstructed Confederate. "Hope you win!"

The NC Pride Committee moves the event from place to place based on bids from local gay communities. Charlotte hosted the event in 1994 for the first and only time in the 13-year history of the event in North Carolina. As an outgrowth of that event, Charlotte founded its own annual cultural festival celebrating gay and lesbian life called OutCharlotte, which will be held this year October 7-11, coinciding with another undeclared national holiday, Coming Out Day.

This was the second time that Asheville had hosted Pride. And despite the ugly turnout by anti-gay activists in 1992, Asheville has earned a reputation as a rather tolerant city. For some reason

it has attracted a large lesbian contingent. No one keeps records of these matters but it seems that lesbians outnumber gay men here considerably, which means there's a lot of poetry in those hills, much of quite respectable. And much of it can be heard at Malaprop's Bookstore/Cafe.

Malaprop's is located downtown, like all great bookstores, the sidewalk out front dotted with tables and chairs, which are occupied by the 90s version of beatniks. In fact, this store resembles nothing so much as the famous City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, the famous beatnik hangout and poetry stage.

Jane Voorhees has been there for 13 years. She manages the store, and on Friday night of Pride 98 was putting things in order after a reading by Bob Smith, the comedian, who recently published *Openly Bob*, a volume that might best be described as standup memoir. It's so funny that Paul Rudnick was moved to write, "Bob Smith is that rare phenomenon: a hilarious Gentile."

Malaprop's has become the place to go for information about the gay community as well as the arts and music scenes. It's a little like Sue Henry's bookstore was in Charlotte, before it closed, only Malaprop's caters to a much broader market.

"Downtown Asheville is very accepting," Voorhees said. "Once you get very far out beyond the city limits, there are all sorts of rednecks, but Asheville itself is very comfortable for gays and lesbians."

Malaprop's is one of six well-established businesses downtown that are owned by gays or lesbians. In fact, as is so often the case, gays and lesbians helped to bring on the revitalization of downtown, which was pretty dead when Eموke B'Racz opened the bookstore 16 years ago.

"She had a lot of faith," Voorhees said.

Downtown Asheville is surrounded by hills that have kept most of the sprawl that would have consumed the urban fabric out of sight, although a few government and bank buildings have replaced friendly brick structures with blank walls and smoked glass. In other words, Wal-Mart is on the other side of the mountain. And meanwhile, the streets and storefronts and art deco edifices, including a spectacular City Hall, have given birth to a fascinating city life that encourages arts, locally owned businesses and all the idiosyncrasies of a truly metropolitan life -- including homosexuality. No wonder Charlotte is tearing down every fine piece of old architecture it can find. Suburbanization is a right-wing conspiracy.

It rained Friday night, but the Pride folks were able to move the Stonewall Vigil inside the Trinity Episcopal Church. The better Episcopal churches come in only two varieties, the Colonial and the Canterbury. This church is one of the latter. It's full of arches, and real stained glass windows, pillars that block the view and the comforting presence of the prayer book -- the many symbols of faith in something not yet visible. Friday evening's congregation bore symbols making what is not visible seen: the pink triangle and the pride flag.

We were each handed a candle, and then Glo DeAngelis, a local lesbian activist asked us,

"For whom do we light a candle in 1998?"

"Those who have left this world?"

"Those who are living with HIV?"

"The caregivers?

"The researchers who are looking for cures?

"Those who have gone before us and paved the way for the life that some of us live openly?"

"For Audre Lorde?

"For James Baldwin?

"For Michelangelo?

"For Sappho herself?"

In the midst of this enumeration, an electronic alarm like those that remind people on complicated HIV drugs to take their medication, began to sound, and a handsome man of a certain age hurried out of the sanctuary.

Among the speakers Friday was an actor named Kermit Brown. He was born in Asheville and followed his career to New York. He's had his moment on Broadway and toured from one coast to the other. He was with Jackie Gleason in Sly Fox. And now at the age of 62 he's come back home to Asheville. Lately he's played the role of Roy Cohn in Angels in America.

He remembers New York in 1969. He recalls the weekend of Stonewall. "Everyone was talking about it," he said. "It was all over town. Everyone had to decide whether to go down there (to the Village) and help, or stay away. I stayed away."

Q: Do you regret having stayed away?

"I do now."

Q: What did Stonewall change?

"There was a much freer feeling after Stonewall. There was an incredible sense of freedom. It was all right to hold hands in the street."

Q: How has Asheville changed since then?

"Oh, there's a much, much larger gay community, especially the lesbians. They sensed before the rest of us what a beautiful community this was. The rest of us followed. And now there is safety in numbers."

Deanna Perkins and three other lesbians drove all the way from Fayetteville. She came out in 1985. She is 34 years old, and this was her sixth Pride weekend.

Perkins has one of those very sad coming out stories. It goes like this:

She and a friend were at a gay bar in Fayetteville. They were outside. Two men came up to them and started talking. They thought the men had been in the bar and thought little of their intentions. But at a moment when the four of them were alone, the two men overpowered the women, got the keys to their car, which belonged to Perkin's mother, and abducted the women. They drove out of town. They tied Perkins and her friend to a tree using the women's bras. They gagged them with their socks. They drove away.

Perkins freed herself and then her friend. They were bruised and shaken but otherwise unhurt.

They went to the police and filed a report. When the newspaper printed an account of the crime, it reported the victim to be Perkin's mother.

Perkins got a call from her mother.

"Deanna, come right over here, and buy a newspaper on your way," her mother said.

Perkins mother, a Jehovah's Witness, had been asked what she had been doing at a gay bar. Perkin's mother now had the same question of Deanna. She had to explain, and life has been much different ever since.

"Everyone's concern wasn't that I could have died, but that I was gay," she said.

"It's important to accept yourself and love yourself, or you won't get anywhere in life or be able to help people understand you," she said. "I don't need help, and I can't be cured."

Saturday began with a downpour, but the conference moved indoors to the workshops: a question and answer forum on "the transgendered community," "Gender-Free Partnering," "Fulfill Your Gay Soul's Purpose." Just the titles of some workshops were enough to inspire the Calvinist tendencies of even the most liberated homosexual. Nevertheless, they did provide, as one workshop leader said, "an opportunity to dialogue."

Other sessions were more practical. M.K. Cullen, the executive director of NC Pride PAC, the statewide gay and lesbian political organization, led one called "Second Class Queers." It was a look at the legal obstacles that gays and lesbians in North Carolina face.

Pride PAC's attention is focused on marriage laws, the sodomy law, obstacles to adoption of children, inheritance taxes that treat a gay partner as though he or she were not family, and school health curricula that require any mention of homosexuality to include a kind of warning label that describes it as felonious.

The only issue likely to get any legislative action any time soon is the issue of inheritance taxes, Cullen said. Other issue look like long shots. But Cullen says she's hopeful about the bigger picture.

"We have more friends today than we did just three years ago," she said. "There are more people who know who we are."

By afternoon, the rain had stopped, and although the skies threatened throughout the day, there were no thunderbolts from heaven. The buses from Charlotte, South Carolina and Tennessee had arrived. The march was on. But first came Bob, the comedian and author.

"The right is always talking about 'the gay agenda,'" he said. "There's no gay agenda. But if one existed, it would have two points. One, gay rights. And two, the national anthem would have a 25-minute dance version."

Gay contributions to Western Civilization have long been overlooked, he noted.

"We started the Renaissance," he said. It was probably two gay men talking at a party: 'Let's make a lot of paintings of muscular and naked guys and sell them to churches!'"

A woman with a bullhorn assembled the marchers: the NC Pride Marching Band, the NC Bear Lodge, an enormous drag queen dressed in enough yards of pink cloth to sail a frigate 'round the cape, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, the Human Rights Campaign the denizens of a particular bar, Christians, sober gays and lesbians, more than 3,000 of us in all, including J.D. Parsons of Charlotte.

"I go to pride every year," said the 45-year-old industrial sales rep, who has been out of the closet for 20 years. "It's a time for us to get together and show our strengths and diversities."

The march began at the courthouse and wound downtown to Pritchard Park and back to the courthouse. People stood along the street, gathered in doorways and shouted greetings from open windows and balconies. Asheville is a real city, and that made this march an exercise in democracy, rather than just another festive parade. The Bible-thumpers called us reprobates. The lesbian peace keepers kept us all in line. The police watched warily.

"If people will just watch our march they will see the diversity of people we represent," said Parsons. "It's not just the militant thing."

At the rally that followed the march, Candace Gingrich described her national coming out in the pages of the Washington Post. And she recalled that years before, when her family discovered that she was a lesbian, her half-brother Newt told her "It was my life and I could live it anyway I wanted."

Perry Young, another Asheville native who has returned home, the author of several books including *The David Kopay Story*, the first book on a gay subject to make the New York Times Bestseller List, reminisced about his mother's words to him when he came out: "Come out of the shadows of shame and guilt and live your life in the sunshine."

And then back to Bob: "I was a gay kid. My tree house had a breakfast nook ... my Boy Scout survival kit had a spice rack."

The bars were crowded Saturday night, the streets were filled with people and Malaprop's was busy, its customers spilling out the door to sit at sidewalk tables and drink coffee and taste literature.

"It's nice to be able to be in the majority once a year," said Susan Lees, the cofounder of the Lambda Association in Fayetteville, a social and support group for gays, lesbians and transgendered people. "It makes me feel all charged up."

The final morning of the weekend was cool and sunny, a bright mountain day. Inside the Radisson Hotel, about 150 people had managed to wake in time for an interfaith service and a commitment ceremony for 15 couples. These ceremonies are often held in lieu of marriages, because a majority of politicians believes they would threaten the very institution of holy matrimony. (It's unclear whether the senators are trying to protect their first, second or third marriages.)

"Let us pray. Above you are the stars, below you are the stones. As time does pass remember: Like a star your love should be constant. Like a stone your love should be strong."

The couples are a motley crew. Some dressed up. Others in jeans. They come from all traditions. Friends take pictures. Tears are shed. They all hold hands as the celebrant gives them, and all of us, the final charge:

"Be free in giving affection and warmth. Make love often, and be sensuous to one another. Have not fear, and let not the ways or words of the unenlightened give you unease. For the Spirit is with you. Now and always. Amen."