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Lesbians, Gays to Set Capitol Straight

Gay pride is alive and well from coast to coast as protesters revive that American tradition, the March on Washington

Tai Moses

If you are watching the evening news on October 11, sometime after the newscaster's litany of international disasters and squeezed in between the latest tripe on jail breaks and auto makes you may see a 30-second spot and a smattering of information on what may turn out to be the largest protest ever to descend upon the nation's capitol: The March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

The national organizers of the march predict that half a million people will show up in Washington, recalling the year 1963, when Martin Luther King Jr. led 200,000 through the streets to call attention to civil rights.

About 30 Santa Cruz residents will be attending the march, and according to Will Russell, who is helping to organize the Santa Cruz contingent, the morale of the group is high. "When a little town of 50,000 like

Santa Cruz sends 30 people," he says, "you can imagine what the response from people all over the country will be."

The news media rarely represents adequately the causes of the gay community, preferring instead to play up the AIDS issue, but organizers say that although the issue of funding for AIDS is a crucial one, it is not the focal point nor the main purpose of this protest.

There are three main issues that form the foundation of the Washington march, says Russell: "to demand the end of state and federal laws which attempt to regulate sexual behavior between consenting adults; to insist on the continued right of personal choice regarding the decision to have an abortion; and to urge Congress to re-prioritize the budget, moving resources from the war machine abroad to the urgent needs we have at home."

Several events are planned to take place over the five-day span of the demonstration. One will be a civil disobedience action: a sit-in at the Supreme Court building to protest the *Hardwick v. Bowers* decision and call for the repeal of state and federal laws that make sodomy between consenting adults a crime. Sodomy laws, Russell has discovered, are currently in effect in over 25 states. "That's half the country," he says, "that has legislation interfering with what both straights and gay people do in their bedrooms."

March participants feel this issue is on a par with that of reproductive freedom. The right to safe and legal abortions, while not strictly a gay issue, is a sexually related one; both are areas where the government is attempting to regulate people's private conduct.

A major activity of the march will be an intensive lobbying day where individual groups from cities and representatives from national organizations will go to their senators and members of Congress to address them about specific bills that are currently in the House. One of these is the Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights bill, which if passed would ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.



JANE HARLOW

The Civil Rights bill calls for the legal recognition of spousal equivalence for gays and lesbians. "If I have somebody that I have made a lifelong commitment with," Russell explains, "and they are the same sex, I should

be given the same legal recognition that lifelong partners have been given who are of the opposite sex." On the day before the march, hundreds of lesbian and gay couples will hold a nonsectarian, mass-marriage cere-

mony to emphasize the validity of their relationships and demand that they be given the same rights as married heterosexual couples. "This marriage is to sort of focus on that," Russell says. "To say that we are people who are going to be married—we are going to share our finances, our life, our love."

Some of the lobbying efforts will be directed at senators who have a key voice on the confirmation of Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork. "I think it will have a large effect on the Bork confirmation proceedings," says Russell, "to have half a million people saying they will not put up with a Supreme Court that does not uphold these basic civil rights."

Another project planned for the march is called the Names Project; a giant patchwork quilt made up of panels embroidered with the names of people who have died of AIDS. The quilt will be displayed across the Capitol Mall. "I think the media and many people whose personal lives have been more affected by AIDS are going to stress that issue," says Russell, but for the Santa Cruz group at least, AIDS has not yet hit close to home. There wasn't a single person from the group, said Russell,

I think it's really important to keep the gay rights agenda in the public eye, especially in these times when we're so reactive to negative attacks," says one lesbian marchgoer who asked that her name not be used. "There's a tendency in Santa Cruz for people to think that everything's okay. There are *still* people in the closet, people losing their jobs, losing their homes."

The gay community in progressive Santa Cruz is a relatively secure and vocal one, but in most areas of the country lesbians and gays are still a rejected and largely invisible segment of society; though they are a large minority, they are still a minority.

The protesters hope that the March on Washington will help to educate the public, downplay the AIDS hysteria that comes from inaccurate information and media-sponsored fears, and bring the needs and goals of lesbians and gays to the national consciousness. "We don't always just want to be defending ourselves," says the anonymous participant. "We also have a positive agenda for change that we want to see." Further attention to gay causes could depolarize gays and straights, she hopes, and create allies out of straight people, allowing them to "take our word for it when we tell them we feel oppressed, to speak up for us at those

times when we can't."

Allison Claire, of the Lesbian and Gay Action Alliance, feels that the group that is going to this march shares more of a commonality, a greater unity between lesbians and gays than was present at the 1979 march. Due to the swing to the right in the nation and the resulting homophobic backlash, gays and lesbians see this as a crucial time for them to make themselves seen and voice their concerns. "The lesbian and gay community," says Claire, "feels that it has taken as much as it's going to take and it is time now to put ourselves on the line. We have really grown and become stronger, and

that's what this march will be celebrating."

Will Russell shares this affirmation: "People need to realize that gay people are there in every part of society. They're not parasites, they're not welfare bums or some freakish subculture that hangs out on the streets of Berkeley. They're everywhere—in the military, in the cities and in the country."

The Santa Cruz contingent will meet in Washington, D.C. at 10am on October 11 at the statue of John Paul Jones, whose motto, appropriately enough, underscores the theme of the March on Washington: "We have not yet begun to fight." •

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who could think of a person they personally knew who had died of or was suffering from AIDS.

The marchers will concentrate on demands that funds for research and patient care be vastly increased with money from the military budget and not from the already overburdened and underfinanced social services programs. AIDS has not become a major research endeavor or funding priority in the nation due to the perception that it's a gay disease, says Russell, and that perception is a false one. "The virus doesn't ask if you're gay or if you're straight."

City Councilmember John Laird compares the upcoming march to the first national march in October of 1979, which gathered 200,000 protesters together in Washington. "It was so carefree and so up," he says. "It was definitely pre-AIDS. None of these people were aware that this was coming. The first cases weren't diagnosed until two years later. This [march] will be much more serious than that one was."

Although the feeling among the local participants is spirited, there is a tangible undercurrent of determination that this time their efforts will bring about some positive changes. "I'm going because