

In Gay Apparel

A Gay Evening in May benefits the community

Gays + Lesbians

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PHOTOS BY RUTH RABINOWITZ

by Charles De Wald

From its humble beginnings in a dining hall at UCSC almost a decade ago, A Gay Evening in May (AGEM) has gradually become the biggest social event of the year for the gay and lesbian community in Santa Cruz.

That appeal is spreading. Now, more straights are going. Recent attendees have included State Sen. Henry Mello, County Supervisors Fred Keeley and Gary Patton, and City Councilmember Katherine Beiers. "Though the audience is primarily gay, the show also appeals to a wide cross-section of society," says promoter Mark Grantham.

The AGEM that takes place this weekend is the tenth annual event — which is, in itself, an amazing feat considering that the event started as a simple variety show organized by a group of gay and lesbian UCSC students.

In addition to the burgeoning number of straight people who have been showing up to enjoy a night of bold entertainment and socializing, the show has been having a growing impact on local non-profits. More than \$10,000 was raised for local charities last year. This year, organizers hope to make \$15,000.

Originally, they didn't realize the show would produce the revenues that it did. But after the enormous success of the first event, organizers decided to incorporate and donate any future profits to community causes.

"It's amazing how little money is available to these community groups," says Jill Simmons, a co-promoter and host for the evening's festivities. "My eyes have been opened — and that's what this event is really about for me."

Programs that the show benefits change from year to year, although the Santa Cruz AIDS Project always tops the list. Some of this year's beneficiaries include Hospice Caring, The Women's Center, and Triad.

But, ultimately, the hundreds of Santa Cruzans who attend AGEM year after year are there for the show.

More than a hundred acts auditioned to be in this year's event. Twenty-seven performance pieces including dramatic readings

comedy skits, large group numbers, and modern dances were selected, each running in length from three to five minutes.

Donna Phillips and Cheryl Tibbets play folk music and have just released an album entitled *River Poets*. David De Wald choreographs "Boys In Heat." Men and women of the Just Country Cloggers put on a country-western style dancing display. Two drag numbers highlight the show, and local dance instructor Dee Meredith arranges the introduction and finale numbers.

Not all of the participants could be considered veteran entertainers. "It's very challenging having little performing experience and having to write a script and get up on stage," admits first-time emcee Simmons.

Michael Tossy is in his second year as the director of the show. Five years ago, Tossy started out as a volunteer backstage, worked his way up to stage manager, and now directs. "The performers, organizers, and operating crew are all volunteers," says Grantham. "The only paid staff are union workers at the Civic."

A Gay Evening In May raised \$10,000 for charity last year



To re-entice the long-time AGEM fans to return again this year, each evening has something new and different to offer.

Friday night features "Gay Cafe Nightclub" seating. Chairs and tables set up next to the stage will include coffee, sparkling water and desserts. Also on Friday, theatergoers can pencil in bids on more than 40 silent auction items as they stroll the lobby before the show starts. On Saturday, an already sold-out VIP dinner is being catered, beginning at 5:30 p.m. Bay Photo, Stapleton's and other local merchants have donated items for a raffle, and \$750 in gift certificates for travel, dinners, original art, manicures, hairstyles, and other expensive prizes will also be disbursed.

For the raffle on Saturday evening, the ticket holder need not be present to win. A photo booth will be in the lobby.

Tickets for the 8 p.m., Friday and Saturday Gay Evening In May shows at the Civic are \$10-18, but you can be a part of the Friday Gay Cafe, with extravagant desserts and coffee and premium show seats, for \$25. A silent auction happens at Friday's show, from 6 p.m. until the close of intermission. Tickets are available at all BASS outlets and at the Civic.

