

## **Gays will focus on political picture at upcoming PrideFest**

By Jo Mannies

Post-Dispatch Political Correspondent

Thursday, Jun. 16 2005

Politics may edge out partying at this year's PrideFest as many gay advocates focus more on the cause.

"It'll be very politically charged," said Debbie Miller, coordinator for the annual parade, set for June 26, that's usually the highlight of the two-day gay-rights festival, held in and around Tower Grove Park.

Politics have always played a role in the annual event, especially since many area politicians in both parties began to openly court gay voters. Mayor Francis Slay, who has several gay siblings, is serving as the grand marshal of the parade.

But more significant, say organizers, is this year's backdrop. PrideFest is the state's first major gay-rights gathering since the overwhelming statewide vote in August in favor of a constitutional amendment that bans gay marriage.

"We were all stunned at the numbers, to be quite honest," said Maureen Costello, who co-owns MoKaBe's coffee shop with her twin sister in the South Grand business district.

Costello, who is a lesbian, said she's among many homosexuals who were never strong advocates for gay marriage, but now care deeply about other discriminatory measures that may come next.

That fear has helped fuel the creation or resurrection of at least three local gay-oriented groups - Republican, Democrat and nonpartisan - since the gay marriage vote. All three will be among the groups participating in the parade.

Costello is a member of Show Me Equality, a new "direct-action" group that plans to call public attention to the legislative efforts by some social conservatives in Jefferson City. "It's not a pretty picture," Costello said.

The group's parade entry, she added, is expected to include a "hate monster" tagged with the names of various state officials, including Gov. Matt Blunt, who are deemed to be opponents of gay rights.

Gay activists predict that Jefferson City's next prime target will be the right of homosexuals to adopt children or serve as foster parents.

Openly gay individuals or couples in the state are technically barred from becoming foster parents or from adopting Missouri's foster children. But in practice, many have become foster parents and adoptive parents - often by not disclosing their sexual orientation.

Fred Simmens, who heads the state's Children's Division, said the state won't certify families for adoption or foster care if they are known to be living with a gay partner. Simmens added, though, that state caseworkers aren't actively asking prospective foster parents about their sexual lifestyle.

Some gay activists suspect legislators may press for more vigilant enforcement. "We fear another constitutional amendment," Costello said. "It's gay marriage yesterday, parenting tomorrow."

A spokeswoman for Blunt, a Republican, said the governor saw no reason for such an amendment, in the wake of the state's existing restrictions against gays when it comes to adoption and foster care. But gay activists note that there was already a state law on the books banning gay marriage when conservatives

opted to press for a constitutional amendment as well.

A gay couple in Kansas City has gone to court to challenge the state's foster-care policy.

Blunt emphasizes that he opposes general discrimination against any group, but also is making clear that he's siding with social conservatives when it comes to the gay lifestyle. Among other things, the governor is breaking with the precedent set by his recent Democrat predecessors, who issued supportive statements or proclamations regarding PrideFest.

Several event organizers said their calls to Blunt's office hadn't been returned.

"We have not received a request for a proclamation and we do not intend or plan to issue one. Not only would a proclamation be counter to the governor's values, it would also be counter to the values most Missourians expressed less than a year ago," said Jessica Robinson, Blunt's spokeswoman.

Ironically, several other prominent Republican officials - including state Senate Majority Leader Mike Gibbons of Kirkwood and House Speaker Pro Tem Carl Bearden, R-St. Charles - have agreed to speak at meetings of the St. Louis area chapter of the Log Cabin Republicans, a gay group.

That new GOP group already has sparked controversy within the gay community, especially when Pride St. Louis recently awarded a \$1,000 scholarship to local Log Cabin president Charles Stadlander.

Stadlander said the GOP group also is out to fight discrimination against gays. But he added, "If any gays believe they can do it without working with Republicans, they're sadly mistaken."

Costello, with Show Me Equality, asserted that Stadlander isn't comprehending the true portrait of what's happening in Jefferson City. "Anybody who stands up for our community in this environment is taking a great risk."

*Matt Franck of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.*

**Reporter Jo Mannies**  
**E-mail: [jmannies@post-dispatch.com](mailto:jmannies@post-dispatch.com)**  
**Phone: 314-340-8334**