

Tolerance is feted at PrideFest Parade

By Bill Bryan
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Judy Worseck and her partner, Karla Kaucher, sat in their lawn chairs across from Tower Grove Park. They were decked out in matching American flag shirts and were soaking up the sun and the sights of the annual PrideFest Parade on Sunday.

The women were red-faced and perspiring profusely, but the heat of the day couldn't cool their enjoyment of the parade.

"I never miss this parade," said Worseck, 60, of St. Peters. "I enjoy it because it's a peaceful way to let people know that there is discrimination."

Worseck knows firsthand about discrimination, she says. "I've been fired from two well-paying jobs over the years because of my (sexual) orientation," she said calmly.

While the women said such discrimination still existed, they agreed that strides had been on diversity and acceptance. "Fifteen years ago, you couldn't have this parade," said Kaucher, 50.

St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay led the parade as grand marshal, and St. Louis Police Chief Joe Mokwa and St. Louis Fire Chief Sherman George were at the head of it and shook hands with some of the thousands of parade-watchers who lined South Grand Boulevard. Mokwa passed out plastic badges from a sack he was carrying.

The parade is the highlight of the two-day PrideFest, a gay rights festival held annually in Tower Grove Park. The festival featured musical entertainment and educational forums addressing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues.

The parade participants included all sorts of gay groups and clubs, from the Gateway Gay Rodeo Association, whose members threw beads to the crowd, to the Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, wearing their purple T-shirts, to the St. Louis chapter of the Log Cabin Republicans.

Banners, signs and T-shirts had many messages. They included: "God Blessed Me With a Gay Son," "If someone says you throw like a girl, take that as a compliment," "We have dignity" and "I love my lesbian sister."

The group called Show Me Equality marched carrying a pole with a black-robed figure called the Hate Monster. The monster displayed the names of Archbishop Raymond Burke, Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., Gov. Matt Blunt and others.

There were heterosexuals enjoying the parade, too.

"I think it's beautiful; It's about time," said Anna Hickman, 28, who lives in the area. She was watching with her 4-year-old son, Bryce, and her mother, Carol Caskanett.

"I think it's absolutely wonderful," added Caskanett, 47. "I'm so happy to see tolerance here."

A distraction for some was a booming loudspeaker at the corner of Grand and Pestalozzi Street, where the Rev. Philip "Flip" Benham was admonishing the crowd to change their wicked ways and seek redemption from Jesus Christ.

Benham, of North Carolina, is director of Operation Rescue/Operation Save

America.

At first, a band from the parade set up and played directly in front of Benham to try to drown him out. A short time later, the pastor of the church on whose property Benham was standing asked police to have him leave, and Benham obliged.