

## Pride and Prejudice

### A ruckus rocks the gay community over a Log Cabin Republican's college scholarship

By Randall Roberts

In blast-furnace heat at this year's PrideFest, Charles Stadtlander, president of the St. Louis chapter of the Log Cabin Republicans, stood on the main stage at Tower Grove Park and accepted the 2005 John Van Voris Scholarship.

Photos taken that late June afternoon show Stadtlander addressing about 150 people, a dozen-odd of whom chanted, booed and waved signs, including one that read "Log Cabin = Gay Shame." The protesters were up in arms over the Log Cabin Republicans' refusal to acknowledge transgendered people in their mission statement.

All the sound and fury was prompted by a series of columns in the gay community tipsheet *EXP*, wherein publisher and owner Jeff Balk took bitter aim at the Pride St. Louis board for giving the scholarship to Stadtlander.

Balk complained that the 25-year-old Log Cabin Republican "supported anti-gay candidates" such as Governor Matt Blunt and President George W. Bush, and called for Pride St. Louis to rescind its decision and apologize to the community.

The three columns have stirred up a hornet's nest, and ill feelings linger. Balk accused the Pride St. Louis board of favoritism and secrecy in the selection process and even hinted at a conspiracy. He charged that Stadtlander, one of just three candidates, won by default.

In the heat of that Saturday, Stadtlander, microphone in hand, accepted the \$1,000 award that provides financial assistance for college education. He did himself no favors by invoking his affiliation with the Log Cabin Republicans, but he did promise in his acceptance speech that the Log Cabin Republicans would work to advance the cause of gay and lesbian rights.

"I said, 'Men and women are dying in Iraq and Afghanistan for your right to protest,'" Stadtlander recounts. "'Log Cabin Republicans are going to work in a positive manner to advance the cause, and those who choose to concentrate on negatives will soon be left behind. Anyone who wants to work with us on our positive mission of moving this forward, we welcome you.'"

After his brief remarks, the outcry continued, and police were forced to load Stadtlander into a golf cart and drive him to the Log Cabin Republicans' booth a few hundred yards away. Stadtlander claims Balk relentlessly pursued him throughout the day, pounding him with questions.

"He did this the entire duration of PrideFest, to the point that I eventually told him to leave me alone," Stadtlander says. Later that night, police were active again when Pride president Wayne Burling allegedly attacked a fellow board member and was escorted from the park in handcuffs. The reason for the alleged attack is unknown; Burling declined to comment on the incident.

The John Van Voris Scholarship is named in honor of a long-time Pride St. Louis member who died in 1997. Its purpose is to reward gay students who have been active in the community with a little money for college. Although Stadtlander apparently does not pass Jeff Balk's litmus test, he did sponsor a party in 2004 that raised money to help defeat a Missouri

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**Charles Stadtlander, president of the St. Louis chapter of the Log Cabin Republicans**

constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages. (The measure was overwhelmingly approved last November.)

Despite sending announcements about the Van Voris scholarship to members of the gay community via mass e-mails and posting the opportunity online, Pride received only three applications. Of those three, two were tossed out almost immediately -- one because his application was incomplete, the other because he was from Los Angeles and had no St. Louis connection.

"The application is several pages long," explains John Lovin, Pride's outreach director, "and I think a lot of people just didn't want to hassle with it for only \$1,000." Faced with only one choice, Lovin, who heads the scholarship selection committee, recommended Stadtlander. The ten-member board unanimously named Stadtlander the winner in early June.

What followed, says an exasperated Lovin, "came totally out of left field."

Balk says he was stunned after reading Pride's press release awarding Stadtlander the scholarship. Stadtlander's biography, which accompanied the release, mentioned that he campaigned for Bush and Blunt, neither of whom could be considered gay-friendly candidates.

"I did work to get President Bush re-elected," acknowledges Stadtlander. "Why? Because there was no clear difference to me on the gay-rights issue between John Kerry and George W. Bush. They were both against gay marriage. The only difference is that Kerry supported the state amendment, and Bush supported a federal amendment. Regardless, all the amendments are equally bad. And I found myself choosing between a lesser of two evils."

In his columns, Balk accused board members of breezing through the selection process. He says Stadtlander, through Lovin, made false claims about receiving the endorsement of Personal Rights of Missourians (PROMO), a statewide gay-/lesbian-/ bisexual-/transgender-equality organization. Both Lovin and Stadtlander deny this.

"I never told John Lovin that," maintains Stadtlander. "It's completely false."

Balk also claimed that Stadtlander and Lovin were friends. "We can place them together at a going-away party on August 21, 2004," says Balk, adding that others saw the two men talking at a local gay bar. In Balk's opinion, Stadtlander's political activism should disqualify him from consideration. "He helped put into office people who are stripping us of our rights, and that outweighs any good he did on the amendment question."

Stadtlander adamantly denies the charges and says Balk misquoted and misrepresented him in print. Another gay-oriented newspaper, the *Vital Voice*, also reported on the award, but in a more tempered tone.

"[Balk] lied in his publication about me," fumes Stadtlander. "He said that I'm friends with people on the Pride board, which is why I got the scholarship. He misrepresented the entire situation and had caused this huge controversy for no other reason than to give him something to write about."

As far as he and John Lovin being friends, Stadtlander says, "Apparently we were at a party together at some point a year and a half ago. We shook hands or whatever. I didn't even know his name. But *EXP* is making it sound like he and I are going to parties together and that we co-conspired to get this scholarship."

Stadtlander says that he's grown increasingly frustrated with many of his peers. "The gay and lesbian community, unfortunately, likes to focus on negatives and likes to focus on hate," he says. "When they do that, our cause is damaged. We've done more in six months than a lot of gay and lesbian organizations in this state have ever done."

Pride St. Louis, for its part, wants to move on. This year's party had low turnout, and vendors say it was disorganized. And, of course, it's never good to see the president of the board escorted away in handcuffs.

To that end, Pride offered one final press release, seemingly directed at Balk. It reads, in part: "Over the past month or so, statements made by individuals in this organization have been taken out of context, and there has been a general sense of miscommunication between us and the community. This is very unfortunate. We condemn all false statements, the rumors and lies that have been spread, and the personal attacks that have been made against members of this community."