

HEALING PRIDE -- DESPITE CONTROVERSY, OUR COMMUNITY CELEBRATES

by COLIN MURPHY Senior Staff Writer

If one thing can be said for St. Louis PrideFest 2005, held the weekend of June 25-26, it's that it was one of the hottest on record with heat indices approaching the century mark. But in one particular instance, tempers became overheated as well.

Pride St. Louis president Wayne Burling had announced to his board of directors approximately 10 days prior to the festival that he would be resigning as leader of the organization at the festival's end due to a job opportunity he received out of state. But Burling's unexpected departure prior to the finish of the first day's events following a brief physical altercation with a fellow board member sent the St. Louis gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) rumor mill into high gear.



Wayne Burling

Burling could not be reached for comment, but the board member involved in the altercation, upon the condition of anonymity, said that the incident had been blown out of proportion.

"There was no punch involved — simply a slap on the stomach," said the board member. "At the time, the gesture startled me — not due to the physical aspect, but rather the childish, inappropriate and unprofessional nature of it."

According to Pride St. Louis, no charges were filed and Burling left Tower Grove Park and did not return. Vice President Eric Cordsiemon will remain acting president of Pride St. Louis per the 501 (c)(3) group's bylaws through the 2006 festival, finishing out Burling's two year term.

Nevertheless, the Pride Committee has been playing defense in the court of public opinion following last month's announcement that they were awarding the \$1,000 John VanVorvis Scholarship to Charles Stadtlander, a college student at UM-St. Louis who is also the president of the Log Cabin Republicans of Greater St. Louis (LCRGS), the local arm of the Republican gay and lesbian rights organization. Stadtlander had openly campaigned for the reelection of President George W. Bush and the election of Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt, both widely perceived to be anti-gay Republicans who, among other actions, advocated for federal and state constitutional amendments banning same sex marriage.



Charles Stadtlander

The LCRGS marched in the St. Louis Gay Pride Parade for the first time this year to jeers and cheers. Some community members booed in protest of the Stadtlander scholarship, while others voiced their opposition to the group's refusal to include transgender equality in its mission statement.

"Yes, there were a few negative comments," stated Stadtlander. "But I firmly believe that for every one negative statement made, twenty people would cheer and commend us on our difficult work."

Stadtlander received a police escort on and off the stage when accepting the scholarship award. According to both Stadtlander and Pride St. Louis, neither requested such an action, although they admitted that they were aware of protesters. St. Louis Police could not be reached for comment.

"The scholarship award was a great experience," said Stadtlander. "Yes, there were protesters, but very few. And I would like to offer my appreciation for their presence. By protesting an act which they did not feel fair, demonstrated the wonderful freedoms and rights we enjoy in this country. Although I felt that their complaints are misguided, I certainly respect their right to dissent and debate."

The controversy over the Stadtlander scholarship has brought an outcry from some of Pride St. Louis' corporate sponsors, in particular, EXP Magazine, which also publishes the official Pride Guide. EXP has hinted at not sponsoring PrideFest next year.

"As far as our sponsorship, even with a leadership change ... " offered Jeff Balk, Publisher of EXP. " ... It would have to take a major shakeup of Pride board members for us to consider sponsoring future festivals as well as them recognizing this grave error in their awarding of the scholarship to someone who worked with anti-gay candidates."

Pride a Success

Still, according to organizers and attendees, this year's PrideFest was a great success. PrideFest commemorates the Stonewall Riots in which patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a Greenwich Village Gay Bar, fought for three nights against homophobic practices in 1969 New York.



Photo by Scott Lokitz
Protesters flocked to the stage as Charles Stadtlander received his scholarship award at PrideFest.

"We feel this year's PrideFest went very well considering the heat," said Toni Duran, Director of Public Relations for Pride St. Louis. "We received many compliments throughout the weekend and have received more since. We have also received wonderful suggestions from the community, vendors, and sponsors for an even better 2006."

Although crowd numbers for the festival were not yet available, Duran stated that attendance was slightly down from last year's 70,000 for the two day weekend due to the heat.

"All PrideFest staff and volunteers were watching each other closely and had cold water and rest areas readily available," Duran continued. "Our first aid staff did a wonderful job preventing any full-blown medical emergencies. The safety of our volunteers and all attendees was one of our main concerns throughout the weekend. We are looking into acquiring cooling tents and/or large fans for the 2006 festival."

Indeed, PrideFest and its annual Sunday parade were full of the usual pomp and circumstance and celebratory flair. From the emotional crowd reception to the Parents, Family And Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) to the unbelievable energy of HOLA; from the GLBT bands and choruses, the drag queens and dykes on bikes to the colorful bar floats and expressions of individuality, PrideFest was yet again a veritable pallet of community color.

Dr. Lee Borrine, Director of Fruit Jam Jazz and member of the GLBT musical band "BandTogether" has attended every PrideFest since moving to St. Louis in 1984. Borrine was enjoying watching the parade

following BandTogether's finishing the parade when he heard the hate speech from the loudspeaker of Rev. Philip "Flip" Benham, Director of Operation Rescue/Operation America.

"I thought, 'no, it couldn't be, not in this day and age, that guy is preaching hate,'" recalled Borrine. "He's raining on our parade."

Immediately wanting to do something, Borrine gathered a handful of members of BandTogether, some reluctant, who were still in the area. The alto saxophone player then led the band of about 15 members to the tune of "Tilt at Windmills" and drowned out the North Carolina clergyman until he was asked to leave by St. Louis police.

"When he was silent, we were silent; when he spoke, we played; when he spoke louder, we played louder," explained Borrine. "The moral of the story: Nonviolent action can make a difference. I had been depressed since the presidential election last November. This one small victory went a long way toward reinstating my hope. It proved that every voice counts, even the voice of an alto sax."

A Political Feel

Politics has always played a pivotal role at PrideFest but last year's passage of the Missouri Marriage Amendment banning same sex unions in the state constitution has proven a jump start for politicians in the GLBT community.

The following, Democrats all, participated in this year's event: St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay, U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan, State Senators Joan Bray, Maida Coleman, and Rita Heard Days; State Representatives Margaret Donnelly, Barbara Fraser, Robin Wright Jones, Sam Page, Rachel Storch and out lesbian Jeanette Mott Oxford; St. Louis City Democratic Committee Chairman Brian Wahby; President of the St. Louis Board of Alderman James Shrewsbury; St. Louis Aldermen Stephen Conway, Jennifer Florida, Stephen Gregali, and Lewis Reed; and Clayton Democratic Committeewoman Cindy Brown. Many of these elected officials stopped by the tent of the newly formed Gateway Stonewall Democrats (GSD) or participated in the Pride Forums.

"We are very pleased with our 'debut' in the LGBT community," stated Perry Nelson, Vice President of GSD. "We had a great reception from those who visited our tent, and I was very happy with the support shown to our new chapter by those Democratic notables who dropped by to visit, and who spent time meeting and greeting people at the tent."

Following the parade, GSD, along with Show Me Equality, an organization focused on the equal rights of all Missourians, participated in a form of street activism called "March to the Park for Equality."

"We were greeted very loudly and enthusiastically by the spectators," said Nelson. "And well before the end of the parade, other people had folded into our march, taking the remaining signs. Other people just joined us to march and show solidarity."

Immediately following the GLBT Pride Parade, the ACLU of Eastern Missouri and PROMO hosted a press conference outside of MoKaBe's Coffeehouse on the State of GLBT Parenting. Speakers included Denise Lieberman, Legal Director for the ACLU of Eastern Missouri, Kenneth Haller, MD, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at St. Louis University School of Medicine and Julie Brueggemann, Executive Director, PROMO, Missouri's statewide GLBT equality organization.

Missouri resident Lisa Johnston's foster parent application was recently denied, even after being deemed "exceptionally qualified" by a state administrative judge. Johnston was denied solely because she is a lesbian. She is currently challenging the Missouri policy barring lesbian and gay people from serving as foster parents in state court and is represented by the ACLU.

"It is unfair to deny children the good, stable homes they deserve simply to condemn gay and lesbian people," said Lieberman of the ACLU-EM.

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