

# Celebrate Pride in a positive way this summer

by Darren Frei  
Special to Q-Notes

Jerry is 26 years old. He serves coffee to conservative professionals in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah. Every June, he and an assortment of close gay friends make a pilgrimage to West Hollywood for a chance to hold hands in public, dance with shirtless boys, buy useless trinkets, and smuggle a trunk load of porn back into squeaky clean Utah. After Jerry has stamped his gay card at the Pride Festival, he can function once again as a minority in an overwhelmingly homophobic community.

"Thank God for Gay Pride," he says. "I look forward to it more than I looked forward to Christmas when I was a kid." The Gay Pride celebration helps Jerry feel that he's part of a larger movement, and not feel as isolated as he does the rest of the year. His pride in his accomplishments and his love for his friends outweigh his desire to party like this every day of the week. Pride is a healthy part of his life.

Paul is 35 years old. He lives in a dilapidated bungalow near Santa Monica Blvd. in West Hollywood, California. Every weekend, he and an assortment of close gay friends get together for a decadent dose of drugs and sex. Like Jerry, he looks forward to Gay Pride every year. In fact, he's already saved up enough money to buy the drugs he needs to ensure that he and his friends don't waste time with anything as pesky as sleeping. "I've been to better parties on the circuit," Paul says. "But this is Gay Pride — hot boys throughout the day, right in my backyard." A big part of Paul's celebration has to do with the constant stream of muscle boys that file past his bedroom window. "At least 20-30 guys will stop by throughout the day," he says proudly. Paul doesn't see anything wrong with his behavior. "I'm proud of my body and if other guys appreciate it, why not? I feel confident with drugs and they're a part of me now." Paul sees Pride as another excuse to party.

Clearly, the meaning of Gay Pride varies significantly from individual to individual. One can analyze the superficiality of Gay Pride as easily as local newscasters do, pointing the cam-

era toward G-strings and chaps, and away from people who base their pride in self-love instead of exterior labels.

Gay Pride is the one event our community can depend upon annually to display the outward signs of unity to a homophobic world that needs to be jolted out of complacency and ignorance. But with Millennium March organizers and the Human Rights Campaign in the midst of criminal allegations, the notion of displaying sincere internal pride as a unified community is poisoned with irony.

What does gay pride mean anymore in a community where middle-age gay men, riddled with addiction, cannot confront their demons of internalized homophobia by any means other than by resigning themselves to a life of escapism? "I feel confident with drugs," Paul says. Why does a large proportion of our community find it necessary to ground their confidence, their pride, in drugs and sex? This escapism has nothing to do with the creative spirit that has helped fuel the vitality of the queer movement.

"Pride is creativity." Brian, a 32-year-old development executive in the film industry, says. "It has to do with someone deciding to bike across the state to raise money for AIDS or to perform a taboo play on the street in front of thousands of passers-by." Creative expression is not the same as escaping from reality with drugs, alcohol, and sex. Escapism has to do with denial, self-hatred, and shame.

David, an aspiring screenwriter jokes, "I like my pride tempered with a lot of shame." He appreciates the idea of the festival, but prefers to stay away from the hoopla surrounding it. "It serves a purpose because it reminds people of a time when you couldn't be vocal and it was dangerous to be vocal."

He has mixed feelings about what Pride means. "Are [we] celebrating homosexuality or are [we] celebrating sex? Is it about feeling better about yourself, or is it about shaking your bacon? It's hard to separate one from the other. It's a festival so it should be fun — should they cordon off the festival and charge admission? No."

David's comments are echoed by a growing number of individuals who question the relevancy of gay pride as it appears to be more about external displays of muscles, rainbows and controlled substances, and less about engendering internal feelings of pride and learning to love ourselves in a hostile world. Indeed, festivals should be fun. But shouldn't one leave a gay pride celebration instilled with a sense of self-worth and pride rather than a hangover?

The majority of people I spoke with agree. To them, pride has nothing to do with rainbow flags, bumper stickers and pride rings.

"Pride means self-respect," says Kali, a 41-year-old actress and stand-up comic. "I wish the festival were more open to straight people and families, regardless of race and whether or not they can afford tickets."

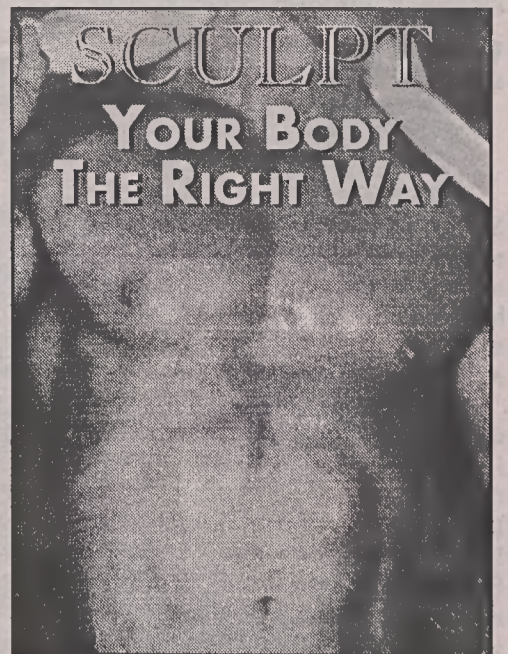
Despite her disdain for the chain-link cage that encloses the official L.A. Gay Pride celebration, Kali loves to participate. "We're all human. I'm not going to boycott the festival and stop anyone else from having fun. I go to be with friends, listen to music and simply to enjoy the summer heat."

The issue isn't whether or not the festival is worth saving — it serves a vital role. "Pride is about fighting ignorance and showing straight people that we are a powerful force when we unite," says Shelly, a clothing designer. "Pride should not be exclusionary and divisive."

The organized Gay Pride Festival can be an essential step toward coming out and finding tools to build self-esteem. Gay Pride provides common ground and visibility for gay and lesbian seekers. But once we've found that sense of community, can we just resign ourselves to "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die"?

Many believe that Pride has become nothing more than a party holiday with people nodding their heads to the ideals of equal-rights and visibility and then hiding in shame and complacency the rest of the year.

"It reminds me of the way my parents practice religion," Doug, a local musician says. "They go to church only on Christmas and  
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