

A Tradesmen long-timer recalls group's 15-year history

by Jim Griggs
Special to Q-Notes

In 1984, a member of the Nashville leather group, The Conductors Levi/Leather Club, moved to Charlotte. Having been an officer and a leading force in The Conductors, Bill Purcell (d. 1991) proposed the idea for a new club to friends and leather-oriented patrons of The Brass Rail.

In May of 1985, The Tradesmen Levi/Leather (L/L) Club came into existence. Regular bar nights were established — the first Friday of each month — to raise funds for the club and for local charities. Metrolina AIDS Project (MAP) was forming at this time and their first fund raising event was sponsored by The Tradesmen at The Brass Rail.

Providing a visual presence at the bar and in the community with the clubs trademark colors/patch, The Tradesmen became well known quickly. The first Fridays became one of the most well attended nights at The Brass Rail and events that were sponsored and co-sponsored by The Tradesmen were well received.

During the club's second anniversary and run, Trademark II in May of 1987, a group of interested leatherfolk from Atlanta got together with The Tradesmen and formed The Panther Levi/Leather Club, a club that is extremely well known in the southeast and has raised over \$25,000 for various charities in the Atlanta metro area. The family relationship and bonds established between these three clubs have remained strong.

The strong leadership core of The Tradesmen went on to provide assistance with the beginnings of several other clubs: Menamoré Levi/Leather Club of Wilmington, NC in 1988; The Tarheel Leather Club of Greensboro, NC in 1990; The Capital Leathermen of Raleigh, NC in 1990; and the Spartans L/L of Spartanburg, SC (which folded in 1996). The friendship and brotherhood of The Tradesmen, founded by a few interested men, is evident throughout the southeast GLBT community and is extended through our "daddy" and "brother" clubs.

As with all gay clubs and organizations at that time, the toll of AIDS on the community wore the club and its resources down to 4 full members by the summer of 1997. The four set-out to rebuild and strengthen the club and its bonds to the community and brother clubs.

By the summer of 1998, the club was up to 8 full members and plans were being made to get The Tradesmen name back out in public. After fundraisers were held for Palmetto AIDS Life Support Services (PALSS) and the Metrolina Food Bank, the local public was once again aware of The Tradesmen. By the summer of 1999, the club was up to 13 full members and plans to return to the run circuit were made.

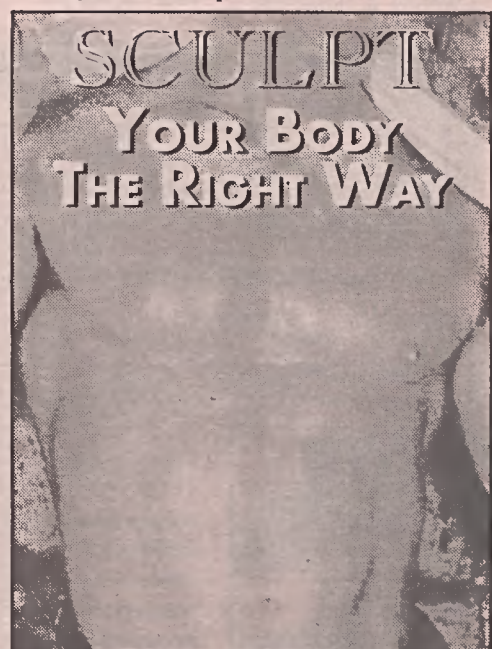
Members that could travel to out-of-town events began doing so, spreading The Tradesmen's name back into the southeast community. From Wilmington to Richmond,

and even as far west as San Francisco, the club colors were being seen again.

Plans to hold our first anniversary and run since our tenth in 1996 were put into motion. Trademark XIV in 2000 was a tremendous success, especially for a group of men that were predominately novices at organizing and holding such an event. The leadership of the three senior members was key.

During that year, the club grew to its largest membership ever at 21. The average membership for leather clubs is around 12. The Tradesmen are not the largest, but definitely among the biggest in the southeast.

Plans for Trademark XV are nearing completion and it looks to be our biggest celebration yet with a three-day vendor fare, an officer's ball and special guest COLT Model Wade Neff. Fundraising this year is ear-marked for House of Mercy, an AIDS hospice located in Belmont, NC. ▼



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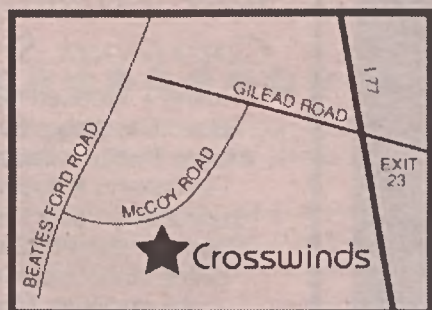
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