

Activists ignite gay men's health movement

Raleigh Summit a rallying success

by Erik Libey
Gay Men's Health Summit

RALEIGH — Noon on May 11 marked the official close of Gay Men's Health Summit 2003 — five days of education, information-sharing, community-building and activism centering around issues of health and wellness for gay, bisexual, trans and queer men.

This was the third national summit of its kind over the past five years and brought over 300 participants from all over the country and world, including countries such as New Zealand, Canada, England, Ireland and Switzerland. The Summit's boldly stated mission to "build a multi-cultural multi-issue health movement for gay men's health" drew a broad range of participants including activists, medical providers, community advocates and human service providers.

"We are really excited to see the exciting work taking place on gay men's health around the nation and around the world," said Summit organizer Eric Rofes of San Francisco. "Cutting-edge work with men of color, start-up gay men's health projects in Tucson, San Francisco and Geneva, Switzerland, and the increasing attention to aging and ageism, really made this an exciting summit to me!"

Work at the Summit got a jump-start for early arrivals in a collection of intensive pre-summit institutes addressing issues such as bear health, racism, working with queer youth, applying critical theory to health models and creating a new model for gay men's health. As the bulk of participants arrived later

in the evening on May 7, they were greeted with an opening reception and a keynote plenary session that generated a unique energy that carried itself throughout the Summit and fueled discussions around a myriad of issues in the health movement.

Throughout the Summit, over 150 workshop sessions and plenaries covered the most diverse collection of topics in the Summit's history. Amongst this wide range of topics some key issues — including substance use, mental health, HIV/AIDS, domestic violence and prostate cancer — were identified and received special focus.

One such focus included a programming track — and funding to provide specific scholarships for participation — devoted to the Summit's first ever "Men of Color Institute." This Institute, sponsored in large part by the Ford Foundation, addressed some of the unique needs in populations of color and in discussions including how health needs in these communities are addressed, access to care and the ways that homophobia and/or racism interact to impact health for people of color. Participants in the Institute also created and distributed a draft document summarizing "critical issues that were identified [to] serve as a set of priorities for gay men of color that can

be considered for future organizing efforts."

A second unique feature of the Summit was the beginning of what will hopefully grow into an ongoing discussion of gender amongst queer men. Issues of gender identity and the trans community were featured in a series of workshops and a well-attended keynote plenary

entitled "Queer Men, Queer Masculinities: Towards a Broad Understanding of Gender in the Gay Men's Health Movement." This plenary included trans activists and FTM (female-to-male) transgender individuals addressing the broad spectrum of gender experience and why these issues fit within a gay men's movement rather than as a separate trans movement. Plenary moderator Hugh McGowan of New York City succinctly summarized this point saying "The work of dismantling the gender machine is not for trans people alone and the work of changing the world does not belong to someone else."

A final critical component of the Summit included a number of workshops and plenaries on how a gay/bi/trans/queer men's health movement might be framed and in what directions its future might lie. In this vein issues ranged from strategizing how to reach communities to creating sex-positive health messages. A focal point of the Summit's inclusion of these

issues was a plenary session led by Eric Rofes. In his plenary, Rofes stressed the need to make a nationwide paradigm shift from a gay health movement that focuses exclusively on issues of HIV/AIDS to one that includes these issues as one component in a more comprehensive and holistic menu of needs.

Further enhancing the Summit experience were a number of activities to provide a social component for participants — including receptions, an exciting pool party and collaborations with local nightclubs for "nights out on the town," and a mini film festival screening several queer titles donated by Frameline, San Francisco's LGBT film festival.

Audience response to the Summit was overwhelmingly positive as they joined in a process that both energized and educated. As the week wrapped up, participants were charged with bringing the energy and message of the Summit back to their communities and organizations and with creating similar summits at the state/regional level nationwide. Additionally, discussions were already underway for the next, in what will likely be many, follow up national summits — tentatively scheduled to occur in 2005.

Additional sponsors included Gilcard Sciences and Glaxo Smith Kline.

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