

We're here, we're queer — now what?

By Bob Moser
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Under low-slung skies on a sprinkly June day in 1996, I held my boyfriend's hand for dear life and walked with several hundred queer people through the rain-slick downtown streets of Winston-Salem. I was one year out of the closet at the ripe old age of 32, and the annual NC Pride march had traveled to my hometown for the first time. Local right-wingers had been protesting the march for months, and they'd turned out a cadre of those charming fundamentalists who can't resist a chance to inform thousands of people at once that they are destined for hellfire. The TV cameras were out in force, too, and I could just imagine the phone call later that night: "Mother saw you kissing Phil on the 6 o'clock news," my sister would report, "and she keeled over dead on the spot."

All in all, I'd never felt better in my life. Chanting that venerable old chestnut of Pride marches — "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" — in the city where I'd learned to stifle myself, where I knew hundreds of queer kids like me were busy stifling themselves at that very moment, was giving me the kind of head rush that bungee-jumpers and mountain-climbers live for.

As we rounded one last curve, a big cluster of vociferous soul-savers came into view at the end of the march route. I wanted so badly to say something to them, and was searching for exactly the right words when a marcher in front of me broke from the pack, pranced up to a man hollering "Sodomites Burn in Hell," planted a sloppy kiss on his grizzled old mug and cried, "Honey, see you there!"

Perfect.

No similarly delicious moments were possible this past Saturday, when the Pride march returned for the sixth time to its original home in Durham. Only one protester took the trouble to show up, and all he brought were signs bearing such mysterious slogans as "Elephant abuse starts at home." Marchers puzzled over the possible meaning of this lonely protest, but none could decipher it well enough to come

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up with a witty rejoinder.

Maybe it's no surprise that the local gay-baiters have lost interest. After their spirited beginnings in the '80s, North Carolina's Pride marches have, like so many of the original marchers themselves, settled down considerably. An estimated 3,000 people turned out on Saturday — not bad, though it represents just a tiny sliver of the state's queer population. But as we shuffled up Main Street, sauntered down Ninth Street and meandered back around for an afternoon festival on Duke's East Campus, there was precious little energy. Not only were there no protesters, there were also no songs, no cameras and not even a half-hearted attempt to update "We're here, we're queer."

"Chants are passe," a fellow marcher informed me along the way. "There weren't any at the Millennium March." This was the recent march on Washington organized by the Human Rights Campaign, a nationwide lobbying group that longs to make queer

people appear approximately as threatening in the eyes of the straight majority as Rob and Laura Petry. The HRC also had a hand in organizing North Carolina's Pride march this year, and its well-scrubbed charges seemed to outnumber the drag queens by at least a two-to-one margin. Everything was restrained, orderly, impeccably organized — and adrenaline-free.

That's nothing new, actually. The Winston-Salem march, through marginally

hostile territory, was a rarity for N.C. Pride. Unlike South Carolina's feisty queers, who like to startle and enlighten homophobic towns like Myrtle Beach and Greenville with hordes of marching sodomites, we North Carolinians apparently prefer a quiet stroll through relatively tolerant areas like Carrboro, Asheville or Ninth Street.

Pride marches don't lend themselves readily to militance, of course. Though they're timed to coincide with the anniversary of the raucous Stonewall uprisings in New York, the point is simply to come out and proclaim to the world that you're happy with your sexual orientation. But what's the point of *that* when the world isn't watching?

Maybe I'm part of a small queer minority, but I want to flush out the homophobes in Fayetteville or North Wilkesboro and strut past them with every ounce of dignity that's inside me. I want to hear what they have to say to me, and I want to kiss them on the cheek for saying it.

Or, better yet, I want to storm the Bastille — well, the state Capitol. On a Tuesday afternoon, say, when the General Assembly is in full swing. With drag queens leading the way, as they did during Stonewall, and thousands of less-well-appointed queers flanking the rear. I want to disrupt. I want to risk arrest. And, fashionable or not, I want to chant myself hoarse — not with a stale cliché, but with a fresh slogan aimed at claiming our basic civil rights. The state of North Carolina offers so many possibilities. Queer couples can neither marry nor adopt. Gay people can be fired from their jobs for being gay. And, most egregious of all, our fair state maintains the nation's most antiquated Crimes Against Nature law, allowing both gay and straight people to be arrested for having consensual sex with their fellow adults.

Which suggests a pretty catchy chant for the first annual storming of the Capitol: "Don't lock me up for making love."

It's true that my idea of a Pride march might accomplish little more than a pleasant afternoon's stroll through the most liberal section of Durham. It might even, as the Human Rights Campaigners would no doubt remind me, be strategically counterproductive in the long run to be so, well, bothersome. But maybe storming the state Capitol would start something — like Stonewall did, like the WTO protests in Seattle certainly have. At the very least, it would prove there's a pulse in North Carolina's queer community. And *that* would make me proud.

Reprinted from *The Independent Weekly* (6/14/00). Bob Moser lives in Carrboro and is editor of *The Independent*.

When Democrats Do Bad Things

By Dale Carpenter
Contributing Writer

A governor criminalizes gay sex, yet gay leaders say nothing. An elected official backs anti-gay marriage legislation, yet a gay group says he's blameless. Another governor vetoes legislation giving gay employees the right to take time off from work to care for a sick lover, yet the state's gay lobbying organization yawns.

Welcome, my friends, to the world of the Democratic double standard.

Under it, a Republican who even hints at doing something that might adversely affect a gay person somewhere is instantly denounced as a homophobic hate-monger. When a Democrat does much the same thing? Well, nobody's perfect.

Consider former Texas Governor Ann Richards. To the gay political establishment in Texas, the colorful Democrat is a saint. Yet despite Richards' ability to wow gay audiences at black-tie dinners with her winning smile and folksy accent, her legislative legacy is darkly anti-gay. It's her signature you'll find on the state's anti-gay sodomy law, after all, one of only a handful in the entire country that specifically targets gay

sex. Two men in Houston were recently prosecuted for violating Richards' law in a private home. (Note: a state appeals court has held the law unconstitutional.)

If George W. Bush had signed such a hideous law, gay activists would have blockaded every road between the Alamo and the Astrodome in protest. Yet the excuse factory rolls into production for Richards.

One of these days we'll have a civil rights movement that doesn't look at partisan labels before deciding what to say and do. That day is not here.

Despite the fact that she did nothing to lobby the legislature to defeat it, gay advocates explain she was forced to sign the law because it was part of a larger overhaul of the criminal code. Despite the fact that Democrats controlled *both* houses of the Texas legislature at the time, they complain it was really the Republicans' fault.

Another example of this blame-the-GOP

defense came recently from the Stonewall Democrats. In a press release extolling the Clinton-Gore administration, the group excused Clinton and Gore's support of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) by arguing that the congressional Republicans, under the leadership of Newt Gingrich, made them do it. "Sure, Clinton signed the bill, but only in a political reality created by

Republicans," huffed Stonewall.

Never mind that Clinton publicly agreed to sign DOMA before it was even drafted, much less introduced in Congress. Never mind that after Clinton signed DOMA, he and Gore trumpeted their support of the measure in campaign ads on Christian radio stations. Did Gingrich make them do that, too?

When blaming Republicans won't fly, some gay groups try minimizing the importance of the Democratic betrayal. Witness their supine reaction to California Governor Gray Davis' recent rejection of a domestic partners' bill.

Because Democrat Davis and most officeholders of both parties oppose same-sex marriage, gay Californians are left trying to approximate the benefits of marriage by creating a domestic partnership system that confers a series of limited rights to gay couples.

Earlier this year, Davis approved a state-sanctioned registry for same-sex couples that grants no benefits to them other than the right to visit a partner in the hospital. To give the system some content, legislators have subsequently proposed a series of piecemeal bills that would accord domestic partners a few of the privileges of marriage.

One such proposal, which passed the California legislature and went to Davis for his signature in May, would have expanded the state's family medical leave law to allow an employee to take unpaid time to care for an ailing domestic partner — just as the

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