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A different drummer

Torn by controversy and struggling for survival, the Dyke March still strikes a blow against assimilationism

by R.J. Grubb

Shirts off! That's what countless dykes across America will be shouting next month as they get ready to march in unison down such celebrated city streets as San Francisco's Castro and New York's Fifth Avenue. Yet in Boston, the planned walk down Boylston Street almost didn't happen. Last month, an emergency e-mail bulletin was sent to a popular local listserv, alerting all who cared that Boston's fourth annual Dyke March would be canceled if more women didn't get involved. Frustrated by the lack of community involvement, past organizers seriously considered abandoning the march. After all, if no one was interested, why have one?

The emergency bulletin generated enough of a response that organizers decided to go ahead -- at first glance, a narrow victory of community solidarity over activist apathy. Nevertheless, the fragile state of the march underlines the general trend in the gay and lesbian movement toward assimilation and demonstrates the need for lesbian visibility.

Today, if you ask people to describe the Dyke March -- and those who march in it -- you're likely to receive responses ranging from "a group of misguided women" to "a band of rebel dykes out to scare puritan Boston" to the "best thing that's ever happened to Pride."

Which raises the question: what *are* the goals of the Dyke March?

Sarah Shreeves, a founder and current march organizer, says the point is to "have a huge group of women walking down the street together who are dykes in a politically charged way." In other words, lesbian visibility.

In working toward that seemingly simple goal, however, march organizers have opened a Pandora's box. "I just think that the Dyke March might have

tapped into larger conflicts in the community that are very far-reaching," explains Beth Hastie, another founding organizer and an adviser to this year's organizers.

Back in 1979, Charlotte Bunch predicted that "lesbian feminist separatism will continue in some form as long as there is heterosexual domination." Bunch's prophecy does not seem in danger of becoming obsolete anytime soon. It's still a man's, man's world, and lesbians still occupy that unenviable place as a minority within a minority.

In fact, one of the reasons the Dyke March came into being was to address the needs of dykes who felt they were being excluded from the broader gay community. If you need evidence that these women had a point, just pick up one of the gay glossies and see how much editorial space is given to gay men's issues and how little is devoted to lesbian issues.

Still, many lesbians were angry about the march organizers' decision last year to separate from Pride and hold the march a week after the big event. There was a much smaller turnout for the '97 march, and for some, the negative feelings still linger. "Having last year's march a week later turned a lot of people off," says Shreeves.

Leigh Kempinski, a queer-rights activist and organizer from last year, remembers: "We're marching and we have this path, which is great. But our audience was random tourists in Boston or anyone who happened to be out that Saturday. And that's great because people need to have their eyes opened, but in terms of political statements and political goals, where was it going?"

That's something even those involved in the march don't always agree on. For instance, who can forget the upheaval over "Bedgate," when a Dyke March float consisting of a bed on which women simulated sex crashed the 1996 Pride parade?

In retrospect, Shreeves argues that the larger gay and lesbian community's response to "Bedgate" revealed a double standard about sex. "There are floats with men hardly wearing anything and grinding each other, but when women do it, it's: `Oh my God, what will the straight community think?' " Shreeves says. " `We're sending the wrong message.' `Look how far we've gotten, and you're setting us back.' Personally, I don't give a fuck what the straight community thinks of us, and I find it sad that we're pandering to the idea that we are just like everybody else."

Beyond arguments like these, there's the question of whether our community makes up a market or a movement.

"We have had issues with the growing commercialization of Pride over the years and wanted to get back to grassroots," Hastie says. And though the

focus of the event is lesbian visibility, Shreeves acknowledges that "at some point you need to focus on real, tangible issues." Addressing this concern last year, organizers presented a forum on health care issues after the march. During a "speak out" segment, women walked up to a podium and shared personal stories about how lack of health care affected them as lesbians. Shreeves remembers it as "empowering and satisfying."

Yet this year, due to a lack of volunteers -- in part, a consequence of last year's separatist stance -- there will be no focus on a single issue other than visibility. There simply isn't the time or energy to pull off something like last year's forum. "It's always a struggle for activists and organizations to keep people actively involved in planning things," Shreeves notes. "Even Pride is having problems getting [the community] involved."

Of course, to some people, Pride is more a day of fun than an occasion for activism. Hastie says that the Dyke March has had "a very positive effect on Pride," which began using the term *march* rather than *parade* last year, but people who see Pride as an excuse to throw one heck of a party think calling it a march is a bit strong.

"There's always that conflict," says Sara Wolfson, a new organizer of the Dyke March. "Are we going to have social events or are we going to have political events? [Some] people whine and they just want to have fun, flirt, cruise, whatever. But I think anybody's life is made up of things that are fun and [things that are] political. Everybody lives in both arenas. The Dyke March is just part of the scene. The fact that Pride is more commercial does not make it bad; it just makes it limited."

In truth, the Dyke March crisis -- whether you want to call it disorganization or apathy -- reflects the crisis facing queer activism in general. Groups like ACT UP and the Lesbian Avengers have seen their membership dwindle to the point where they, too, have had to beg their communities for involvement and support. Meanwhile, the Human Rights Campaign, which focuses on mainstream issues like marriage, continues to garner support nationwide. Most likely, HRC will be out in force at the Pride parade on June 13. I remember being tapped on the shoulder by so many HRC representatives last year that I was forced to wear one of their stickers so I wouldn't be asked again. (I guess we're all fighting for visibility -- perhaps some of us are just better at marketing than others.)

Clearly, the perception of the Dyke March as being, in Wolfson's words, "anti-Pride" or "anti-mainstream" reflects a preference in today's gay community for assimilationist activism, as opposed to in-your-face political theater. In that context, the Dyke March is crucial. Yes, it is, as Wolfson says, "something radical and grassroots." But it's also "something that is part of everyone . . . it's important that it happens in Boston, so we can have a diversity of experience. So you can say, `I went to Pride and bought a flag' and `I went to the Dyke March and yelled really loud.' "

We can argue till we're blue in the face about whether the Dyke March's politics are effective. As a community, we still do not present a single united political front. But that's okay. It's been argued that the gay and lesbian movement will most likely draw strength from a range of organizations containing more than a handful of token dykes. As Urvashi Vaid has said, "Diversity in leadership, not a single leader, is what the gay-rights movement needs."

Whether or not the Dyke March can continue to provide that diversity is uncertain. For now, we might just have to be content with the certainty that on Friday, June 12, at 7 p.m., a bunch of dykes will get together in Copley Square and work toward figuring that out.

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