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Pride 2009: We Yelled, They Screamed. But Did Anyone ‘Hear’ Us?

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Abstract

It was one for the ages. Forty years after Stonewall, to the day (with an additional 12 hours added) ... we found ourselves marching down Fifth Avenue through downtown New York and cutting a path directly through Greenwich Village and right down Christopher Street in front of the Stonewall Inn where the riots - the flashpoint for the organized Gay Rights Movement around the world - began.

Article



“When you’re drowning, you don’t say ‘I would be incredibly pleased if someone would have the foresight to notice me drowning and come and help me,’ you just scream.” -- John Lennon

It was one for the ages. Forty years after Stonewall, to the day (with an additional 12 hours added) ... we found ourselves marching down Fifth Avenue through downtown New York and cutting a path directly through Greenwich Village and right down Christopher Street in front of the Stonewall Inn where the riots - the flashpoint for the organized Gay Rights Movement around the world - began.



Marching through this parade, in the very same New York, with a banner for the contingent noting "Sons and Daughters of Sylvia Rivera" on this anniversary was inspiring. The roar of the crowd as we passed, especially throughout Greenwich Village, was absolutely deafening! My ears were literally ringing afterwards.

In so many ways this was an event to remember! As Sylvia Rivera recalled saying that night of the riots, "I'm not missing this for the world!"

Privately, it was also a trying and disappointing result. I knew it would be a logistical task coordinating something in a locale hundreds or thousands of miles away. But this one was a bit more "Murphy's Law"-like than most others. Everything that could go wrong ....



The banner people were nothing but a mass of confusion, and the banner had to be sent to Mona Rae's house in Yonkers NY as I was afraid I wouldn't receive it until after my flight to NYC. I literally

picked up the banner at a drop off point on Friday in Manhattan just a few minutes before the Trans Day of Action after criss-crossing the town to pick up poster boards (which were shipped late) after a speech out in far East New York, and dropping those off in Hoboken where I was staying! Between that, crossed wires, lost items, help arriving too late to be of any good, a subway weekly pass that arbitrarily stopped working and family and personal issues to deal with long-distance while in New York, it was, um, interesting!

Coordinating things in your back yard is simply stressful. Coordinating things 1500 miles away tends to border on madness.



We were also unsuccessful in getting the Stonewall Girls to the 40th anniversary. One showed interest but the other two didn’t. As one noted, there was far too much bad blood over how she and the other trans folk were treated to gloss over it. For a lot of old-line trans members, there’s nothing to really celebrate and much more to mourn or stew over.

We had participants cancelling due to health reasons (theirs and their spouses), even a group cancelling while en route due to a communter train’s power outage! We had a number of confirmed attendees who simply didn’t make it; no idea why, just no-shows. Locally, even though I made the circuit to promote, we didn’t draw any from those, save for five from Mid-Hudson Valley Trans Assn. up in the Kingston / Poughkeepsie region.



That said, we did get Alyssa Harley (who's taken pains to remember Sylvia Rivera every year by attaching red roses to the lamppost at Sylvia Rivera Way.) Both she and Breanna Smith helped lead our contingent and worked their asses off to stir the crowd. Jamie Dailey who made it down from Connecticut also gets props for working the crowd and for her help on the banner preparation on Pride day.

We also brought in a couple of the old Transy House crew: Rusty Mae Moore and Jamie Hunter. It was great seeing them again and especially marching as the Sons & Daughters of Sylvia Rivera. In fact, Jamie even brought her boyfriend Michael Gredowski, a brand new straight ally. Rusty originally wasn't sure that she could make it through the entire length of the parade route, but I noted admirably that she was just as energetic, holding her sign high above her head and stirring the crowd even at the very end of Christopher Street! Meanwhile Jamie did her own tribute to Sylvia Rivera by marching the entire route in heels (amazingly!) and was leading our contingent running and stirring the crowd herself. Michael, who stood in as our "Son" portion of the "Sons & Daughters" absolutely kicked butt and really got into the march himself.



Special thanks go out to both Jamie Hunter and Michael for all their help during and especially before and after the parade. They were indefatigable assistants that really helped make this succeed. In fact, with all the complications and potential to fall flat on our face, our team made it look effortless and successful!

We later had another older latino man (not even sure that he was gay) who joined us from the sidelines on the banner as our second "adopted" son of Sylvia, ha! We even had a couple other latinas join us as well! We were pulling people in from the crowd - it seemed everyone wanted to be part of the Sons & Daughters of Sylvia Rivera!



The Sons & Daughters of Sylvia Rivera garnered a lot of attention from photo journalists and the crowd itself! However, I believe I overestimated its importance to the Trans Community. While Sylvia herself was around and had her voice, people listened. However, she's been gone for over seven years now. Most of the newer trans community members either don't know of her or the history, or they are busy making their own individual history and doing and participating in their own ventures. Rather than one group, we're now spreading out into hundreds of groups and individually expressing our own perspectives.

"I just can't do what I done before,
I just can't beg you any more.
I'm gonna let you pass and I'll go last.
Then time will tell just who fell
And who's been left behind,
When you go your way and I go mine." -- Most Likely You'll Go Your Way And I'll Go Mine, Bob Dylan

This is a good thing. However there is also a downside to that dispersal. As we all know after hearing it from Barney Frank or other gay and lesbian critics of the Trans movement, people "don't know" us, and we're "a very small segment" of the community. The message has always been that Trans people are an infinitesimally small portion of the greater Queer (originally Gay) movement. Between the stigma of Trans and being out about it, and the compulsion to do our own thing, it's tough to gather trans folks in

numbers adequate enough to make a statement to gay and lesbian leaders and the world that we're not tiny, insignificant and doomed to utter obscurity.

At the risk of sounding like a skipping record, I can't stress the need for quantifying numbers of us. We need to establish our population and our income (especially lack thereof). Its needed not just for demographics for political attention, but even afterwards to establish our market share (the key to corporate funding for things Trans the way even the gay and lesbian and all other segments are able to draw.)



And again, these numbers will help us actually steal back our own voice (which is increasingly being co-opted and capitalized on of late). It's about the only thing we ever really had in the Trans community was our voice and it appears others think we've abdicated it. When you sit back and let anyone represent you, you end up with the type of governance or oversight you deserve.

Even while I was up in New York, there was an apparent dust up between trans folks and others on Pam's House Blend which ended up resulting in a number of people being censored or banned (I'm not sure which). There was a noticeable hue and cry over it all with folks complaining about the list's owner and the uneven treatment. But a reminder: it's Pam Spaulding's list, she's not a trans person and she can do whatever the hell she feels like with her blog (emphasis on "her blog"). If she wishes to ban trans people, it's her blog! She has the autonomy to do so.

If we trans readers disagree, well then, start your own. Nobody should think that anything trans that's valid must come from an entity that is always led and/or created by a gay or lesbian. Similarly anything that was created and that provides autonomy to trans people should not be quashed simply because it isn't led or created by gay or lesbian leaders who then choose the agenda and represent the de facto face of the trans community. TransAdvocate is attempting to do that right now.



Yet too many of us end up contributing to building up gay and lesbian-led institutions as “they’re our allies” and end up watering down or thwarting our own voice in order for some perceived considerations or reward. Maybe that worked adequately for Mara Keisling or a few select folks from the NCTE ilk. For the rest of us there is absolutely nothing gained -- it’s an absolute net loss. All we do is water down our own numbers, our own voice and our own efficacy. We must get out there and actively take control of our own fate, lest we end up not even being the face of our own community.

“You know, with all the press releases you do, people think that it’s just NTAC -- or just you - drawing attention to yourself.” -- Mara Keisling of NCTE in a conversation to me in August 2004



Taking back the Trans community’s voice is a must. It is more than needed, it’s urgent. The original hope was that this would hopefully serve as a catalyst to begin earnestly to re-seize our destiny and our voice.

Is it possible? Well, after seeing the response on the march in New York and how easily separable we are from our own community, it’s not likely. Far too many of us have no desire for the involvement (much less the work getting it done). The few of us with such desire for involvement or working to make things happen will be going our individual directions in things such as Pride parades. The solution to this still needs some rethinking.



We've got to find a way to take a Trans movement that's dying on the vine and get it spurred in the ass into some forward motion. We have people dropping out of the movement in frustration, fatigue and dreams of wanting to have a "real life" away from being "the tranny" or "the activist" and on point constantly. I've even had numerous others ask me how I'm doing this still after 14 years with the obvious burn-out and the high, high cost that it's come with. Certainly it would seem better to just admit it's fruitless and walk away. But that only makes certain defeat.

We need to bear in mind trans history, with all our forebearers efforts ending in absolutely nothing for those who gave all. We need to recognize there's nothing ever to gain from relinquishing our destiny to the trust of others who have no full understanding of our needs, much less the urgency. And I fully keep in mind that with no future or hope, I certainly have nothing to gain by giving in, and in fact nothing to lose (save for my life, which we all lose in the end) by anything I do. As I noted to the most recent activist stepping away asking how I continue this, I just put myself on auto-pilot - or more precisely auto-battle mode. As I had on one side, "when hope is gone, fight like Sylvia! (fiercely and to the very end!)"



In years down the road, Trans folks will realize we must re-seize our movement. Until then, I’ll just be the crazy, quixotic old tranny, screaming in the wind about our need to own our voice, our movement and our destiny. Sylvia said the same thing years ago, and nobody much listened to her while she was around either. They may not hear, but we should continue speaking truth to power and never stop screaming it.

Maybe it’s the roar of the crowd drowning us all out.



“Lift every voice and sing,
‘Til earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty.” -- Lift Every Voice And Sing, James Weldon Johnson

“Ain’t no one gonna listen if you haven’t made a sound.” -- Filthy Gorgeous, the Scissor Sisters

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