

venue

Happiness is being (openly) gay

After several years of activism, hundreds of thousands of gays remain in the closet, and many old issues remain unresolved. They include the sodomy law, which makes it a crime to engage in sexual relations with a person of the same sex; Law 87, which requires HIV-positive persons to disclose their previous sexual partners, and "sting operations" on the beach in which undercover police entice gay men into "lewd conduct" in order to arrest them.



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On the cover: Olga Orraca, Liza Gallardo, Sandra García, Georgie Irizarry, José Molinelli and Luis Burgos

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Features Editor
Natalia Muñoz

Assistant Editor
Delinda Karle

Graphics Editor
Gabriel Szoke

Copy Editor
Ian Malinow Maceo

Staff Writers:
Aura N. Alfaro
Peggy Ann Bliss
Natalia de Cuba
Melba Ferrer
Todd Michael Jamison
Barbara Tasch Ezratty



The gay men and women behind this new Human Rights Foundation banner recognize that there are a lot of serious issues to be dealt with, but this parade is about having fun, says Ronnie Billini, left. Beside her from left, are Tom Koontz, Iván Reyes, Andrew Prashak, and Herminio "Nino" Adorno. STAR photo

Pride against prejudice

By Peggy Ann Bliss
Of the STAR Staff

Their pride is palpable, but so is the prejudice of others.

So as some 3,000 gays march out of the closet today, they will be looking over their shoulder every step of the way — at the persons who would push them back inside, and at their predecessors who have enabled them to walk the street arm in arm without fear of reprisals.

The 7th Parada de Orgullo Gay, (Gay Pride Parade) with the theme "Identity Plus Visibility Equals Strength," will urge tolerance and justice for all gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, trans-sexuals and transgenders in Puerto Rico.

After several years of activism, hundreds of thousands of gays remain in the closet, and many old issues remain unresolved. They include the sodomy law, which makes it a crime to engage in sexual relations with a person of the same sex; Law 87, which requires HIV-positive persons to disclose their previous sexual partners, and "sting operations" on the beach in which

undercover police entice gay men into "lewd conduct" in order to arrest them.

Everywhere, gays hide their identity for fear of losing their jobs, their apartments and their families. In the past, the parade has attracted all kinds of people, from transvestites to straight families, even a few gay-friendly dogs.

"We want people to see that we're not trolls who walk underground; we are not a freak show," said Ivan Reyes, 27, director of Community Outreach. "We are your next-door neighbor, your son, your cousin; maybe your grandfather was a gay man."

Reyes, whose gay sister is a physician, said he has been "out" to his parents for some

Sodom by the sea

Regardless of what one thinks of sexual relations within a couple of the same sex, or of anal sex between straights or gays, these actions, known as sodomy — after the ancient city of Palestine — are still a crime in Puerto Rico.

The so-called sodomy law — article 103 of the Puerto Rican Penal Code — regulates Crimes Against Public Decency, also referred to historically as "crimes against nature." Despite a public poll which considers it an extremely minor crime, and court

recommendations to eliminate it, it is still the law. The revision of the penal code which recommended it be struck from the books under the Rafael Hernández Colón administration was never completed when the administration changed parties.

The present government has suggested that a list be kept of everyone accused of sex crimes. And while seldom, if ever, enforced, the crime of sodomy carries imprisonment of six to

Continued on next page



Getting ready is almost as fun as marching, as these gay activists found out as they "tested" their rainbow banners for a human flag in today's parade. Preparing for a parade with a serious purpose is hard work, but these activists are smiling, because they have discovered that homosexual life on the outside of the closet isn't as hard as being in the closet.

STAR photos



time. "They're just glad their children are all educated and settled in their jobs," he said.

According to national estimates — that 10 percent of any population is homosexual — Puerto Rico has at least 380,000 gays. Only a tiny percentage of them will march, but the parade is designed to give the closeted ones courage to liberate themselves in small ways.

"This is not a lifestyle; it is a life," said Liza Gallardo, 28, who was echoed by her companion of two years, Olga Orraca, 41,

who added: "Our sexuality does not define us."

It is not something you choose like overspending, or staying out late, or going to a gym, they clarify. It is a way of life which defines your relationships with your friends, family and co-workers. It is not, as many detractors say, "what you do in bed," but a way of relating to the world.

"You don't come out of the closet once and shut the door," said Gallardo, a self-

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12 years for consenting adults, and up to 20 if the victim is under 14 years of age, or if physical or moral coercion has been used.

Attorney Laurence Helfer, in a legal brief, notes that sodomy was eliminated as a crime from the Penal Code of 1870 by the Spaniards, but was re-introduced by the Americans in 1902.

During a 1974 reform of the Puerto Rican Penal Code, and another in 1994, legislators voted to retain the sodomy statute. A Puerto Rico Supreme Court opinion has denounced the law, which has been eliminated in almost half of the states.

In a revision of the penal code, headed by

Doris Muñiz Nevares, 800 people were asked to rate the seriousness of sodomy between consenting adults. The results placed it 74th on a scale of 86, with a punctuation of 1.4, compared to first-degree murder, with a score of 38.3.

Despite Nevares Muñiz's recommendation to strike the statute, it was reintroduced in 1992. The legislative assembly maintains that it "has the duty to maintain and preserve the highest values of our society."

To homosexuals and heterosexuals alike, it is a privacy issue raising many questions. For example, can anal intercourse by a heterosexual couple, married or unmarried be prohibited?

For homosexuals, the implications go beyond sex.

The law is used to justify denying jobs to gays and lesbians, and to block their purchase of property. Police members are explicitly prohibited from associating with homosexuals, who are explicitly believed to be breaking a law.

Says Helfer: "The mere existence of a sodomy statute perpetuates discrimination and maintains the stigmatization of homosexuality. (Elimination of the article) would demonstrate that homosexuality is not a deviation, but a mere orientation." The article, he says, "is an obstacle to a weak but emerging gay and

lesbian rights movement, and should be the movement's top priority."

The Foundation of Human Rights agrees: "The law sends the message that discrimination is acceptable and justifies violence against us," said member Andrew Prashchak. "The gay community cannot find support with a legislature submerged in prejudice and inertia. The strategy will be to challenge the unconstitutionality of the statute in the courts, using a privacy challenge to the sodomy statute, he said.

"Government, with its intransigent attitude, is fomenting hate," he said. "This law is dehumanizing us."



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Liza Gallardo, 28, and her partner Olga Orraca, 41, exchange a moment of tenderness. Says Gallardo: "this is not a lifestyle; it's a life."

employed process server. "You go in and out dozens of times a day."

"It defines something as simple as where you spend New Year's Eve," said Orraca, a representative of the Rainbow Pride Coalition (Coalición de Orgullo Arcoiris) which is organizing the parade. A government researcher in the area of drugs and alcohol, she has been an activist in homosexual visibility issues for almost a decade.

She said that unlike heterosexual couples, homosexuals are not encouraged to give priority to their partners at important family times. Lesbians, especially, are

"It is because of people like her and those much older who are coming out of the closet that young people can sit here and talk about the parade."

Liza Gallardo

criticized for neglecting their parents at holidays, even when heterosexual women are encouraged to attend to their partner's needs.

"Society doesn't provide any moral support to our families," said Orraca. Another issue, she says, "is violence, which takes subtle forms. We must listen to jokes in the media, at work, even from friends and family. I take every opportunity to let people know how hurtful their comments are."

Her partner, who is organizing an international convention of the Latin Lesbians and Gay Organization (LLEGO) in October, looks to her as a pioneer.

"It is because of people like her and those much older who are coming out of the closet that young people can sit here and talk about the parade, and have our pictures taken," said Gallardo.

Couldn't homosexuals just leave things well enough alone? detractors ask.

"There is so much ignorance that it leads to violence; we must take a stand," said Gallardo, conceding that "defending your life is wearying."

Some burning issues are the ability of a homosexual couple to get health care and housing together.

"That a law (the sodomy statute, section 103 of the penal code) exists that makes me a criminal is reason enough to march," she said. "I am a lesbian and that's who I am."

Female homosexuals' acceptance of the word lesbian has increased, as women assume a more active role in the campaign for civil rights. Gay, an acceptable word for both sexes, has nevertheless been appropriated by men.

Also in the movement for acceptance and non-discriminating legislation are bisexuals (people attracted to both genders); transexuals (people whose gender is medically changed via an operation); heterosexuals (people attracted to the opposite gender) and transgenders (people who feel they are the opposite gender, but don't have a sex-change operation).

The more visible elements of the gay community, like drag queens and

transvestites are "part of our community," said Ronnie Billini, a board member of the Fundación de Derechos Humanos (Foundation for Human Rights), which was launched March 1. "Many people would like them to go away, but they are brave individuals," she said.

A former New York resident of Dominican background, Billini is a real estate agent. "Things have been happening in the U.S. for the last two decades, and we've got to start somewhere. We must educate elected officials that gays are not just sexual beings, but human beings who work, suffer, and contribute."

She said the FDH has also denounced the controversial Regulation 87, which requires mandatory notification to the Puerto Rico government of all persons who test HIV positive, as well as reporting their sexual contacts for the last 10 years.

The organization, which marched in New York in front of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico Offices, fears that the regulations can be used to prosecute gays under the Commonwealth sodomy laws.

She said gays in many professions are afraid to be found out, especially teachers, whose work with children makes many people unnecessarily nervous, and members of the police force, which brags that it has no gay members.

The beach entrapment issue has been a priority of the Foundation during the last few weeks. Tom Koontz, editor of the local gay newspaper, "The Puerto Rico Breeze," disapproves of using the area for sexual conduct. Nevertheless, he notes that the U.S. Constitution protects citizens from entrapment.

Koontz said shirtless police in cut-off jeans and sneakers approached men on the beach and made lewd remarks to them. If they responded, they were taken to a local police facility where they were arrested, given a hearing date and denied their right to counsel.

Andrew Prashchak, in an official bulletin dated May 7 from the Foundation, warned gay men to avoid the public beaches after dark.

"We haven't had any more arrests," said Reyes.

The parade, says Orraca, is a place to get important information out for people who don't often go to gay bars. It is also an opportunity to teach the non-gay community about the issues.

"This parade, which attracts many different kinds of people, gives us empowerment," said Orraca, recalling how only 200 people turned out for the first

COVER STORY



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The road for a gay person is often lonely, as Sandra García knows. But with solidarity — and a parade for fun — life seems a lot more bearable.

event seven years ago. Last year, despite controversy, 3,000 persons turned up. "It has kind of leveled off," said Orraca, a board member of LLEGO. "We expect the same number this year."

Last year, the Parks and Recreation Department denied the group a permit for the Peace Pavillion, but relented at the last hour. "We thought people would be frightened away by the publicity, but they came in record numbers," said Orraca. However, the police department made surveillance videos, which the coalition is trying to get them to return.

Stephen Alvarez a spokesman for the police superintendent Pedro Toledo said the department would provide whatever security necessary to guarantee a normal and peaceful parade.

"We want people to see that we're not trolls who walk underground; we are not a freak show."

Iván Reyes

Orraca said marchers are urged to observe a strict behavior code, including abstaining from answering insults and drinking alcohol. However, she said, no one would be asked to repress normal expressions of affection.

The Condado Plaza Hotel, which will serve as headquarters of the LLEGO convention in October, offered its facilities Friday for a press conference to discuss both the convention and the parade.

A highlight of the parade will be a human flag, made up of people carrying colorful banners to represent the international rainbow flag, a symbol of the gay pride movement.

Puerto Rico's parade has spawned dozens of related events, from an ecumenical church service last Sunday at Cristo Sanador Church to an art show of lesbian and gay painters, sculptors and photographers Saturday night at a local gallery.

Many marchers also got a jump start on the parade yesterday with a Fiestón de Orgullo at Prschak's home in Barrio Sonadora in Guaynabo, to honor Margarita López, an outspokenly lesbian candidate for the New York City Council, and Antonio Pagán, a gay candidate running for Manhattanboro President.

Iván Reyes decided to invite his parents to dance and sing and meet his friends in a festive atmosphere.

There are many serious issues to be dealt with, says the Foundation's Billini. "But this parade is about having fun." ♦