

# HISTORY OF PRIDE

Kansas City's LGBT community has been celebrating for nearly 40 years

by STUART L. HINDS

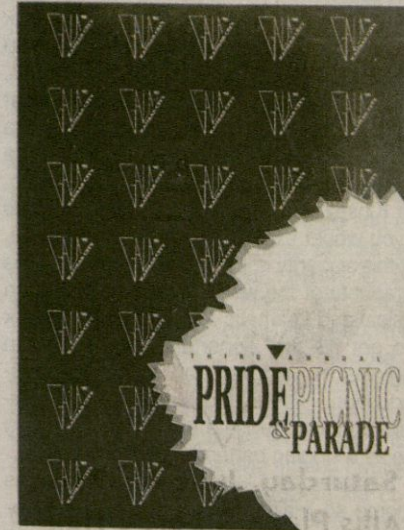
"Gay Pride" was first celebrated in June 1970 to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the riots at the Stonewall Inn, considered by many to be the birth of the gay rights movement. Of course there were gay and lesbian advocacy groups well before this outburst, even bar riots in other cities before June 1969, but a variety of factors came together to provide Stonewall with a lasting resonance in the LGBT communities that resulted in annual parades and festivals.

In June 1975, the first Gay Pride Festival was held in Kansas City. The three-day event was spearheaded by the Gay People's Union, Kansas City Women's Liberation Union, the Joint Committee for Gay Rights, and the Metropolitan Community Church. The weekend's events included five skits "depicting familiar scenes from gay life;" workshops on topics like "The Personal is the Political" and "Can You Be Gay and Christian, Too?" and opportunities to socialize through a banquet and a picnic.

By 1979, the community had become much more overt in its celebration, yet maintained its grassroots quality. A Friday night parade starting at Crown Center and winding through downtown back to Liberty Memorial captured the attention of spectators and news media. The next day 150 people attended the Gay Pride Dinner and Dance, sponsored by MCC and featuring an address by Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the worldwide church. A sunny and warm Sunday offered the perfect setting for a day-long Pride Hoedown at a farm in Gardner with live country music by the Elk River Biscuits and Gravy Band, "recorded Disco music, and all the brew and vittles one could consume."

Records of Pride activities for most of the 1980s are scant to nonexistent in GLAMA collections. A poster from 1982 and a brief 1984 article are the only two references in the Archive, so if readers of The Phoenix Newsletter have material from this period we'd love to hear from you at [www.glama.us](http://www.glama.us).

Kansas Citians who attended the national 1987 March on Washington returned home with a renewed sense of purpose coupled with a surplus of energy and dedication. Other factors contributing to the zealous mood of the period were responses to the growing AIDS crisis and reaction to the decision



Pride Picnic & Parade, 1990



Pride map, 1990

in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the Supreme Court decision that legalized anti-sodomy statutes. It was a heady time politically, and in part this accounts for the vigorous nature of the Pride Parades and Festivals of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Parades during this time snaked through different parts of Midtown and culminated in community and family picnic festivals at Southmoreland Park, just west of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. The festivals at this time had a palpable empowering energy,



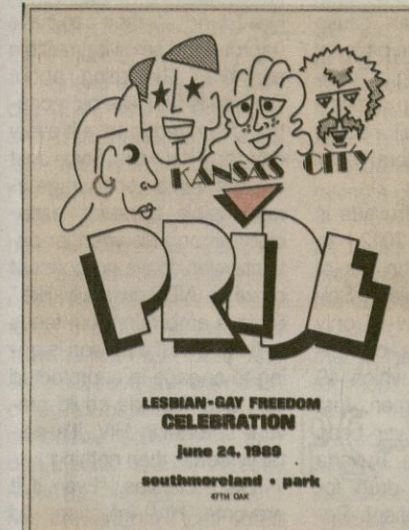
Poster from first Gay Pride Festival held in Kansas City, 1975

made even more evident by political events on the local scene.

In 1991, then-mayor Emmanuel Cleaver was taken to task by gay and lesbian citizens when he initially refused to declare "Gay and Lesbian Pride Week," noting it would divide the Kansas City community. To make matters worse, he declined to attend that year's picnic while at the same time agreeing to be the first African-American to attend the all-white Jewel Ball, Kansas City's premier debutante

event, held the same day as the picnic. After intensive consultation with representatives from Gay and Lesbian Awareness, organizers of the Pride events and other groups, he eventually agreed to appear at the picnic.

During his Pride address, in a rebuff to local and vocal religious fundamentalists, Cleaver, an ordained minister, proclaimed "The God I serve 'don't make no trash.'" In addition, he announced the formation of a commission to investigate the status of gays and lesbians in



Kansas City Pride, 1989



Together in Pride, button 1991



Purè Energy, logo 1990

Kansas City, which collected testimony over the next two months and generated a report for the mayor's office.

Cleaver's actions came on the heels of the failure of the Kansas City Council to pass an ordinance prohibiting discrimination in housing and employment based on sexual orientation or HIV status. The ordinance battle was highly controversial and fiercely debated, primarily by members of the gay and lesbian community and religious fundamentalists



Pride Guide, 1992



Family of Pride, 1993

– "fundies," as they were nicknamed – who gathered under the moniker FIRED-UP, patterned after the AIDS activist group ACT-UP. FIRED-UP members protested the 1992 Pride Parade and Festival, which may have contributed to the event's record audience. The Parade was billed as the only one to march across two states – starting in Westwood on the Kansas side of the state line, travelling east on 47th Street through the Country Club Plaza to Southmoreland Park, site of the



Saturday, June 6, 1998  
Allis Plaza & Bartle Hall

Pride Guide, 1998



Pride Guide, 1999

Festival.

A lawsuit was filed against the mayor of Westwood for proclaiming Gay and Lesbian Pride Month, and his response was to subsequently issue a tongue-in-cheek proclamation announcing "Heterosexual and Moral Living Month." The Kansas City gay rights ordinance was ultimately passed by the Council in May of 1993, immediately before that year's Pride events, which took place in Roanoke Park. The success of the effort to secure protection

for gay and lesbian Kansas Citians certainly played a role in the attendance that year; officials noted it was the largest crowd ever for a Pride parade and festival.

Much of the activist energy that had previously infused Pride seemed to dissipate after the 1993 event. Subsequent festivals began to emphasize the party over the political, and, as the '90s wore on, Pride became corporatized. This was due in large part to the higher costs associated with more lavish events – bigger name entertainment required bigger fees, insurance and security costs were formidable, and charges assessed for location rentals were challenging. Not only were organizers forced to solicit more corporate sponsorships, attendees were regularly charged admittance fees. For many years fences were erected around the festivals, completely eliminating the communal, come-and-go nature of earlier years' events.

The early 21st century has not been kind to pride festivals in Kansas City. As larger amounts of money were required to put on a festival, the opportunities for fiscal problems grew, to the point that for several years Pride planners were unable to meet their financial obligations. The reputation of the event suffered as a result, from vendors who required prepayment for services to a lack of trust within the greater LGBT community. Ultimately the situation has deteriorated to such a degree that competing Pride events have been offered, ironically dividing the community using opportunities that are supposed to bring it together.

But examining what Pride should elicit compassion for those who attempt to organize a celebration. People's reaction to Pride is a deeply personal one, and initially the reason for a Pride commemoration centered on individual pride in a hostile environment. As the community has matured, the purposes of a Pride Festival reflect the spectrum of where individual LGBT community members are in their own personal growth. Moreover, while positive representations of LGBT life abound, the need for personal, social and political pride has not diminished. No one festival, party or parade can begin to address the diversity of these concerns. That there are those who continue to make the attempt to maintain a Kansas City tradition of nearly 40 years should be worthy of the community's gratitude and support. ▼