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TIMES



**DINING OUT
REMAINS POPULAR**

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ALL OUT JUNE

Festival Boosts Gay Pride

GROUP GETS \$4,000 IN TAX DOLLARS TO HELP PROMOTE EVENT

By Skip Descant
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FAYETTEVILLE — Discounted tickets for a Northwest Arkansas Naturals game, a documentary about gay civil rights activist Bayard Rustin and a safe sex workshop are some of the events on this year's slate of gay pride activities in Northwest Arkansas.

"When it started building, it was like, wow, we can't do all of this in one week. So let's try and spread it out throughout the entire month," said James Rector, an event planner. Rector is one of the lead organizers for All Out June, a monthlong festival to recognize the gay rights movement.

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Boy Named Grand Marshal Of Parade

By Skip Descant
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FAYETTEVILLE — He's the youngest grand marshal to lead the Northwest Arkansas Gay Pride Parade.

When 10-year-old Will Phillips

declined standing for the Pledge of Allegiance in his West Fork middle school classroom, he stood up for gay rights.

Phillips' said until everyone in the country is treated equally, he'd

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BOY: Family Passionate About Equality, Dad Says

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just as well sit out the Pledge of Allegiance. Some of the people Phillips had in mind that morning in October were gay Americans, many of whom cannot legally marry in 41 states. Arkansas amended its constitution in 2004 to make gay marriage and gay civil unions illegal. Arkansas voters approved another amendment in 2008 to prevent unmarried persons from adopting or fostering children.

"Our family is very passionate about equality and the experiences of the last half-year have only intensified that," said Jay Phillips, Will's father.

The gay pride parade, organized by NWA Pride, is in its fifth year.

"There were several pride and protest parades dating back to the late eighties," said Joney Harper, one of the

AT A GLANCE

NWA PRIDE PARADE

Where: Fayetteville

When: 10 a.m. June 26

Route: East Avenue to Dickson Street. There will be a rally in the Walton Arts Center parking lot.

SOURCE: STAFF REPORT

parade organizers. "The first parade I attended in Northwest Arkansas was in 2004, which was the first parade in some time."

The parade has grown to some 300 participants and 500 spectators, Harper added. "This year we expect a lot more due to the notoriety of Will Phillips as grand marshal."

The modern gay rights movement began on a June night in 1969 at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village in New York. The bar

was raided by police — typical for these establishments at the time. The bar's patrons — which included lesbians, drag queens and everyone in between — fought back.

"That was an amazing night," remembers John Schenck, 60, of Conway, who was a teenage barback in the bar at the time.

Schenck and his partner, Robert Loyd, have been together since 1975 and have been living in Arkansas for the last 32 years. The two Conway residents have been champions for gays and the many struggles they've faced through the years.

"It's just incredible, the changes that have occurred over the years," Schenck said, recalling the random and deliberate discrimination gay men and women encountered and how attitudes have changed, those in Conway included.

EVENT: NWA Center For Equality Fills Month With Activities To Broaden Discussion Of Issues

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June is traditionally Pride Month in many cities. The observance generally translated in past years in Northwest Arkansas to a small parade on Dickson Street in Fayetteville attended by a few stalwart supporters. A picnic usually followed.

This year the NWA Center for Equality decided to pack the month with activities to not only attract tourists, but also do a better job at broadening the collective discussion of gay people and issues.

"For years, I have heard people say 'Why don't we have more Pride activities?'" said Casey Willits, 28, of Fayetteville, another organizer.

To accomplish the more than a dozen activities and get them publicized, the organizers needed money. The NWA Center for Equality turned to the Fayetteville Advertising and Promotion Commission.

The commission, which collects a 3 percent tax on bills at hotels, motels and restaurants to promote tourism within the city, hands out more than \$180,000 a year in grants supporting events developed by other organizations.

The center's idea to turn to the tourism money came after the center learned the commission would help fund Bikes, Babes & Bling, a motorcycle festival set for the Fourth of July weekend.

"So we said, 'Can't we go forward and see if we can get some money?'" said Rector, 29.

The group asked for \$10,000. The commissioners granted the group \$4,000 to help pay for advertising and marketing of all the month's events. The money is given as a reimbursement for expenses.

"June's always slow," said Maudie Schmitt, a member of the Fayetteville Advertising

and Promotion Commission and a local restaurant owner.

All Out June organizers hope to attract somewhere in the neighborhood of 2,000 to 3,000 people to the parade, block party and other events planned for next weekend.

"And if they start spending money down there, that's a win-win for the city," Rector said.

'Worthy of Consideration'

In concert with the fun of All Out June is a gay rights organization whose mission is broadening gay access to marriage and adoption, as well as allowing gays to openly serve in the military. All these issues are controversial.

In Arkansas, only 18 percent of adults support full legal marriage rights for gays, according to the 2009 Arkansas Poll conducted by the University of Arkansas. Nationwide, 39 percent of adults support full legal marriage for gays, according to a 2009 poll by the Pew Center for People and the Press.

The Arkansas Poll surveyed 754 Arkansas adults statewide, 18 or older. The poll has a 3.5 percent margin of error. The Pew Center poll was conducted in August 2009 and surveyed 4,013 adults. It has a margin of error of 3.5 percent. Both polls were conducted via telephone through both land lines and mobile phones.

Gay people — regardless of their platforms — are residents in Fayetteville, making them worthy of consideration by the city's advertising and promotion commission, said Robert Rhoads, a city alderman who serves on the commission.

"There are black people in Fayetteville. There are Hispanic people in Fayetteville. There's all these people, and there are gay people," Rhoads reasoned. "They live

and shop here, and I guess that was sort of my thought process."

"It was not, 'Let's do something special for the gay community.' It was, 'They're citizens of Fayetteville like everyone else,'" he added.

"I really don't have an issue with any of it, myself," said Mayor Lionel Jordan, speaking during the May 10 commission meeting after an unsigned letter was read denouncing All Out June. The writer claimed to be a Fayetteville restaurant owner, saying, "I don't feel that my restaurant customers would approve their restaurant taxes being used to promote this event."

All Out June organizers said the NWA Center for Equality's nonprofit organization tax status puts it on par with any of the other nonprofit groups petitioning the commission for money.

"Technically, every 501(c)3 has something that they're advocating for," Rector said. "If a nonprofit is not advocating to make their community a better place, they're probably not doing their job," Willits added.

"And that's why during this month, it's more about the education side, rather than trying to push views on people," Rector said.

Seal of Approval

Government and quasi-governmental bodies attaching themselves to at-times controversial organizations or causes has been done before.

"It's not unusual that governments do it, and it's not unusual that it raises an eyebrow," said Janine Parry, associate professor of political science at the University of Arkansas.

"It's not at all unusual for government to sponsor the activities and interests of some groups more than other

groups. We have civil rights commissions all over this country," she added.

And perhaps because of this government sanctioning, the groups generally become less controversial over time, Parry said.

"Civil rights in the 1960s were hotbeds," she remarked.

But does the funding for All Out June put the commission on a slippery slope if another ideological advocacy group comes calling for money for a local event?

"I guess it isn't a slippery slope as long as the group is in compliance with a city's stated values," Parry said.

Diversity of Support

Marilyn Heifner, executive director of the commission, said no one had a second thought about funding the Gay Pride events.

"Their money spends just like anyone else's," she said.

Gay Pride events in Conway received \$1,600 in sponsorships from computer giant Hewlett-Packard, which has manufacturing operations in the city, said John Schenck, one of the lead organizers of Conway Pride. Schenck added he intends to approach the Conway Chamber of Commerce next year for support.

"We were really excited," Schenck said of the Hewlett-Packard sponsorship. "This was lots more than what I was expecting."

Supporting and growing Pride events has residual benefits for a city's image, gay activists said.

"By supporting a Pride festival, you're not just bringing in dollars for one weekend. You're giving your town an image of diversity," Willits said.

Fayetteville's always been sort of a funky place that

embraces a lot of diversity," said Brandon Karn, a member of the Fayetteville Advertising and Promotion Commission, and an owner of a downtown coffee shop. "And I guess I see

the gay pride event as more of that."

"This is a monthlong family friendly event that's going to bring people to town," he added.