EDITORIAL

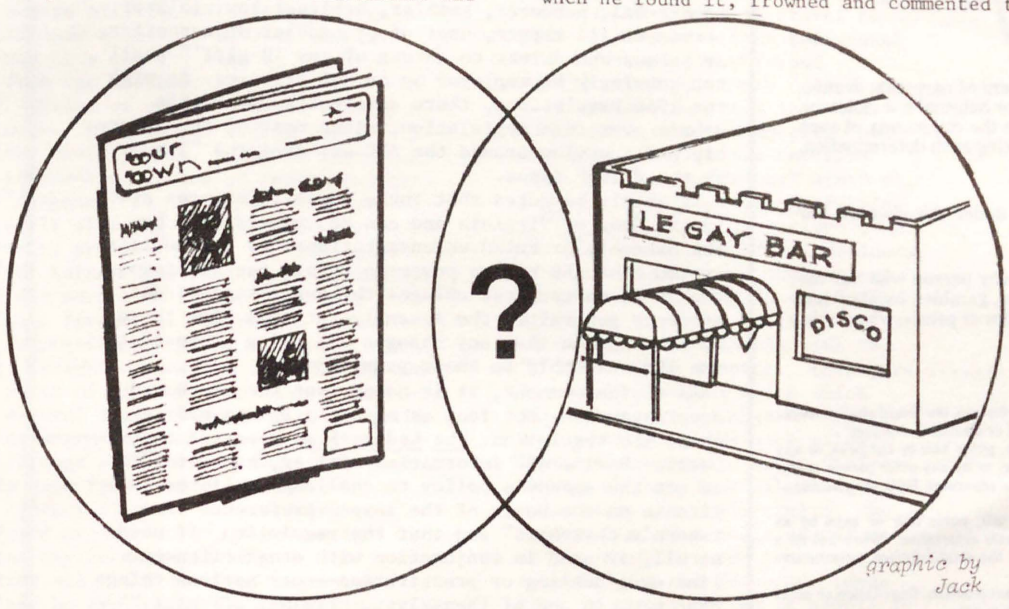
Gay Bars and the Gay Press

What should the relationship be between gay bars and the gay press? All the subleties of this question became very apparent to Our Own during the week before the last issue was published. That issue contained an article reporting on an incident of police harassment concerning the Oar House. The information on the incident was called in by one of that bar's owners to Our Own on the night it occurred, which happened to be during the last weekend of that issue's production period.

Several days later, while the paper was still at the printers, the Oar House owners had second thoughts and requested to one of our staff members that we "pull" or not print the story. Along with their request went a strong suggestion that if we ran the story they, along with the other gay bars, would not distribute copies of the paper they received, would dispose of them, and, further, would pick up copies from other distribution points. Since this seemed so incredible, the owner of one of the other gay bars in the city was contacted concerning this matter. He replied that the local bar owners, although they had met that day to discuss the harassment of the gay bars, had not discussed whether Our Own should run the story or any action to be taken in that event. He further added that he was not against running the story and would not support any action against the paper's distribution.

The next evening the editor of Our Own talked with two of the Oar House's owners. He asked why the Oar House wanted the story pulled. The reply was that the bar owners' group needed some time to investigate the causes of the harassment and to try to stop it quietly. Further, a Virginian-Pilot reporter had been asking all the bar owners about the harassment, but none would go "on the record" with him. The Pilot would have to therefore wait for Our Own to print the story (making it public record) before it could report on it. Although not discussed, it was concluded that the Oar House would naturally prefer its name kept out of the city paper, since it would likely be labelled as a gay bar. This might jeopardize the establishment's daytime business. (During the day it is by appearance a straight restaurant and all newspapers, flyers, posters and anything "gay" are put away).

The editor also asked the owners if there would be any consequences against the UUGC or the newspaper if it ran the article and if the Oar House would stop advertizing in the paper. Their position had apparently changed and the answer was "no" to both these questions. In addition the text of the article was shown to one of the owners, who agreed that the article was not inflammatory or sensationalistic and that it didn't even say that the Oar House was a gay bar, but they still asked that it not be printed.



graphic by Jack

Our Own therefore found itself between the proverbial rock and a hard place. It had to try to sort out all the confusion, all the conflicting versions of the "truth," and all the ramifications of the question of running the story. For a newspaper of limited means, this is not a decision to be taken lightly. Practically, the bars are a source of about half of the paper's advertizing revenue. (The paper already costs each month about $200 more than it makes). Of greater importance, about one third of each month's copies (out of a circulation of 2000) is distributed at the local bars. This is therefore a very important means of reaching people in the gay community, and for those who only go to the bars, it is the only, or at least most convenient means of obtaining the newspaper.

On the other side of the decision, the side chosen, were the concerns about being dictated by the bars what we could print, the paper's loss of integrity if it submitted to censorship by the bars, and our responsibility to alert the readers to the harassment that had occurred, the laws that enabled it, and what to do if involved in future incidents of harassment. To address this last point, a special supplement was printed to accompany the November issue, informing people of their rights and how to act with the police if questioned or arrested.

One additional complication to the decision worth mentioning was the pressure on us by a Virginian-Pilot reporter as to whether or not we were running the story. (They wanted to know so that they could, in their article, give specific details of harassment). We did not know the Pilot's approach on the story and even considered the possibility of their story igniting, with the help of local Bible bigots, a backlash against the gay community. We decided not to tell the Pilot of our decision to run the Oar House story. They would find out, along with everyone else, on the Friday night the paper came out. As a footnote to this exchange, the Pilot decided it could wait no longer and ran its story on that Friday morning, without any specific references to incidents of harassment and without mentioning the Oar House or any other gay bar. Parenthetically, the article did make a neutral reference to Our Own as "a local 'gay' community newspaper," which was the first time the Virginian-Pilot has acknowledged our existence.

We published the November issue of Our Own without knowing if it would be distributed by the bars or what repercussions, if any, would follow. We are pleased to report that most of the bars distributed the paper as usual. We were naturally especially interested in the Oar House's response. They received their normal 50 copies and we do not know their fate. We do know that the supplements were removed from those copies and were being distributed separately. If they "ran out" of the first 50 copies, then those people did not get the flyers. In the following few days another 50 copies were given to the Oar House, and they requested additional copies the next week. For lack of better information, we have to presume that the copies were distributed. We do know that when the initial 50 copies were brought to one of the owners, he flipped through one copy, looking for the article, and when he found it, frowned and commented to our distribution person, "I thought we asked you not to print it."

All this is preamble to my original question: what should be the relationship between gay bars and the gay press? The paper already states, in the masthead every issue, that its goal is to print news of interest to lesbians and gay men, particularly in Tidewater. The bars are, of course, businesses, but serving the gay community does not have to be incompatible with the goals of making money. And if the bars are serving the gay community, with a real concern for the welfare and treatment of gay people, then they probably would not have occasion to concern themselves with trying to influence the gay press.

Norfolk's gay community is still young, and there is much that needs to be done to reach out to those people who are still closeted. The bars can help by lending their support to the local gay groups in Tidewater that are working actively toward those goals. In some cities, the local bars have certain nights during the month (comparable to our local 15¢ or 25¢ draft nights and usually not on a weekend) on which a nickel is tacked onto each drink, with the proceeds going to the local gay community center or related cause. The customers don't mind this extra charge on an individual basis, but it can become significant to a gay group.

Another avenue of support would be for the bars to subsidize the gay hotline. It has already been documented that about one third of the average monthly total of 500 calls are for bar information; supporting financially the hotline seems a very logical action, with gains all around. Of course, ads in the newspaper also help the process of reaching out to people. And in the long run, efforts like the newspaper and the hotline, if they can help more people in "coming out" and learning to be comfortable with themselves, it also means more people who would be comfortable in interacting with other gay people. From a business sense, this likely translates to more people coming to the bars. In addition, ads or donations are, in one form or another, deductible business expenses, making such steps even more palatable.

These are just a few examples of what the bars can do for the gay community. Other ways can be thought of to suit special situations, ranging from the Oar House's chartered bus to the March on Washington to efforts to change the discriminatory ABC laws. The recent police harassment, the anti-gay editorial in the Virginian-Pilot, and the continuing attacks by the likes of Jerry Falwell should make it clear that progress for the gay movement will not be easy and we have to work together.

National Convention Project Started

The 1980 Presidential elections are a year away and the nominating conventions are not until next summer, but, in the aftermath of the March on Washington, efforts have already begun to organize gay participation in the national political process. These efforts are in the form of a special project initiated by the Gay Rights National Lobby (GRNL) that is known as the National Convention Project. The project's goal is the inclusion of a gay rights plank in the platforms of both the Republican and Democratic parties at their conventions.

In an article in The Blade GRNL Executive Director Steve Endean stated that "the platform plank is a precondition for getting a gay civil rights bill through Congress. We can't realistically expect to get one until at least one of the major parties is committed." Endean sees local participation as essential to the project's suecess and added, "that's where we're going to have our greatest impact and make our political power felt. If we're going to do it successfully, we're going to do it in partnership with strong and effective local organizations. It can't be done from the top down."

Accordingly, GRNL and the project's two coordinators, DC activists Mary Spottswood Pou and Tom Bastow, are already planning written material and training sessions to help local groups through the complex delegate selection process, and the coordinators will meet with local organizations all over the country.

Of the two parties' conventions, reception of a gay rights plank is expected to be more likely with the Democratic Party. That party's delegation is defined to have a 50% men, 50% women ratio, and feminists have traditionally supported gay rights. In addition, Boston's Gay Community News (GCN) has reported Carter aide Jane Wales in saying that the White House would view "with great sympathy" a gay rights plank. Another candidate, Jerry Brown, is also said to have "strong willingness to have a gay rights plank included in the 1980 Democratic Party platform."

Efforts however must begin at the local level and the three major roadblocks are not unexpected ones. First, the National Convention Project is budgeted at $120,000. Funding is expected to come from foundation grants and an extensive direct-mailing campaign. Second, local candidates or delegates may fear political consequences for endorsing gay rights, and third, candidates may have their own homophobia to combat. These are formidable hurdles, but coordinator Bastow is optimistic. "I think we have a reasonable chance of success," he is quoted in GCN, "but it won't happen if we don't work."

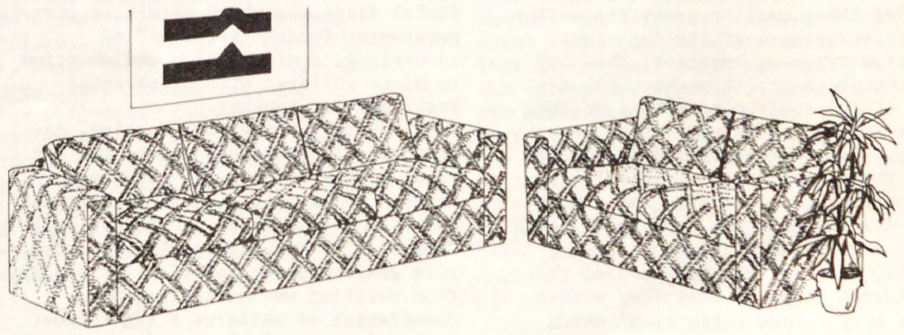
Sofa Sale

SOFA Reg. $456. NOW $299.00
LOVESEAT Reg. $355. NOW $249.00
QUEEN SLEEPER Reg. $588. NOW $399.00

POPULAR FABRIC IN STOCK,
TAKE HOME TODAY OR FREE DELIVERY

AVAILABLE IN CHOICE OF 50 OR MORE FABRICS AND COLORS

MATCHING CHAIR Only $139



DECORUM
301 W. 21st ST. NORFOLK • CORNER OF LLEWELLYN
ACROSS FROM SEARS • 623-3100 • PARKING LOT IN REAR

OPEN EVENINGS UNTIL 8:30
THRU DEC. 24