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# OutSmart

Houston's Gay & Lesbian Monthly Magazine



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- HIV-Infected Patients Feel the Effects of a Medicare Cap •
  - Gay Issues in the 76th Texas Legislature •
  - Comic/Actor Jason Stuart Tells Almost All •

# KREWE *of* OLYMPUS

## -Mardi Gras, Texas Style

by George Rimmey

**B**ack in 1970 the Krewe of Olympus established itself by hosting one of the first gay Mardi Gras balls in New Orleans. Although heterosexual Mardi Gras balls were in existence for hundreds of years, it was unheard of for a gay group to host such spectacular feats.

There were several straight krewes in New Orleans that carried an almost sacred allure. Their members were carefully selected and highly restricted. Many of them, not wanting to upset the status quo, held very quiet balls with plain or simple costumes. However, the Krewe of Olympus, fighting convention, was one of the first gay krewes to use rhinestones and feathers, putting them in a class of their own.

Ben Jones joined the Krewe in New Orleans in 1974. His life partner Bill Walters joined in 1978. Their interest in the Krewe and its growth became an intrinsic part of their lives. When Ben and Bill moved to Houston in 1980, they continued to rent an apartment in New Orleans so they could return and continue full participation in the Krewe's activities. But in 1991 the Krewe of Olympus suffered from a dwindling membership. Many of its members left the city or suffered from the effects of AIDS in the community.



Reigning King Denise Martin and Queen Weldon Hickey 1999

The Krewe was down to just three members when Ben and Bill effectively moved the Krewe to Houston in 1991. Their leadership since has increased membership to more than 60 members and massive events at the Edwin Hornberger Conference Center, with more than 800 members in attendance.

The first Houston ball was held in 1992 at the Ramada Inn Northwest in its grand ballroom. Nearly 20 members dressed in elegant and fabulous costumes for the show's 250 guests. A convention for the Goat Ropers, in town for the annual Houston Rodeo at the time, were having a conference in the room next to the Krewe's pageant. It wasn't long before these rough and ready cowboys sensed something strange was going on, and it was impossible to stop them from crashing the party. The members' vim, vigor, and enthusiasm excited everyone, and the first Houston Mardi Gras show was off with a bang.

The Krewe of Olympus ball is a tableau, meaning it is a theme-costume presentation by the members and requiring black-tie attire for the guests. Each year the theme is unique. There is no charge for admission to the ball; guests must be invited by a member of the Krewe.

Each year a "captain" is elected by the membership.

The captain's authority over the ball is absolute. He determines the theme, picks the king and queen, and determines the table arrangements and seating assignments. Every member gets 10 invitations. However, the captain can increase the number when a member gives extra effort and work. The captain's table

## TIMELINE 1973-75

Each month OutSmart will feature sections of the Houston gay history timeline as featured in the January issue.

**1973** Political unity within the gay community began to crystallize when the **Houston Gay Political Coalition (HGPC)**—led by **Billy Walker, Chuck Berger, Bob Osborne, and Randy Thomas**—entered onto the political stage. Calling the former **Hope Mission for Alcoholic Women** building at 504 Fairview its home, HGPC was organized to provide such basic needs as legal council, to educate parent groups, and to provide other services lacking within the gay and lesbian community. And although HGPC did not draw much support from other community groups, it appeared before City Council twice in May, when it demanded a halt to job discrimination and police harassment. It also demanded that a liaison group be established with the police department and that the **Human Relations Council** recognize gays as a minority group. Refusing to take action, **Mayor Louis Welch** walked out during the second Council meeting "on the pretext that he had to greet visiting Japanese mayors."

**1974** **Henry McClurg** founded the news publication **Contact**, which had distribution nationwide despite its deep Houston roots. And although it may have only published 17 issues before being absorbed by **The Advocate** in 1975, it served as the catalyst for a myriad of other news-based publications geared to inform, empower, and unite Houston's gay and lesbian population.

**1975** **The Pointblank Times**, founded in March by **Linda Lovell** and **Alison McKinney**, was the city's first lesbian periodical. Although snubbed by many of its surrounding peer publications, the *Times* addressed feminist and lesbian subject matter until it encountered financial difficulties in 1978. Big-business lesbians continued their growing pres-

ence in the community, including top-notch **Marion Pantzer**. With her partner, she opened the lesbian bar **Just Marion & Lynn's**, where many patrons flocked to hear lesbian poet **Judy Grahn**. The event was a mere highlight of the many cultural events held at the bar. During the mid-year, though, politics took over from the social scene.

**The Gay Political Caucus (GPC)**, borrowing its name from the **Women's Political Caucus**,

announced its formation at a press conference. Leading the GPC's efforts was **Integrity's Jerry Miller, Reverend Robert Falls**, the first pastor of the newly formed **Metropolitan Community Church of the Resurrection;**

**Pokey Anderson**, lesbian community representative; **Hugh Crell; Keith McGee;**

and **Bill Buie**. (Certain accounts also recognize well-known homosexual activist **Ray Hill** as a co-founder of GPC.) The caucus' demands included the introduction of new legislation prohibiting discrimination against gays in the workplace and the right for gay couples to jointly file tax forms. A major issue for the caucus, however, was the repeal of Article 21.06, which classified the act of sexual intercourse between two individuals of the same sex, even private, consensual contact, as a class C misdemeanor and now punishable by a fine of up to \$500. Look for *OutSmart's* May issue, where we will spotlight certain historic events that helped to strengthen Houston's gay and lesbian community during 1976-1978.

—Steve Poruban

*Timeline provided by the Houston Gay and Lesbian Community Center and Steve Brown of the Botts Memorial Library of MCCR. Research obtained from "Twelve Fighting Years" by Bruce Remington.*



**Pokey Anderson**

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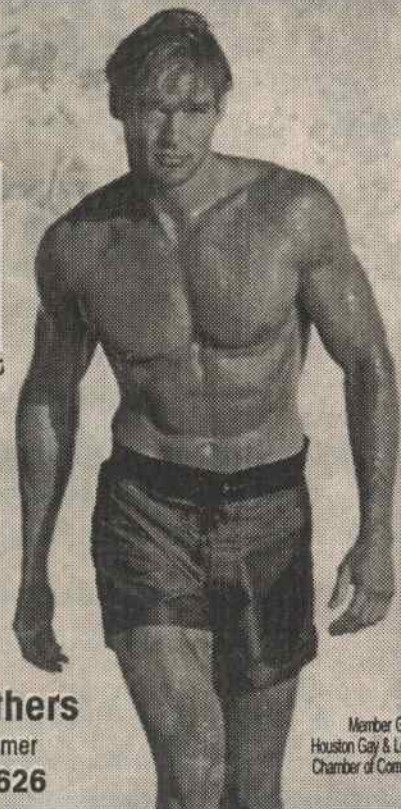
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seats about 50 and is reserved for his friends, event underwriters and sponsors, and community leaders; it is a great honor to sit at the captain's table.

Since the ball's theme changes from year to year, guests come prepared for surprises. At the beginning of the ball, the king and queen present themselves to the guests and walk the length of the ballroom showing their fabulous costumes. After they take their seats of honor to reign over the ball, members come out in resplendent costumes in accordance with the theme, some worth nearly \$3,000. (We all know rhinestones and feathers do not come cheap.) They too walk the length of the ballroom, and the throwing of the beads begins. Members throw out beads to guests, who scurry to get as many as they can. Attending the Krewe of Olympus Ball is like going to the Belle Arts Ball in Paris!

During the ball, a collection is taken for designated community charities, and guests respond with an outpouring of donations. In a matter of minutes, thousands of dollars are collected. Last month during the Krewe's "Games People Play" Ball, \$16,000 was raised for AIDS services and gay-oriented organizations such as the Thomas Street Clinic, the PWA Holiday Charities, and the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard. Past recipients have included Q Patrol and Pet Patrol.

Sands Stiefer, this year's captain, stated, "The purpose of the Krewe of Olympus is not only working toward increasing needed monies for charities in our community but also to preserve and extend the traditions of the gay Mardi Gras ball."



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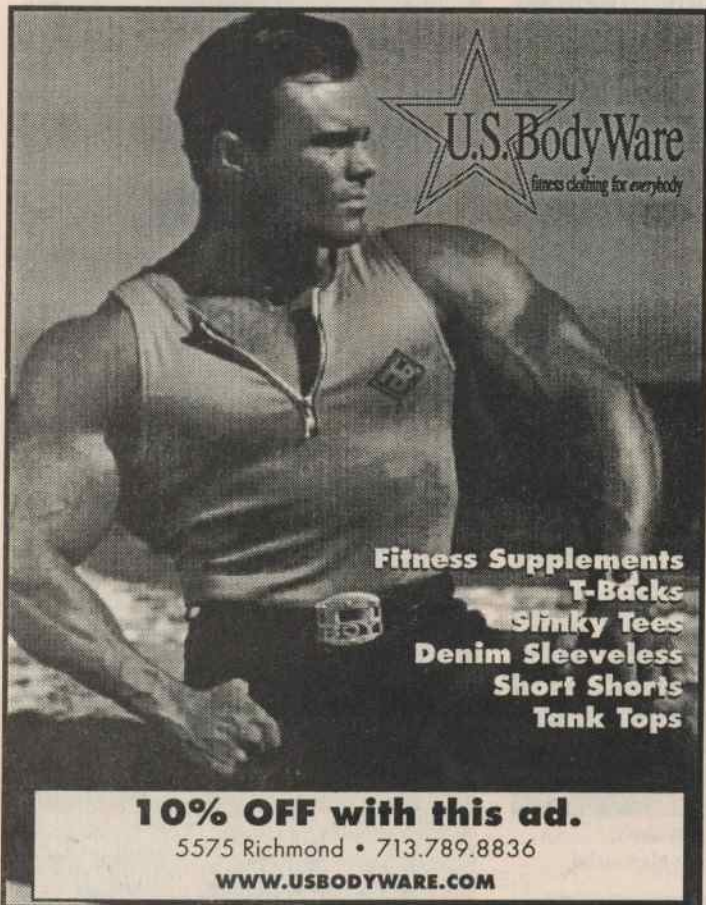
Since members pay for their own costumes, three fund-raisers are held throughout the year to raise money for the ball's expenses, including the hall rental. Any money raised in excess of the expenses is also donated to the ball's designated charities. The three fund-raisers are the Fais Do Do Party, the Bastille Day Party, and the 12th Night Party.

The Fais Do Do Party (country) is always in October, and it is a Cajun Festival. Zydeco music rings out, and there is Creole food like Houston has never seen. The French-style Bastille Day Party is in July. It is a celebration of freedom which features a headless Marie Antoinette cutting and serving cake, and leather-clad executioners monitoring a guillotine.

The Krewe also hosts the 12th Night Party, in recognition of the Feast of the Epiphany held on the 12th night after Christmas, which marks the beginning of Mardi Gras season. The Krewe of Olympus gives an elegant cocktail party on that day.

And speaking of cocktails, Briar Patch's own Wayne Gray takes full control of the bar activities at the balls. Many of the guest ball bartenders are leading members of our community, and are at the splendid mercy of Gray's training. The ball is always followed by a cast party at the Briar Patch.

Krewe members make up a delightful team, with no motivation other than to provide entertainment to a grateful crowd. Their efforts are strictly for the enjoyment of their guests. In fact, none of the members sit in the audience to view the show, making the Krewe of Olympus a unique group of men and women, both gay and straight of all minorities, a constant pleasure to the party eye.



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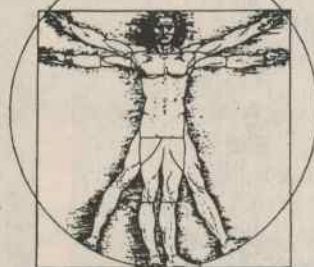


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