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6 27 04

PRIDE
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Revelers display pride at parade as rain relents

By JUSTIN GEST
Houston Chronicle

With the threat of wet weather behind them, thousands of people danced and cheered Saturday as colorful floats and decorated cars made their way down Westheimer for the Houston Pride Parade — an annual event celebrating gay civil rights and culture organized by the Pride Committee of Houston.

Though the dark sky threatened, it never delivered the predicted heavy rains.

Parade organizers and police had been concerned that last week's deluge would spill over onto the parade and spoil the party.

"All we know is that Mother Nature is a lesbian," said Nick Brines, president of Pride Committee of Houston. "I was very worried about the weather all week."

The enthusiastically flamboyant revelers, however, were able to dance, shout and strut down a dry parade path, albeit to a crowd slightly smaller than last year's 150,000 people.

Brines said the parade also celebrates the strength and diversity of the city.

"We are a very large community that is a part of Houston and a part of Texas, and we want people to know that we are their neighbors, their siblings and their friend," he said.

"This parade shows people a wonderful side of the gay community and says what we believe in — that we are all human beings," said emcee "Kofi," an employee of Charles Armstrong Investments by day but in drag Saturday night.

With the growing legalization of same-sex marriage in certain parts of the nation serving as a political backdrop, many participants emphasized their desire for equal marriage rights while others remembered that Saturday marked a year since the U.S. Supreme Court declared Texas' anti-sodomy laws unconstitutional.

A limousine filled with recently married couples — many of them wearing tuxedos — rolled down the Westheimer parade route.

Before the parade began, drag queens demonstrated their feelings about President Bush's stance on gay-rights issues. The colorfully dressed queens held an effigy of Bush as Dolly Parton's song *Go to Hell* was played on the loud speakers.

Among the more notable participants marching were U.S. representatives Chris Bell and Sheila Jackson Lee of Houston and Mayor Bill White.

White's participation, according to a spokesman, reflected his support for diversity.

"The mayor recognizes that there is a political connotation to (his involvement in the parade), and that there is a large constituency (of homosexuals) here in Houston," said White's spokesman, Frank Michel. "That doesn't mean that he agrees with every person and any group he appears with."

While parade organizers were thrilled to have White join in the parade, others had hoped the mayor would make a stand on gay rights issues, particularly with respect to his partisan leanings.

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Photos by Christobal Perez / Chronicle

Rosa Gonzalez with Montrose Counseling Center/ H.A.T.C.H. throws beads to the crowd during Saturday's Pride Parade.

basis of sexual orientation.

Most other floats used an array of colors and creative designs to emphasize unity among Houston's homosexual population, often with the financial support of a corporate sponsor.

One eye-catcher was the Chase Bank float, which incorpo-

community."

Holiday Inn's float featured a hotel queen-size bed at the top and the statement "We are committed, are you?" on the side.

"With this being the first year that gay culture has really been a part of mainstream culture, the parade emphasizes the



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"You want to win people over, like in a presidential campaign," said Kofi, who came dressed in a black, knee-length, poly-crepe skirt with a rainbow shawl and matching 3-inch heels. "It is in the interest of any community that may suffer from discrimination."

The pageant celebrated the cultural identity of the city's homosexual, bisexual and transgender population but made its political underpinnings plain.

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While parade organizers were thrilled to have White join in the parade, others had hoped the mayor would make a stand on gay rights issues, particularly with respect to his partisan leanings.

"The problem for me is the lack of a backbone of people in the Democratic party on this issue," said Randall Ellis, executive director of the Lesbian Gay Rights Lobby of Texas in Austin. "This is the civil rights issue of our generation, and to not take a side is wrong. He is doing a disservice to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual movement."

The LGRL float, in particular, colorfully advocated gay marriage and criticized employer policies that discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.



Photos by Christobal Perez / Chronicle

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One eye-catcher was the Chase Bank float, which incorporated a Western theme of haystacks, an oil derrick spraying raindow hues, cowboys, a mock Dolly Patron and futuristic male dancers.

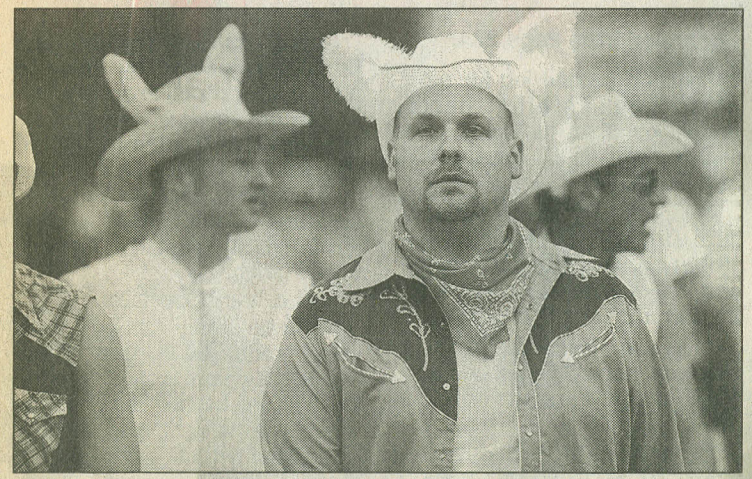
Raúl Díaz, an assistant vice president at Chase, said the company spent more than $12,000 on its involvement in the parade. "Our customers are gay too," Díaz said. "We are telling them that we want everybody's business. I am openly gay. Chase accepts me and assists in the community."

Holiday Inn's float featured a hotel queen-size bed at the top and the statement "We are committed, are you?" on the side.

"With this being the first year that gay culture has really been a part of mainstream culture, the parade emphasizes the strength of the community," said pride committee volunteer Rob Caballero. "Equality is always a theme."

Rachel Hollis, 23, of Katy attended the parade for the first time with a group of friends.

"I've never seen anything like this before. They shouldn't be ashamed to be gay," said Hollis. "(Homosexuals) don't usually get to show who they are in Katy. Today they can be proud."



Brad Brandt walks to his "Bunnies on the Bayou" float with friends before the start of the parade. Over 130 entries, including floats and marching units, rolled in the event's 26th year.