

Gay Generations

Houston's old- and new-guard activists debate substance, style and the terms of compromise

Houston
Press
6-24-93

BY STEVE MCVICKER

FOR YEARS IN HOUSTON, the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus was the only voice for this city's diverse gay community. More recently, some gays and lesbians have decided that it's time to shout louder and longer.

Ray Hill is sitting in a booth at a Montrose coffee shop having Sunday afternoon breakfast. He holds court as he eats, answering a reporter's questions and greeting other diners who stop to say hello to Houston's best-known and most often quoted gay activist. Hill's once-black hair is now mostly gray, and his girth is considerably wider than it was when he and a few friends initiated the gay political movement here in 1975. Eighteen years as the city's highest-profile homosexual have not lessened Hill's commitment to his fight for equality but, by his own admission, have mellowed his approach to activism.

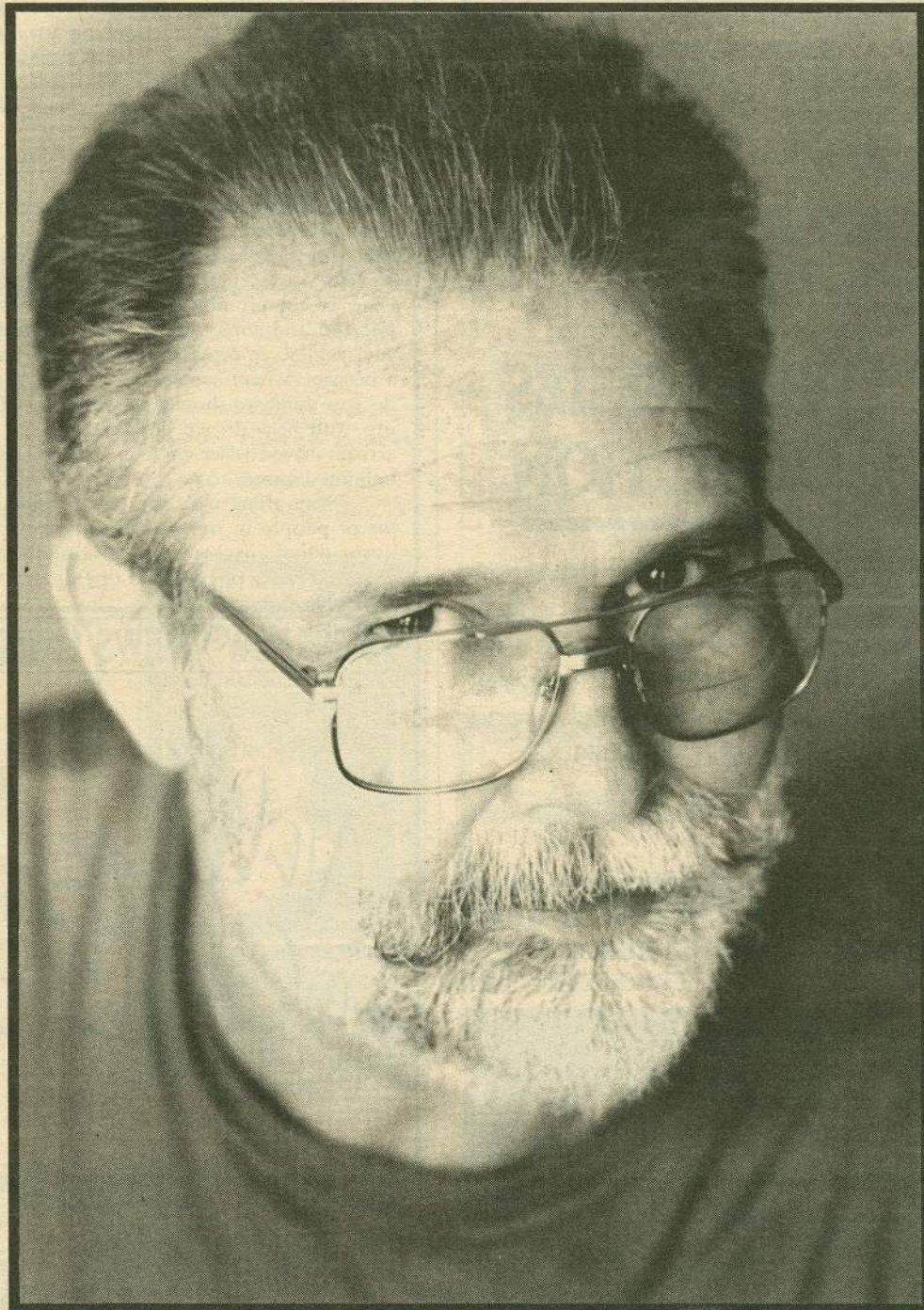
In 1975, after serving prison time for burglary, the Galena Park High School graduate returned to Houston and helped found what is now the GLPC. Given the number of times he has spoken before City Council or has been quoted by the local media, it's surprising to learn that Hill served as president of that organization for only one one-year term, in 1989.

"We started out ignorant as lambs," says Hill. "The caucus doesn't rise and fall according to the personalities of its leadership. The caucus rises and falls according to the perception of the general public of its power. We were hitting on all cylinders until the [failed] 1985 gay employment referendum in the city. That took wind out of our sails, and we went on a downward swing that continued, really, until '89. During my presidency is when we stopped the [membership] numbers' decline, rounded the corner and started back up again [to the current mailing-list of about 14,000]."

"I think all of that is in spite of my presidency," laughs Hill, who could be called the elder statesman of Houston gay politics. "I'm the old man. They have to listen. They don't want to. No young activist wants to listen to an old activist. But they have to listen because I've got gray hair and I've read all the books. But time changes and activism changes."

But not fast enough to suit some in the the gay community.

THE GLPC HAS BASICALLY TOLD us to sit down and shut up — "We know what we're doing, you're just a bunch of obnoxious kids," says 24-year-old Michael Crawford, formerly with the now-defunct Queer Nation, a group, along with the still-viable Gulf Coast ACT UP (with



HERESA DIMENNO

"No young activist wants to listen to an old activist," says Ray Hill. "But they have to listen because I've got gray hair and I've read all the books."

about 50 hard-core members), known for its confrontational methods. The slender firebrand activist — who somewhat resembles Spike Lee's Mars Blackmon — is probably best known for chaining himself to a support beam along the frozen food aisle of the Randall's supermarket on Wesleyan and screaming obscenities at a company representative during a protest against Randall's alleged discrimination against homosexuals. Crawford's contempt extends to what he describes as the "homosexual establishment," including peo-

ple such as current GLPC president Chris Bacon.

"In my opinion, Chris is so overly eager to compromise, he is ineffective as a leader," says Crawford. "And if he's not going to be effective, then we don't need him. I am not willing to compromise in terms of my civil rights. End of discussion. I think Chris Bacon and the GLPC are so concerned with not offending heterosexuals that they are not doing anything to advocate our rights. They play this kiss-ass brand of politics that"

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hasn't gotten us anywhere. They are just cozying up, and are too busy sucking the asses of heterosexual politicians to advocate for us in a way that we need to be advocated for. As I see it, rather than kissing the asses of people like Bob Lanier and Ann Richards, we should be kicking their asses because they fail to do anything about the AIDS epidemic."

Confronted with Crawford's sentiments, Bacon offers no apology for the way in which he and other members of the GLPC go about their brand of activism.

"It is true," says Bacon, "that the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus tends to use more traditional political devices to change the system. We screen candidates. We have push cards [listing the GLPC's endorsements] at elections. We lobby. We do a lot by writing letters, making phone calls. We do far less in terms of public demonstrations, civil disobedience."

Part of the reason for that, says the bespectacled, Ivy League-looking attorney, is that the battle lines are not as clear as they once were, now that such politicians as Ann Richards and Bill Clinton are in their respective offices.

"It's a lot easier to take issue with a Reagan or a Bush," Bacon says, "when it's clear they are on the opposite side, than when you have an elected person who's really on your side. They basically bring you to their table, and so you actually have to deal with the issues of compromise. That's a lot more complicated and sometimes more troubling for gay and lesbian activists, because we're put in a position where someone says, 'Okay, what do you think we should do with AIDS funding, and how do we get the money?' You actually have to face the issue that there isn't unlimited money to go 'round."

"Same thing with gays in the military. A lot of people in our community were very upset when [Massachusetts congressman] Barney Frank, one of two openly gay con-



TERESA DIMENNO

ACT UP and GLPC member Terri Richardson: "Most of our very worst critics are in our own community."

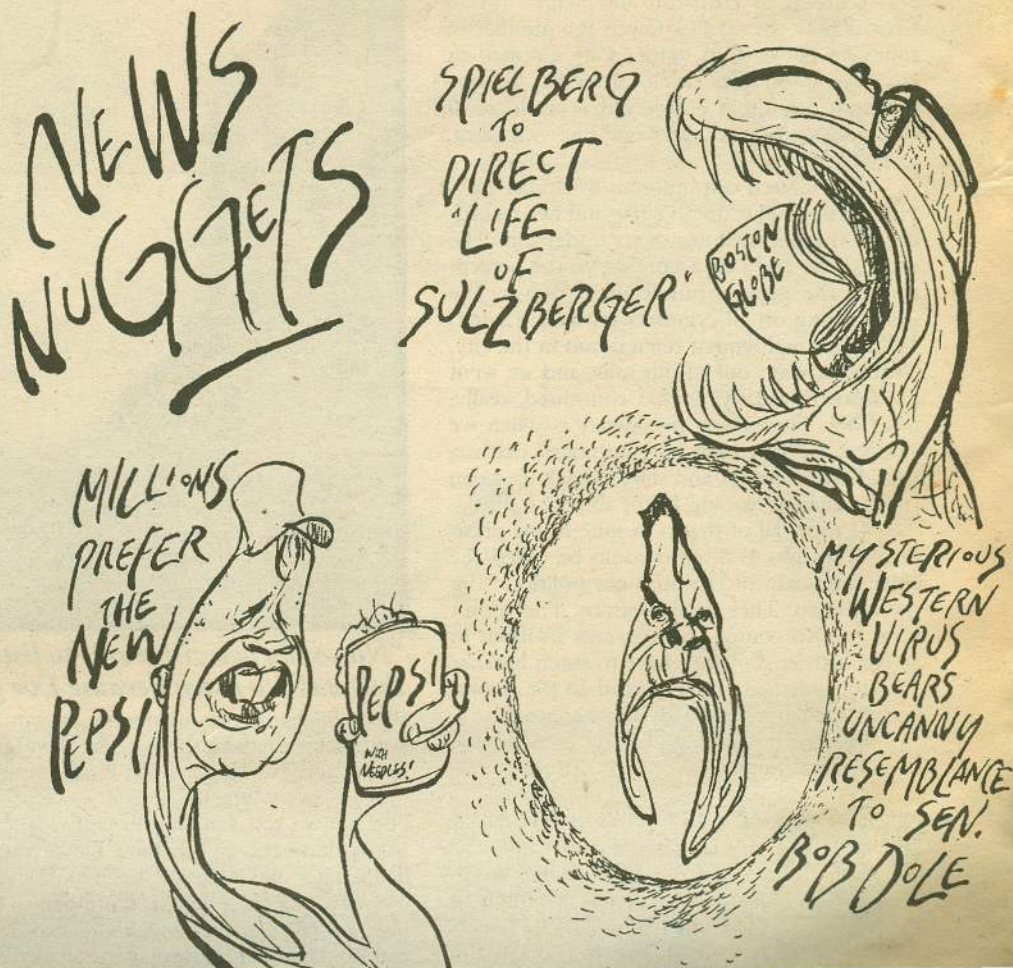
gressmen, proposed a compromise of his own. A lot of people said, 'We can't compromise.' And yet, it was a realistic compromise. He felt he had to have some compromise on the table or else we would never get anywhere with [Georgia senator and Armed Services Committee chairman] Sam Nunn.

"I think the politics of realism makes it a lot more uncomfortable. When the enemies are clear and you have the empire of darkness on the other side, we can all sort of jump and scream and holler. I think that is where there is probably some division in our community."

Gulf Coast ACT UP member Terri Richardson, who also serves on the board of the GLPC, believes that the gay and lesbian

TOMORROW'S NEWS TONIGHT

BY STEVE BRODNER



community is better served by the existence of the two factions, which she thinks actually complement each other. She also believes ACT UP gets a bad rap, not only from straights, but from gays and lesbians as well.

"Frankly, some of our very worst critics are in our own community," says Richardson. "They don't understand what we're about. All they see is the end result — which is us picketing. There's a need for street activism. There's a need for demonstration and protest. Some people, they don't get it."

Scott Lewis, who was involved with protests over the gay-bashing death of Paul Broussard near a Montrose bar two years ago, agrees, and makes a "good cop, bad cop" comparison between the two types of activists.

"Queer Nation being out in the street, and GLPC being the lesser evil, [politicians think] 'We need to meet with the queers,

because we want this media attention off of us but we don't want to meet with Queer Nation. So let's call GLPC, because they're the men in suits, and they'll sit down at the table and they'll be rational,'" says Lewis. But Lewis also sees a darker side to that comparison. "And that is 'good queer, bad queer,' which a lot of the leadership in this community tries to play: 'Give us our civil rights because we're the good queers. Now these guys who want to be openly gay in public, those are bad queers.' I think by doing that, they are giving up the main goal of this movement, which is the freedom to be blatantly gay — equal, not special."

For ACT UP and Queer Nation activist Brian Bradley, who suffers from HIV and is co-grand marshal of this year's Gay Pride Parade, there is not much time or room for compromise.

"I'm almost always willing to compromise," says Bradley, who is less active these days because of his declining health. "But I won't negotiate basic principles like discrimination. There's just no room for compromise on that. Because on the fifth of June, that marked twelve years of AIDS

in America. And in that twelve years I and others have asked for, we've requested, we've hoped, we've fought, we've paid for, and largely have gotten nowhere with that. I don't have twelve more years. I don't have half of that left. So I don't have the willingness to wait or be patient. I'm tired of it. I'm going to be dead and gone one of these days."

AS FOR RAY HILL, ALTHOUGH he no longer has the energy or drive of a young zealot, the desperation of the situation is certainly not lost on him and others of his elder activist generation.

PRESS BRIEFS

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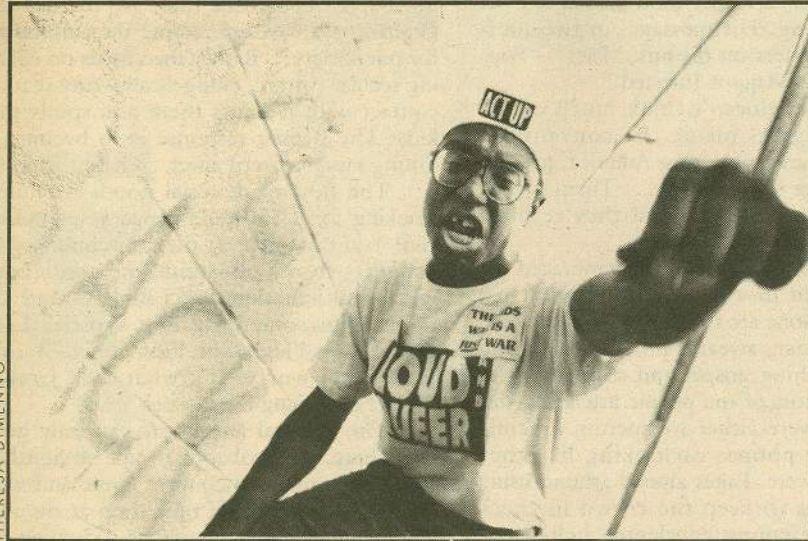
June 24 to decide whether to divide itself in two by forming a new group that could qualify for federal, state and private funds. The board appears to be leaning toward this amoebic route, so that the Alliance's checkered past can be buried. **MICHAEL SPRINGER**, the Alliance's executive director, thinks this option is "accomplishable" and wouldn't jeopardize the \$2.6 million in federal funds the Alliance now receives. The advantage of starting over is that a new group could pursue grants without being burdened with the questionable bookkeeping and embattled image the Alliance gained during last year's wrestling match with county government over the Ryan White funds. An audit and other reports cast aspersions on the way the Alliance was administered, and Springer fears that will decrease chances for other funding. State officials, he said, have been encouraging about the possibility of creat-

"My anger has dwindled down to a precious few," Hill admits. "I'm tired of seeing people die. I'm pissed off about that. My anger about discrimination and all that — I've gotten a callus where there used to be a sensitive point. Even grief, which used to be this acute sharp pain, is now this kind of dull chronic ache, because I've seen so much death. You can't help but be angry about that. And these young people's lives are at greater risk than mine. I'm an old, settled, out-of-the-'60s, marrying kind of queer, and young people are not that. Young people have to suppress their sexual instincts in the interest

ing a new AIDS community group. "The Alliance has been severely handicapped by its history. We've been trying to save the Alliance," Springer said. "But one thing I can't do is rewrite history." If the new group is begun, the old Alliance will continue for as long as is needed to wind up its accounts. What this all could mean for the future of AIDS funding in Houston and Harris County remains to be seen....

AT THE MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR recently deceased astronaut **DONALD "DEKE" SLAYTON** Saturday at the Johnson Space Center, the one and only **BILL "MY NAME JOSÉ JIMENEZ" DANA** was one of the speakers and eulogizers. Dana assisted master of ceremonies **ALAN SHEPARD** and came up with one of the few humorous lines at the memorial service (a tough crowd, perhaps?) when he suggested a way to finance the congressionally troubled space station: "Put the whole thing on a Visa card, say you lost the card and then you only have to pay 50 bucks."

—D.J. WILSON



Theresa Dimenno

Michael Crawford: "I am not willing to compromise in terms of my civil rights. End of discussion."

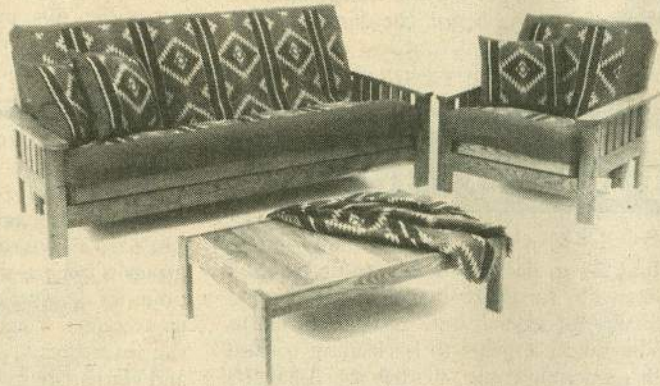
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of their personal safety. That creates a lot of internal stuff that I don't have to put up with."

True Believers

Baptists target gays, abortion

BY SHUM PRESTON

TRAVELING PREACHER Darman McKinney stole the spotlight at last week's national Southern Baptist Convention. He parked his black school bus smack in front of the George R. Brown Convention Center and set about testifying. His message, in two-foot-high yellow letters on his bus: "Fact — Baptist Doctrine is Maggot-Infested."

McKinney doesn't think much of the 17,886 delegates inside the convention. "Them dogs are corrupting America, preaching the gospel of prosperity.... Them greedy dogs won't even preach 'til they've been paid."

The gathered Baptists have embraced the modern world in ways that McKinney just can't stand. Gone are the days of Minnie Pearl hats and greasy, sweaty, polyester-wearing pastors preaching gospel and damnation 'til they drop. Most of the people attending this convention were either whispering urgently into cellular phones or looking like they wished they were. Pages zipped around using walkie-talkies to keep the crowd in check while sincere young gentlemen belted out Michael Bolton-style Christian power ballads as a "Ministry of Music." The SBC's Radio and TV Commission ringed the stage with gigantic video screens so that preachers could be seen from everywhere on the floor.

Houston pastor Ed Young dominated the internal politics of this convention. Texas' answer to the Dalai Lama was re-elected without opposition to lead the national association of 38,000 churches and 15 million people.

Young used this pulpit to set the tone for the convention's external politics. The Reagan-Bush glory days are over, ending the Washington insider status of the Religious Right. The Baptists still seem a little stunned. "We need to stop short of the type of political activity [of the past]," Young said, and focus on "clear-cut moral issues."

There are exactly two such issues, as the Baptists see it: ending abortion and ending homosexuality. This year for the first time, gays edged out abortions as the top moral evil. After an "open" lesbian was elected in his city, "Jesus wept like a Negro," declared Los Angeles pastor Edward Hill. "Why can 300,000 homosexuals march on the nation's capitol?" asked columnist Cal Thomas. Resolutions were passed urging homosexuals, and gay-friendly Bill Clinton, to repent.

This homo-revulsion helped spur a growing Baptist consensus that, as preacher Jack Graham says, "we are...losing the cultural war for our society." Rather than focus on changing secular culture, evangelicals worry that any contact with it taints them and spoils their kids. The Baptist response is to become, as Young says, "a breed apart... a holy nation."

The flow of material goods is endless. Looking for a \$50 gold-plated Jesus bola-tie clip? You can get it at the convention or the national network of Baptist bookstores. Looking for an imitation-Gucci Bible carrier? Got it. Perhaps something in a sportier Lycra model, or a "Jesus: the First Surfer" T-shirt? Don't you worry. It's what Jack Graham called "packaging the Gospel."

The cultural autonomy can only go so far. There will probably always be Southern Baptists listening to country music and wearing Gap clothes while they shop at the mall. There will probably always be sodomites and feminists and heathens shopping at that same mall. TV's favorite weatherman and Baptist, Willard Scott, thinks that something other than confrontation and hatred could come out of that situation. "It's a new world, and it's tough on me," he told this reporter in an exclusive interview, "but God is love, and love is pure.... Let's just love each other and let everybody do their own thing in private." Now *that's* a sunny disposition. □

No Bull

by Michael Fry

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