

The Queer Nation Craze begins

Queer Nation started March 20 of this year in New York, when a word-of-mouth meeting of a couple of friends — "all longtime members of ACT UP," according to one of the founders, Alan Klein — turned up 60 people. The name "Queer Nation" came from "something [activists] had been saying for a long time" — an underground or joke name of sorts which had only been used officially once, a few years ago, by an ACT UP affinity group. "It just stuck and we used it for the group," explains Klein.

Currently 400 people attend the bi-monthly meetings in New York and break into 15-20 different "working groups," each to plan their own action on some current act of anti-Gay violence or homophobia.

With a mission as "the new Lesbian and Gay direct action group dedicated to fighting homophobia and Lesbian and Gay invisibility," and without anyone in charge, Queer Nation in New York can be anything individuals plan.

Other cities have different (although similar) missions or statements of purpose, and each city struggles with itself to develop its own way of making decisions.

Most of the Queer Nation groups engage in similar projects such as visiting traditionally heterosexual nightclubs and shopping malls for non-confrontational visibility; "zapping" or showing up at homophobic institutions (e.g., religious groups aimed at "saving" Gay people, and music groups promoting Gay-bashing); holding Take Back the Night Marches, where queers march through and "reclaim" areas of frequent Gay-bashings; and monitoring city streets at night for Gay-bashers through highly-publicized vigilante patrol groups.

Direct actions galore

Toronto's 150 Queer Nation members have been busy since they formed July 22 through a rally in sympathy with Montreal's severe crackdown by police on Gays and Lesbians. They became the top story on all the TV stations when they drowned out evangelical minister-turned-candidate Reverend Ken Campbell at a candidate's forum, and blocked the TV monitors with posters stating, "Queers Are Here, Get Used To It." They addressed queer students at the University of Toronto and other campuses with posters asking "Are You Enjoying Your Orientation" above the now famous "Kissing Doesn't Kill" poster by Gran Fury for the Chicago Buses of two same-sex couples kissing. And they "crash[ed] that party" when Reverend Jerry Falwell jointed his Toronto equivalent in Campbell on Friday, September 14. They also plan to travel to Ottawa with Montreal's Lesbians and Gays Against Violence in October to demand that sexual orientation be included in the Federal Bill of Rights.

In Los Angeles, the 35 members of Queer Nation have helped dump Miller beer with ACT UP, picketed to highlight homophobia in the entertainment industry, and visited the Beverly Center shopping mall and Hard Rock Cafe — which they announced with flyers stating, "We're Here, We're Queer, and We're Going Shopping," a take-off on ACT UP's chant to gain seriousness that they are "here, queer, and not going shopping." Plans include protesting the city council for the lack of open recruitment of Gay police officers.

The three actions in Providence, Rhode Island have focused exclusively on politicians who voted against their recently-defeated Gay rights bill. With a diversity of age and men and women, and with top billing on news stations, Queer Nation of Providence is feeling successful.

Boston traffic lights and subway stations are routinely plastered with graphic images of Gay and Lesbian sex acts, as members of the Queer Nation



PHOTO BY TOM FLINT

The March

Art Brigade visit city streets after taking over a heterosexual nightclub. Wheat-pasting posters and spray-painting led to the arrest of one member. Boston is also planning a Queer Fair in a traditionally Lesbian and Gay area of the Jamaica Plain neighborhood.

Similarly, in San Francisco, Queer Nation has staged numerous kiss-ins, picnics, and frolics in major tourist areas such as Pier 39. Hundreds of members have visited shopping malls through their Suburban Homosexual Outreach Project (SHOP) and marched in the street, with actions staged at least once and sometimes twice a week.



PHOTO BY TOM FLINT

A storefront at Sea Tac.

How confrontational can we be?

Already, groups are debating how confrontational they can afford to be. In Providence, members who are also involved in lobbying for the Gay rights bill have voiced opposition to actions which might alienate legislators.

And, in Detroit, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Gay men may not be ready for a Queer Nation. "In Michigan, a lot of people are very closeted...and are opposed to joining groups," explains Snell. "I've had a hard time getting a chapter going." Additionally, Snell's vision of a Queer Nation is quite different from that espoused in New York. Snell plans to "try to keep it organized without a bunch of radicals running around" since "no one in town likes the Detroit ACT UP" leader. Snell is currently negotiating with the Gay/Lesbian lobbying group, the Michigan Organization of Human Rights to take on some of that group's activities. "I think sometimes ACT UP goes too far: sometimes they step over the bound-

aries, ruffling too many feathers."

And in Los Angeles, members disagree on whether to be less noisy and confrontational than New York and ACT UP/LA, according to member Bill Faulkner. Acknowledging his personal preference, Faulkner states, "If I would have been in New York, I would have probably been dropping out now" because of New York Queer Nation's loud disruptions of anti-Gay religious groups.

In LA, the disagreement is less between the radical vs. moderate queer activists, and instead falls along lines of angry vs. New Age thinkers. Faulkner and others try not to respond out of anger, following their New Age spirituality, *A Course in Miracles*, and their belief system of radical faeries. In order to continue planning actions, LA has "shelved for the moment" any discussion of how confrontational to be.

Queer? To be or not to be

Similarly, taking on the title of a "Queer Nation" is a difficult issue for some groups — particularly in those cities where members of Queer Nation represent a broad spectrum of ages and political alliances. More moderate voices in the communities often oppose the use of a term which historically has been used to denigrate Gay men and Lesbians.

For instance, Ann Sanders, Boston mayor's liaison to the Gay and Lesbian community, has come out strongly against the appropriation of an anti-Gay slur, "queer." Indeed, one of the organizers of Boston's Queer Nation, Gary Daffin, was himself against the use of "queer" but was willing to go along with the popular sentiment.

"Even the big mainstream...organizations (NGLTF, GLAAD-NY, NYC Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights) have all come out in support of us," one of New York Queer Nation's founders, Alan Klein, told us. "Some of the political caucuses, too — they've all been helpful... and supportive of the activities of Queer Nation as long as they are non-violent." In particular, larger organizations have supported the Take Back the Night marches and anti-violence patrols.

But Alice Foley, a 58-year-old Lesbian who is not part of an organization, and who has been out since the 1950s, disapproves of the group's name: "We worked real hard for years and years and years to have people not call us queer." In the '50s, she heard Gay-bashing (and murders) excused "because he's just a queer, only a queer, what else do you expect with a queer." I have no need to go backwards to that. I've been there. I didn't like it." Foley worries that "by using that terminology, [Queer Nation] is giving the people permission to call us that."

In contrast, "We disarm homophobes by taking away their weapons"

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