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NYC LGBT Center Celebrates 34 Years of Garden Party

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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Way back in 1984, LGBT New Yorkers realized a dream when they opened the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center on West 13th Street at the edge of Greenwich Village and Chelsea. That same year, Executive Director Irving Cooperberg launched the Garden Party, an event to bring the LGBT community together to raise funds and awareness about gay rights.

"Everyone was very tongue-in-cheek about the 'garden' part of it, but they liked the concept of an outdoor summertime event," said longtime volunteer Robert Woodworth. "In that first year people like Edie Windsor helped decorate the Center with foamcore flower cutouts, and we held it in the first floor of the

building with a very simple buffet."

The event was soon moved outside, and 13th Street was closed off, with entertainment on a stage in front of the building, local community groups and box lunches. Donors contributed to a youth scholarship, and volunteers organized services for the 600 attendees.



The Imperial Court

"We used to start planning it in January and meet every week until June," said John Seidl, a Garden Party Steering Committee member in charge of staffing the guest entrance. "It was initially staffed by people who worked on the Dance Committee. The idea of bringing in restaurants manifested because a volunteer started signing them up."

Few elected officials participated back then. Woodworth remembers the year Mayor Ed Koch came to celebrate Stonewall being designated a historic site. Executive Director Glennda Testone noted that, "For some of these elected officials, it is one of the first times they are ever addressing the LGBTQ community en masse, and it's a great opportunity for

people to meet folks they may not have met in person and have a real conversation with them."

Early guests included the philanthropic organization Imperial Court of New York, who would arrive fully decked out in their regalia to sell raffle tickets.



Sen. Tom Duane

Performers included the Gay Men's Chorus of New York, the Lesbian & Gay Big Apple Corps, Stonewall Chorale and the Lavender Light Gospel Choir.

The Garden Party was later moved to the nearby Seravalli Playground, and comedian Kate Clinton was installed as the emcee, introducing a roster of performers and the occasional elected official like Senator Tom Duane. In fact, it was at a Garden Party event in 1995 where the City Council, borough president and mayor dedicated funds to renovate the Center.

"I was honored to be asked by my dear friend, former Executive Director Richard Burns. I was onstage emceeing and noticed an

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older couple leaning out their window overlooking the fun," recalled Clinton. "I waved to them and told everyone they were my mom and dad. The couple smiled and waved back to the crowd. They were all our parents for the afternoon. They were there and part of my routine for years. We were all sad the year they were not there."

Before too long, the Garden Party grew beyond what the schoolyard park could accommodate. It was moved to the West Side Highway, first at the crumbling former Pier 54 in Chelsea and later to the sprawling lawns of Pier 84 in Hell's Kitchen, where it has been held for the past several years.



Focus Changes Over the Years

While the Garden Party began as a way to bring LGBT New Yorkers together, eventually it evolved into an important fundraiser for Center services. It morphed from a block party to a bona fide event, and ticket prices rose accordingly.

"From a purely pragmatic viewpoint, we made the effort to keep the ticket price as low as feasible. But that doesn't mean it's cheap for everyone," said Woodworth. "The economics are no longer going to allow for a \$5 ticket. A lot of work goes into it, so if it doesn't raise money for the Center, it's not a useful event."

Longtime volunteer Max Szadek said that the attendance provides "a snapshot of the gay community, but what's intriguing now is that it attracts the plus-30 crowd. So much of the men's community is geared toward the younger crowd, but you can come to this event in your business suit and not feel out of place. It has a more sophisticated edge to it."



Another thing that changed was the focus of the event. Over the years, it morphed from an entertainment-based model that had people crowded around the main stage for the bulk of the evening to a food-based tasting event that allowed for mingling.

"After 15 years of doing things the same, we were looking for ways to keep it interesting," said Woodworth. "There was a growing emphasis on foodie culture at that point, and people loved it. It was a great way for LGBT-friendly and -owned restaurants to come and showcase their dishes."

Years went by, and Center volunteers were largely replaced by corporate volunteers - in many cases, by the LGBT affinity groups from large financial corporations that sponsor the Garden Party. The bulk of the work was also outsourced to a production company, which handles tent setup, food vendors and other logistics. Seidl also recalls the "real magilla" they encountered in the old days, when they used to mail tickets out beforehand rather than provide them at the door.



Raven Symone and her entourage

As the event garnered more prestige and the LGBT community gained more visibility and rights, the event attracted bigger names and sponsors with very deep pockets.

"The event is now able to attract a lot of influential people and prominent politicians," said volunteer organizer Daniel Ian Smith. "And since the event attracts major donors and VIPs, it's become an important stop for many people. Among that crowd are elected officials and a lot of corporations. That really has changed the texture of the event: People are falling all over themselves to be sponsors so they are seen as supportive of the gay community."

Szadek said that as large corporations take on more of an LGBT advocacy movement, they are eager to send corporate volunteers to staff the event.

"Part of their Pride is being able to be out in their corporation, and they come back every year to volunteer and give their LGBT corporate group a chance to do team building," said Szadek. "That's an amazing change, if you think back to how the Garden party started."

A Kickoff for Manhattan Pride

Traditionally held the Monday of NYC Pride Week, the Garden Party is viewed by many as the kickoff to Manhattan Pride. Early volunteers like Seidl said that even if he wasn't working the event, he would buy a ticket to attend.

"It's part of Pride, a major holiday that straight people don't have," said Seidl. "When I go there, I see the



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same faces every year, so it's like going home to visit my family of choice. It's truly the kickoff of Pride and an immovable date on my calendar."

"People have come to respect it as a sacred day over the years. It's like Pride itself: a great tradition that has grown," said Woodworth. "When you think how it started - from the ragtag Christopher Street Liberation Day march up Sixth Avenue in 1970 - gay Pride has deep roots in the community, and this event is an annual reflection of that."

Smith said that while he's in the Pride spirit from June 1st on, the Garden Party gets people revved up on Monday for a week that ends with Sunday's Pride March.

"They enjoy this kickoff to Pride, and the whole food-tasting idea plays very well with the successful foodie base and that sophisticated crowd," said Szadek. "It's different from big 'beer blast' events, a little more cultured and refined than a pier dance, and both men and women appreciate that. There is an elegance to it."

The Future of the Garden Party

They say the only constant is change, and eventually that will come to the Garden Party as well. Recent events attracted 1,400 people and raised more than \$225,000 for the Center, and those numbers are certain to increase as the event goes on.

"The Garden Party is now in its 34th year, so it's one of New York City's long-standing Pride celebrations," said Testone. "It's a kickoff to Pride and signals that Pride week begins."

The event raises funds for all Center programs, including the recently launched programs addressing critical needs for

women and economic empowerment, poverty in the transgender community, substance abuse in youth and services for LGBT immigrants.

"The Center depends heavily on donors, but not all are huge donors - a lot give at modest levels, and this is a celebration of them," said Woodworth.

Some longtime volunteers would like to see the Garden Party go back to being a thank-you party for LGBT donors. Others realize that raising funds for the Center has a larger impact than just throwing a party.



State Sen. Brad Hoylman and his husband

"We decided the best way to serve the community was to raise money for the Center, as opposed to it being a celebration for those involved," said Smith. "So we raised ticket prices and really tried to cater to a crowd that would be donating money. The goal has become to make sure the Center is able to provide services. It's one of their top annual social events, and it's a celebration of Pride and a great kickoff to Pride week."

For Szadek, keeping the Center programs like addiction recovery and support thriving is paramount. As he notes, "It's an important resource in our community, and it's so great to be able to give back to it. New York City can be extremely overwhelming, and people can come to the Center to find

community."

Most people seem to enjoy the foodie aspect of the event, but many also said they wished the event had a larger entertainment aspect, with Szadek reminiscing about the year that Broadway star Christine Ebersole performed songs from "Grey Gardens."

Some even called for a repeat performance from the old emcee, with Testone saying, "I miss Kate Clinton too! Maybe we can call for a guest appearance next year?"

But all are united in feeling that the Garden Party is a very important touchstone in the history of NYC's LGBT Pride events and an ideal way to celebrate NYC Pride Week.

"Let's get some food and fuel and inspiration, and go into the week of Pride activities, and be connected with each other," said Testone. "People love dancing, eating and drinking at this celebratory event that benefits a good cause."

For information or tickets, visit www.gaycenter.org/gardenparty

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Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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