

## ACTIVISM

# International Conference on GLBT Rights

## Anti-Gay Violence, HIV/AIDS on Agenda

BY GLEN ELDER

**M**ontreal was the center of the queer universe this summer. Becoming so, however, was not easy. A disagreement between the holders of the Gay Games franchise and the Montreal 2006 Gay Games organizing committee two years ago prompted a parting of the ways; whereby Montreal decided to host their own games without the backing of the international organization. The result was that the Gay Games were held in Chicago, and the First World Out Games were held in Montreal a week later. Now it is clear that this is not a long term sustainable solution. There is no point to having two enormous events both of which aim to bring together gay and lesbian athletes from around the world.

What was interesting to me, however, was that part of the struggle between both organizations was related to the number of participants who should be allowed to register and whether the event should have an intellectual and political component attached to it.

Montreal organized, alongside the Out Games, The International Conference on GLBT Rights which was held July 26-29, a few days before the official opening of the Games.

The conference was an opportunity for human rights activists, lawyers, academics, and politicians from around the world to come together and assess, at a global scale, the progress made, opportunities lost, and possible future roads to take.

Conference participants attended five plenary sessions (North America, Latin America, Asia Pacific, Europe, and The Middle East/South Asia) featuring a number of internationally-renowned keynote speakers, and were able to choose from at least 200 workshops (40 simultaneously during each of five workshop sessions), which dealt with the many aspects of the five Conference themes: Essential Rights, Global Issues, the Diverse GLBT Community, Participation in Society, and Creating Social Change. The Conference also featured two "sub-conferences" (Workers Out! and Out for Business!), and a series of workshops (Out in Sport).

For me, the highlights were many, but included hearing from Archbishop Gene Robinson, from the U.S. and also the first openly gay Archbishop in the Anglican Communion; Edwin Cameron, the first openly gay and HIV positive Supreme Court Justice from South Africa; and Georgina Beyer, the first transsexual in the world to be elected to national office as a member of the New Zealand Parliament.

Perhaps one of the more contentious moments at the multilingual and translated event occurred when some participants from Canada and Europe sought to pass a resolution condemning Israel in support of the Lebanese delegates who were unable to attend and made presentations from Beirut by way of live satellite hook-ups with the sounds of bombs in the background. While the motion ultimately failed, it was also a stunning moment wherein it became very clear that global geopolitics and GLBT human rights are deeply interconnected.

Delegates were reminded that in the last few

months, two young men were accused of sodomy and hung in Tehran, the streets of Moscow became a battle ground earlier this summer when a Gay Pride turned violent and bloody; and by the end of this year, South Africa will enter into the community of proud nations that extend the rights of marriage to gay and lesbian citizens.

Sobering for me was how quickly I came to realize how parochial GLBT struggles in the U.S. had become, while at the same time, U.S. foreign policy was exacting a huge toll on GLBT politics in a global context. The Lebanese, for example, argued that they were unable to articulate a Human Rights language in the Middle East anymore because contemporary U.S. foreign policy had hollowed out the term there so that most viewed the language of Human Rights with cynicism and mistrust. Ugandan delegates bemoaned how the current U.S. administration had hijacked their "Abstinence, Be Faithful, and Condomize" campaign to deny straight and lesbian African women access to HIV drug cocktails, abortions, and reproductive health care.

The unresolved questions in my mind are these: Have domestic U.S. GLBT politics ceded international questions completely, at what cost, and why? These questions prick the conscience because they beg the following: If U.S. foreign policy impacts the lives of GLBT people around the world, why are GLBT people here in the U.S. completely silent or unmoved?

In response to this silence, global queers are not sitting around. Coalitions of queers have emerged out of the World Social Forum, an annual meeting held by members of the anti-globalization movement to coordinate world campaigns. These meetings have been held in Venezuela, Mali and Pakistan, and early next year another meeting will be held in Nairobi, Kenya. Out of these meetings, and now working from Ecuador and South Africa, the South-South Dialogue has begun to formulate a queer response to economic globalization and the commodification of gay and lesbian identity. Interestingly, gay and lesbian marriage is not on their agenda. What they are concerned with are rising HIV rates amongst queer brown women around the world, violent and rising rates of state-sanctioned forms of homophobia, and confronting the United Nations to demand action.

At the close of the conference, the Declaration of Montréal was discussed and passed. The goal is to present this Declaration to the United Nations and to national governments, in order to mobilize unequivocal support for GLBT rights.

And then the Games began.

Troubling questions remain about the wisdom of two large GLBT events - the Out Games (now scheduled for Copenhagen in 2009) and the Gay Games (scheduled for Cologne in 2010). But what was very clear in 2006 was that the meeting in Montreal was designed to be political, whereas the meeting in Chicago organized to avoid asking broader political questions.

My ticket is booked for Copenhagen. ▼

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