

Behind the Scenes at a Lesbian Festival



Photo by Sage Russell

WOW Productions-Aliza Ansell (l) & Diane Morgan (r)

Sage Russell

The first Northampton/Amherst Lesbian Festival was an accident. It came about because Aliza (Zizi) Ansell, a Northampton weaver, wanted to organize a crafts fair that would feature the work of local lesbian craftspeople. She enlisted Diane Morgan and another friend to help, and from there it just took off. Before they knew it, they had produced a full-scale festival: 30 performers, 40 crafts-women, 30 helpers and the active support of the Northampton lesbian community. More than 1,000 people attended, and Zizi and Diane ended up with an organization: WOW Productions.

That first year they were barely able to keep up with the festival's demands. As Diane remembers it, "The fact that it happened as an accident and the fact that we were running to keep up with its momentum gave us the courage to go ahead and take each step and do all these things that we had never done before, basically because there wasn't time to think about being afraid. We just had to jump in and do it."

This year's festival has been an entirely different experience. In the year between the two festivals, they have come to think of WOW Productions as a business, one which they want to continue full-time. Zizi says, "Because this year was a deliberate choice, we've been up against our

doubts and fears as women much more than last year...This year it's been much more about the sense of empowerment and the sense of choice, to choose a business, and the amount of choice that women have. There have been a lot of issues that we've talked about that have made this year far more challenging on the personal level than last year. And I think that because we want to do this full-time, we want to eventually just be WOW Productions, it's been about believing in ourselves. There are days when we look at each other and we say, 'Are we doing this?'"

The festival celebrates the strong Northampton women's community by featuring local performers and craftswomen. It is entirely produced, performed, and crafted by women who are willing to acknowledge themselves publicly as lesbians. This year there are about 20 performers, 45 craftswomen, 4-5 food vendors, and even two political candidates on the scene. Locating and hiring an eclectic mix of local and outside performers is the job of Zoe Lewis, herself a performer at the festival, who gets "a free rein and a confusing budget."

Not all the food vendors are lesbians because Diane and Zizi were unable to find enough lesbians who wanted to sell food

at the festival and had the required Massachusetts food vendor's license, a situation they want to rectify for next year.

As a one-day event held in a public place, this festival is different from an event like NEWMR (North East Women's Musical Retreat) or Michigan. It is for lesbians, friends, and allies, so you don't have to be a lesbian, or even female, to attend. Zizi and Diane see this as one of its major strengths: a powerful opportunity to increase lesbian visibility and pride and educate straight people. Says Zizi: "Last year there was a feeling like when you're at a Gay Pride March - people just happy to be visible and not scared of who they were. But this time it wasn't about marching for their rights. It was about their art and their culture, which is something the straight world really doesn't have access to. It was right out there, and people were invited in to see what we were about."

Diane adds, "There's definitely a strong dyke presence, but we're not turning anybody away. Anybody who wants to learn can come...(This is not) to undermine the power of an all-lesbian event, an all-women's event. Those are crucial and needed and very important. But this being a one-day festival, we thought, 'Well, OK, this is the place. Another day a year when they're going to see the dykes.' Rather than just the Pride March once a year. This is another day that this can happen."

Last year, the festival was held on the Amherst town common; this year it's at UMass. While Diane and Zizi are sorry to lose the extra visibility that being right in the center of town provided, UMass offers lots of advantages. Chief among them is a rain location. The festival is so tightly budgeted, at about \$15,000, that they can't afford to cancel.

The UMass campus is also accessible, and this is another of the festival's major themes. Ensuring accessibility has been Diane's special project. "Last year we learned a lot about accessibility, and part of what UMass has to offer is a lot of accessible things. The land is flat. There are going to be interpreters all day. We're going to have the program guide available in large print, Braille, and on tape. We're trying to be sensitive to environmental illness issues, and we're