



National conference brings hope to St. Louis' hurting GLBT community

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by Colin Murphy - Senior Staff Writer

"We are proud that you have chosen our city for your national conference, and we are even more proud that a major reason for your choice was our City's record of support for our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender citizens. We extend open arms to those of you who visit us this week, as we embrace those of you who live and work here each and every day."

-Mayor Francis Slay, in his letter from the Creating Change program

Just eight days after the disappointing election of 2004 when conservative Republicans retained the White House, increased their majority in both houses of Congress and 11 states passed amendments banning same-sex marriage in their constitutions, St. Louis is set to host the largest convention of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) and allied activists Nov. 10-14.

The stage is set, the Millennium Hotel sold out, the volunteers trained and the welcome bags stuffed. Indeed, the much anticipated **17th annual Creating Change Conference sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) is at hand.**

"Actually everybody is very excited," said Carmen Rivera, co-chair of the 60-plus member Creating Change host committee along with fellow community leaders Mel Bramyn, Scott Emanuel and Vincent Flewellen. "The energy is great, everybody's looking forward; especially in light of the election results; just to really start creating change. I know the host committee is thrilled; everybody's like, 'Wow, after months of planning we're getting ready to pull out the red carpet and welcome all these people.'"

Creating Change is the nation's largest and most unique annual skills building and strategy conference of activists and organizers who work in the GLBT movement. Traditionally, between 2,000 and 2,500 people attend the conference from all over the United States and other countries.

"Creating Change is an amazing gathering of like-minded souls," added Bramyn. "How timely it is for us all to be together. The welcome mat has been rolled out. We wait eagerly for your arrival!"

St. Louis was chosen as host for many reasons, but particularly, according to the NGLTF, because of its record as "hospitable and welcoming" to the GLBT community. In 1992, the city banned discrimination in housing, credit, employment, education and public access on the

grounds of physical or mental disability, race, religion, family status and sexual orientation. In 1999, Missouri was the first state that year to pass a hate crimes bill that included sexual orientation, gender and disability. The bill also made Missouri the fourth state to bring transgender people under the scope of the law. And in August, St. Louis was the only major city to vote against Missouri's Amendment 2 which successfully banned same sex marriage in the state constitution.

In preparing to host 2,500 guests, the host committee has "exceeded expectations," according to the NGLTF, directed by St. Louis native Sue Hyde. More than 300 area volunteers have signed up and more than ample community housing has been provided in area homes for conference goers. Attendees at this year's conference will be provided with a St. Louis "Go-Guide" which features St. Louis attractions, restaurants, as well as an in-depth guide to GLBT businesses, bars and eateries, many of whom are offering discounts, specials and coupons to mark the occasion.

"When you look at housing and when you look at volunteerism, it really shows that the local St. Louis GLBT community and our allies have really stepped up and been available for this great conference," explained host co-chair Emanuel. "And I think that makes people feel welcome, personally. And I think that's what we expected of our community but when it actually happens it's really exciting."

Over the five days of the Creating Change Conference, NGLTF will present nine pre-conference institutes, about 130 workshops, keynote plenary sessions, video screenings, meetings, receptions, social events, and entertainment. It will also tackle the myriad of issues that the GLBT community faces today.

"What's really been key is working with the community," said Flewellen, the fourth co-chair of the host committee. "It keeps us focused and part of the mission is building an anti-racist movement and focus on socioeconomic justice. For me, that's key. I've been honored to invite as presenters about four to five black men and those are voices that are frequently left out of LGBT issues."

According to the host committee, Creating Change, in addition to being an economic boon for the Gateway City, also brings with it the literal potential to "create change." Historically, each host city's GLBT community has benefited from the experience in varied ways.

"I'm really excited it's here, but I'm also excited it's leaving because I can't wait to see the momentum and energy it brings to our area," said Emanuel. "I hope that a lot of locals will go through the conference workshops to get the skills and the training and really network with people so that when the conference leaves our community we can then come together and meet and build."

"I think it's so incredibly timely," offered Flewellen. "It's the first time we'll have a national gathering and it will be a great opportunity for our entire community to love one another in light of the election. It will galvanize our community."

The host committee would like to point out that while attending the Creating Change Conference is well worth the money, those wishing to volunteer at the last minute should feel free to show up at the conference. In exchange for a four-hour work shift, you may attend the remainder of that day's program free of charge.