

LEADING WITH

PRIDE

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Cindy Brown's close friends and family have known her sexual orientation since she was 18. But back in the '70s during the Anita Bryant era, being a lesbian wasn't something she wanted to broadcast.

In 1992, Brown joined dozens of others in successfully lobbying Miami Beach commissioners for a citywide gay-rights ordinance. After she spoke at City Hall, a news broadcast identified her as a "lesbian gay-rights activist."

"I consider myself one, but at that point in my life, I wasn't ready to have it on the TV," Brown recalled. "Now, I'm ready to wear it on a T-shirt."

*TURN TO CINDY BROWN, 6E

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LONGTIME ACTIVIST CINDY BROWN IS ORGANIZING MIAMI BEACH'S FIRST GAY PRIDE PARADE AND FESTIVAL



Saturday will be the perfect day for Brown, 47, to don her gay apparel — at the first Miami Beach Gay Pride parade and festival, for which she is operations director.

The nonprofit festival — proposed in June 2008 by Miami Beach Mayor Matti Herrera Bower and her gay-business development task force — will have floats, sky divers and two grand marshals, Patti LaBelle and fashion designer Richie Rich.

Pride-related activities, including the first Miami Latin Gay Film Festival, are planned throughout the week, culminating with the 21st annual AIDS Walk Miami on Sunday and the 11th annual Miami Gay & Lesbian Film Festival the following Friday.

It's been 11 years since anyone in Miami-Dade County mounted a full-scale Pride celebration, according to Brown, who since the early '90s has been a leader in most major gay activities here. She is a longtime AIDS and arts activist, a member of Aqua Foundation for Women and for several years has co-chaired the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Miami Recognition Dinner.

"I've always been the kind of person who wants to see us all together," Brown said. "Not the men's community over here and the women's community over there. Also, we can be great role models for the youth."

Brown believes that although gays and lesbians "have been really successful in mainstreaming ourselves" in South Florida, many have a false sense of security.

"I am educated and I've chosen to work in an area where I can be as out as I want to be. . . . I'll use the Post Office as an example: You can't come out because you have no protection by

law. It's not illegal to fire someone because they're gay."

Brown was born in St. Petersburg and moved with her family to Miami-Dade County at age 2. She graduated from Palmetto High School in 1979 and got an associate's degree in music from Miami Dade College. Later, she earned undergraduate degrees from the University of Miami in psychology and criminology.

"I wanted to grow up and be like Jodi Foster in *Silence of the Lambs*," Brown said. "What changed my mind was I realized I wasn't the type of personality to be a cop. It's a paramilitary organization. If someone gets in my face and yells at me, it isn't a good thing."

Instead, she became a mental-health therapist working in hospitals and nursing homes. "I liked it, but it was a very heavy type of thing. You were working with people who were not well."

She applied for a job at Health Crisis Network, the AIDS service agency now known as Care Resource.

"Cindy has this incredible energy that just radiates. It comes out through this most incredible smile and set of eyes," said Gary Keating, then the group's development director, who hired Brown as an administrative assistant.

"The more confident she got, the more people she knew. This remarkable personality had skills and brains that just kept blossoming."

Brown became well known within the South Florida gay community through her work with AIDS Walk and White Party, the big annual Thanksgiving-weekend AIDS fundraiser.

"That was the beginning of my whole shift," said

Brown, who until college hadn't even realized she was a lesbian.

"I didn't have a clue I was gay until I developed a major crush on this woman in college and had a dream about her," Brown said. "No wonder I never felt I fit in before."

Brown's mother and father quickly figured things out. "My parents realized I was gay because my girlfriend was spending the nights here a lot. They said, 'Why does she have to stay here so much? Are you gay or something?' Uh, yeah."

Now, Brown is a parent. For six years she has been foster mother to Nique, a young lesbian.

"She was 15 when she moved in. She lived with me until she was about 18½," Brown said. "It's not to say that it wasn't without challenges. We both made a very important impact on each others' lives. We are a family. She's my family."

Since early 2008, Brown has dated Michelle Simons, a massage therapist she met at a Miami-Dade Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce networker.

"I'm proud of her. One of the reasons I took the big leap for Cindy Brown is because she believes in what she does. It's an honor," said Simons, 40, who plans to move into Brown's North Miami Beach home.

"We're going to hold off until Pride is over. Once I have Cindy's attention again, we'll be able to focus on that," said Simons, who these days refers to herself as "a Pride widow."

Brown served seven years as managing director of Miami Light Project, a culture organization. In 2008 she started her own business, doing grant writing, fundraising and event consulting.

Her clients include Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center and Miami Light.

Detail organizing is what Brown does best. At a recent Pride meeting, she advised parade committee members:

- “We don’t want anything you’re handing out to create garbage on the street. . . . We want to leave Ocean Drive cleaner than we found it. We want the community to say, ‘Come back next

year.’ ”

- “Balloons can’t go above 14 feet because there has to be clearance. And make sure they don’t float away. They kill the birds.”

- “If there’s anyone in your booth who doesn’t want to be photographed, they probably shouldn’t be in the Pride parade.”

Babak Movahedi, president of the Pride board, calls Brown’s hiring “the best

choice we could make.”

“She is amazing,” said Movahedi, who owns the gay bar Halo off Lincoln Road. “Single-handedly she has been able to put Pride together. Obviously, she has great people working with her, but you need a great leader to put everything together and Cindy is a great leader.”



NISSA BENJAMIN/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

GETTING IT TOGETHER: Cindy Brown makes a toast with fellow organizers – from left, George Neary, Rick Hanley, Larry Harmon and Russ Root – at a reception in Miami Beach.

Miami Beach Gay Pride schedule

Events through Sunday include:

WEDNESDAY

- 7-9 p.m.: Miami-Dade Gay & Lesbian Chamber Networker benefiting Miami Beach Gay Pride; Shore Club, 1901 Collins Ave.; \$10.
- 7-9 p.m.: Panel discussion, 'How Arts Have Advanced Civil Rights and Social Justice,' sponsored by Cento Cultural Español and the Bass Museum; Bass Museum, 2121 Park Ave.

FRIDAY

- 7 p.m.: Opening reception for 'From Miami With Love,' hosted by Miami Design Preservation League; Art Deco Education Center at Historic City Hall, 1130 Washington Ave.
- 7:30-10 p.m.: 'Fruit Cocktail' comedy show benefiting SAVE Dade and The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force; Colony Theater, 1040 Lincoln Rd.; \$28-\$75.
- 8-10 p.m.: Exclusive shopping night at Kiehl's Since 1851, 832 Lincoln Rd.; 20 percent discount for gay pride supporters, free cocktails, 20 percent of sales to benefit Miami Beach Gay Pride.

SATURDAY

- Noon: Miami Beach Gay Pride Parade with floats; Ocean Drive from 5th to 15th streets (Ocean Drive closed to regular traffic).
- Noon-6 p.m.: Festival & Expo; business and community booths, vendors, plus a refreshment garden with food and music; Lummus Park, Ocean Drive from 12th to 14th streets.
- 1-7 p.m.: Main Stage Events; DJs, bands and announcements noon-2 p.m.; special performances by India and Fanny Lu, and Tea Dance 2-6 p.m.

SUNDAY

- 7:30-9 a.m., AIDS Walk Miami registration; walk begins 9 a.m. at Miami Beach Convention Center, 1901 Convention Center Dr.; benefits Care Resource.

For ticket and other information, visit www.miamibeachgaypride.com