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With Pride and Corsages, Gay Proms Reach Suburbs

By AL BAKER

SAYVILLE, N.Y. — It is getting to be prom time on Long Island, and like most of their peers, the young people deciding on decorations and music at the Island Hills Golf and Country Club here are looking forward to theirs.

They plan to hold a Friday night dance with a view through the windows of a moonlit golf course. They want to dress up, set virgin drinks on linen tablecloths in a mirrored ballroom and dance to their favorite CD's. And they want to be with someone special when the music turns slow.

Only here, boys will be with boys and girls will be with girls.

The dance is one of two gay proms scheduled on Long Island this spring that are each expected to attract about 150 gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and heterosexual students. The events — among the first of their kind on Long Island and organized independent of schools — are the latest in a string of similar celebrations to emerge from Seattle to Cleveland to New Orleans.

In big cities (Boston has had a gay prom for 20 years) and in

alternative schools (New York's Harvey Milk School has had gay proms since its beginnings in the 1980's) the idea is not so new. But in most of America, particularly the South and the Midwest and suburbia in general, the idea takes quite a bit of getting used to.

"These proms are establishing that there is a gay community in high school," said Kathleen C. Miller, a member of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, a group that helped sponsor the first gay prom in St. Petersburg, Fla., last spring.

But they also highlight the welter of emotions that surround gay issues for adolescents. Some parents violently oppose an accommodation for a sexual identity they reject, and others sympathize but are unsure whether impressionable adolescents are best served by seeing gay sexuality as a suitable choice. Still other parents are supportive, viewing the special proms as an opportunity for their gay children to embrace identities in a way that would

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have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

So, Gary A. Vegliante, the mayor of West Hampton Dunes, said the proms presented a "confounding situation." Mr. Vegliante, who said he was a "devout Catholic" and was uncomfortable with the idea of gay sex. He said he believed that gay proms should not take place, but in almost the same breath, he said he could understand why this one was needed.

"Heterosexual men, we scratch, we chase girls and we play sports," he said. "Imagine growing up a homosexual male in suburbia where you are supposed to be scratching, burping and chasing girls? Imagine the confusion, especially in suburbia, where it is very well defined what young men do?"

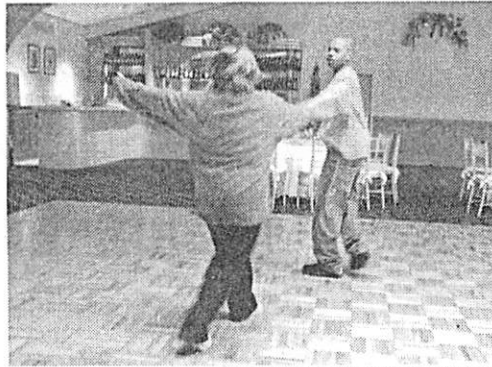
Fifty people have already paid \$30 per person to attend the Sayville dance, set for June 8 and sponsored by Long Island Gay and Lesbian Youth. Organizers expect at least 100 more. The theme is "Free to Be." Some boys may be in dresses and girls in tuxedos. The decorations will include a replica of the Stonewall Inn, the Greenwich Village bar where a 1969 clash between gays and the police is considered the beginning of the gay-rights movement.

"To me, this prom means everyone is accepted," said Michael G. Valverde, 18, a bisexual who said he felt forced to hide his true feelings at the West Babylon High School prom last spring. "No matter who you are," he said, "it is the kind of person you are inside who you can be at this prom." Besides those going to the Sayville prom, more than 150 teenagers and young adults are expected at a prom June 22 at the Thatched Cottage in Centerport, sponsored by Pride for Youth of Bellmore.

The proms are a reflection both of the growth in gay identity and the response to it, at a time when gay issues are pervading the culture in a way that did not in the past.

Eric L. Ferrero, of the Lesbian & Gay Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, said the suburbs are "a real battleground on the issue of protecting gay students." Most complaints from students and parents about schools seeking to bar same-sex couples from proms emanate from the suburbs, he said, and the A.C.L.U. has worked on such cases recently across the country.

Indeed, students said proms were only a microcosm of schools where gays are despised outsiders. Frank H., 16, a sophomore at Walt



Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times

Vicky Lovera, 14, left, and Jamel Liverman, 15, of Long Island Gay and Lesbian Youth, check out the dance floor in Sayville, N.Y.

Whitman High School in Huntington whose gay orientation shames his grandmother, said he has been spit on, pushed down stairs and called names.

James M. Milone, 17, a heterosexual senior at Chaminade, a Roman Catholic high school in Mineola, said he believed most students would frown on a gay couple going to the school prom. And he said most would also deem a gay prom bizarre. "Personally, I don't have a problem, but I think most kids would find it a little strange to have an all-gay prom and some kids would even find it offensive," said Mr. Milone. "A lot of kids are homophobic. They think it's weird because it's not what they've been told is normal."

In a 1999 national school survey of 496 gay students from 32 states conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, a national nonprofit group that works to address gay and lesbian issues in schools, 91 percent said they regularly heard homophobic remarks at school and nearly 40 percent of the time the comments came from school faculty or staff members.

Kevin B. Jennings, the executive director of the group, said he thought the proms were great. "But the existence of these events is an indictment of our schools and communities to do the right thing by these young people in the first place, which is give them equal opportunity to participate fully in school life," he said.

Other people find the proms abhorrent, and say so. "This just shows how sick we are as a civilization when we have gay proms; it is the sign of the decadence of our culture," said the Rev. John F. Harvey, a Roman Catholic Priest

who runs Courage, a spiritual support group in Manhattan for homosexuals. But many others see more complicated issues, particularly at a time when teenagers are assuming a sexual identity at an ever-younger age.

Caitlin Ryan, the director of policy studies at the Institute on Sexuality, Inequality and Health at San Francisco State University and co-author of "Lesbian and Gay Youth: Care and Counseling," (Columbia University Press, 1998), said four recent studies of gay youth show that the average age for them to become aware of a same-sex attraction is around 10. It takes a couple of years for them to announce their feelings.

"Youths are coming out between ages 14 and 16, on average, which is different from the late 70's and early 80's when studies of adults showed they came out between ages 19 and 23," after moving away and going to college, Ms. Ryan said.

John Andrew Kay, the vice chairman of Suffolk's Conservative Party, said events like gay proms were orchestrated to make an ideological point. And Robert V. Lloyd, executive director of Long Island Citizens for Community Values in Huntington, an antipornography group, said he worried that teenagers, who often feel conflicting sexual emotions, could be influenced by adult members of a group like Long Island Gay and Lesbian Youth "who might promote their agenda, as far as sexuality goes, in subtle ways."

Indeed, at an early planning meeting, it was that group's executive director, David S. Kilmnick, who suggested a theme for the prom be a "fantasy" world, where gays could marry, lead Boy Scout troops or be president. Until then, ideas from the young people seemed more typically adolescent: a barbecue, a paradise with palm trees, a medieval setting with knights in armor.

Still, few teenagers involved with the proms said they were confused about their sexuality, and many said self-segregation is a must if they are to be themselves in their hometowns. "If you did go to a regular prom with a same-sex partner," said Stephanie D. Gollobin, 16, a bisexual sophomore at Huntington High School, "you might be the spectacle of the whole thing." She plans to take her heterosexual boyfriend, a sophomore at a Roman Catholic high school, to the June 8 prom.

"This gives us a chance to go with who we really want to go with and imagine what it would be like if it was our real school prom and we were accepted," said Ms. Gollobin. "It is being able to dress in drag if you are a girl, or if you are a guy. It is kind of holding hands, expressing yourself in your clothing more outwardly. Not being worried is the main idea."