



*Villager photos by Elisabeth Robert*

Among those at the L.G.B.T. Community Center's Garden Party fundraiser on Monday night were Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Florent Morellet, the grand marshals of this Sunday's Gay Pride March, above, and many revelers sporting eye-catching ensembles.

# Gay Pride

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## At 80, activist recalls a lifetime on the front lines

BY JANET KWON

With his right leg propped atop a heavily cushioned chair, Bob Kohler shifted his weight from side to side in his wheelchair until he was sufficiently comfortable. He was running a fever of 102 degrees earlier that morning, but he was beginning to feel better — good enough, in fact, to open the window, letting the afternoon sun rays creep into his sixth-floor apartment on Charles St. Having just gotten out of St. Vincent's hospital after treatment for a severe foot infection that cost him his right big toe, as well as problems with his heart and immune system, Kohler has been mostly housebound — which is very unlike him.

Far from being inactive, Kohler has been an active fighter for gay rights since the 1960s, when he played a large part in founding the Gay Liberation Front, which was born out of the Stonewall riots, where a routine police raid of the popular Greenwich Village gay bar turned into a three-day-long riot when gays, for the first time, fought back.

"The G.L.F. — we did some pretty ballsy things.... We were very fierce and we were very angry, and we didn't take any s—t from anybody," Kohler said.

This line is classic Kohler. The Queens native doesn't take things lying down — and still, at 80 years old, he doesn't let anything go without a fight, according to those who have worked alongside him.

"He's always willing to stand up for what he believes is right. It's an admirable quality that I've learned from him," said

activist Eustacia Smith, who's known Kohler for almost a decade.

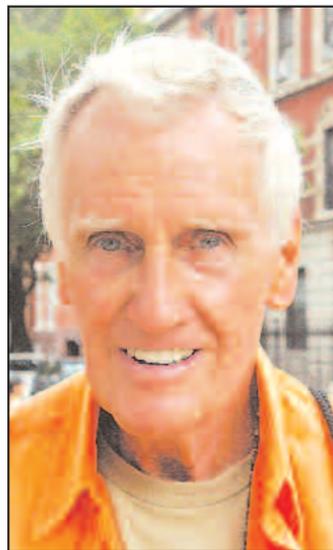
"He always confronts people when he thinks they're doing something oppressive. He comes face to face with it, always willing to see oppression that's going on and takes part in it," Smith said.

Smith is a member of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) as well as NYCAHN (New York City AIDS Housing Network), both of which Kohler is also a member. In 1999, they worked together on a NYCAHN project demanding that the city provide fair and adequate housing to homeless individuals with AIDS.

It was fall of 1999 when Jennifer Flynn, NYCAHN's executive director, sent out a mass e-mail calling for volunteers to help fight for the rights of homeless people with AIDS, because the city's Division of AIDS Services and Income Support was refusing its legal obligation to provide them with adequate emergency housing. She wanted a task force to tackle the challenges of welfare reform.

According to Flynn, about 30 people initially showed up in response to this call for help. However, as the weeks went by, the numbers thinned dramatically — so much so, that only one man was left. He came to the DASIS center on Eighth Ave., and showed up day in and day out for 18 months — without missing a single day.

"I had not done anything like that before, but I was the only one who kept showing up," Kohler admitted with a slight shrug, wrinkling his crisp white T-shirt. He leaned on the left arm of his wheelchair



*Villager photo by Elisabeth Robert*

**Bob Kohler**

and explained how the homeless people had qualms about trusting him at first.

"It took a lot of cajoling and begging...they told me to get my white ass out of there," he said. But they slowly built up their trust in him because "they knew I was going to be there every day and every night," he continued.

"It was the coldest winter I can remem-

ber. I was out there every day for 18 months," he recalled proudly with a trace of a smile. His smile faded as he described the conditions of the "housing" that was being provided to the homeless with AIDS.

"When we went there, there were no doors on the bathroom stalls, there was no water, phones were broken, it was dirty — it was just unbelievable. I mean, these people weren't perfect, but they still deserved a bed," he said.

Kohler recalled one evening around midnight, when a crowd of people was being turned away from the welfare office — left with nowhere to go for the night.

"Chris Quinn came down with her credit card and put the people up in rooms with no questions asked. She really helped us; she was a huge part of our victory. She would just march in there...she's a tough cookie," he said with a laugh.

After 18 months of protest, Kohler and NYCAHN brought the issue to the courts, only to have it thrown out two times in a row. The third time was the charm, however, and a major reorganization of the AIDS housing division of the city's Human Resources Administration was ordered. The office is now located on 14th St. with "big couches and televisions for people to watch while they wait." People are treated more fairly and with respect, and "the whole thing has changed completely."

"All we were asking for was that these people be treated like human beings," he said.

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# The evolution of Dee Perez, transgender activist

Transgender activist Dee Perez is a study in transitions, not only morphing from male to female during her 28-year lifespan but rising from the projects and drug addiction to become a successful community activist and mentor to countless adults and students around issues of homophobia and marginalization. As founder of Gays and Lesbians of Bushwick Empowered (GLOBE), Perez has made it her life's work to end discrimination against L.G.B.T. people, focusing her energies on Bushwick and other underserved sections of Brooklyn such as nearby Bedford-Stuyvesant and Ridgewood.

The fifth of eight Puerto Rican children raised by a single mother, Perez grew up known by her birth name, David, in the Hope Gardens projects in Bushwick, and as an effeminate child, knew firsthand the discrimination she now works to eradicate: Taunts of "You faggot!" and bullying followed her through junior high school, becoming so debilitating that at age 14, Perez dropped out of Bushwick High School, three weeks into freshman year.

"It's sad when you walk up to the door and literally be afraid for your life, and this is the place where you're supposed to get your education so you can excel," said Perez, who turned to heroin and crack cocaine shortly thereafter to assuage the pain, an addiction that lasted until age 20. "Drugs became my body armor. They enabled me to walk down the street or take the train without fearing for my life."

In 1998, Perez sought help from local priest and activist John Powis, who emboldened "David" to face his fears drug free. Powis then introduced him to two New York University law students who had recently started Make the Road by Walking, a social-service advocacy organization for low-income people of color in Bushwick. Perez, who considered himself gender-ambiguous at the time, had long seen the need for L.G.B.T. groups in Bushwick and the outer boroughs and proposed the idea. Shortly thereafter, GLOBE was born under Make the Road's auspices, with Perez as its volunteer director.

As GLOBE grew, Perez grew with it, transitioning from David to Dee with the help of hormones beginning in 2002. That she did so in Bushwick, in front of the very people who knew her as David, is significant.

"This is my home, my community," said Perez, who met with her fair share of resistance from within and outside Make the Road. "Educating people has taken time, but it's happened. The change in attitudes needs to happen here."

That conviction led Perez to challenge principals of area high schools back in 1999, soon after starting GLOBE.

"I told them, 'You have a problem in your schools. I know, because I couldn't get an education in Bushwick, and gay kids tell me it's not safe for them now.' I said, 'Let me come in and do anti-bias workshops with students and staff to help solve the problem,'" said Perez. Three Bushwick principals agreed. Within a few years, Perez had enlisted several GLOBE members to help her run trainings, and in 2005, the group was awarded an \$80,000 grant to formalize its safe schools initiative. For the first time in seven years, Perez herself was drawing a full-time salary from GLOBE and overseeing a volunteer staff of 15.

In the meantime, Perez has also taken GLOBE citywide, increasing the group's visibility and effectiveness through actions such as the protest outside Grand Central Station in February on behalf of 70-year-old Helena Stone, a male-to-female transgender employee of Verizon for 37 years, who had been subjected to harassment and arrest by M.T.A. police while working at the station and attempting to use the women's restroom. That demonstration, which GLOBE spearheaded along with the Transgender Legal and Education Defense Fund, drew significant press coverage, resulting in an admission of wrongdoing and a quick shift in policy by the M.T.A.

Historically, being transgender meant not only being at the periphery of

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**Clockwise from above: Dee Perez in a recent photo; Perez in the office of Gays and Lesbians of Bushwick Empowered, or GLOBE, of which she is the director; photos of Perez, some of them taken when she was still David.**



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mainstream culture but also at the margins of the marginalized, and Perez is not one to shy away from the transphobia that exists within the lesbian and gay community.

"There's still a lot of misunderstanding, but things have gotten better," she said. "We need to keep working at it." Similar issues crop up in romance. As Perez tells it, most men are too embarrassed to stroll in public with transgender women, making it next to impossible to find a fulfilling relationship. That all changed for Perez in 2004, when she met her fiancé, Christopher Linder.

"This is the guy that, like, he swept me off my feet. This guy is the first guy that ever took me out into public, that held my hand, that took me to the movies," she said.

For one who has toiled so hard to create safe spaces for so many, such affirmation was long overdue. Long overdue, indeed.

**Text and photos by Lawrence Lerner**



**Clockwise from top: Perez leads a protest on behalf of Helena Stone, a male-to-female transgender person, at Grand Central Station; Perez conducting an anti-bias workshop at a school; embracing her fiancé, Christopher; hanging out (standing with foot on stool) with neighborhood friends and acquaintances — including another transgender woman and heterosexual men who accept Perez living her life as a woman — at a Bushwick diner.**

