

The Boston Globe

March 21, 2004, Sunday THIRD EDITION

GAYS FIND WELCOMING ATMOSPHERE IN CHICAGO

BYLINE: By Lori Rotenberk, Globe Correspondent

SECTION: NATIONAL/FOREIGN; Pg. A23

LENGTH: 1020 words

CHICAGO - San Francisco may be known as a kind of national hub for diverse lifestyles, and Boston has been at the center of the current debate over gay marriage. But the capital of the conservative Midwest has quietly become home to one of the country's largest gay populations.

"This is the country's best-kept secret!" said Bill Greaves, Mayor Richard M. Daley's liaison to the gay community, who counted off several reasons that gays call Chicago their home. "When people think of Chicago, they think of tough politics, the sports teams: da Bears, da Bulls, da Cubs. I ask, 'Why not da ballet, too?'"

The Windy City, Greaves estimates, is home to 400,000 gay residents, a community that 20 years ago predominantly resided in a tight-knit neighborhood but has now integrated into enclaves throughout the city.

In recent weeks, Daley made national news when he proclaimed support for gay marriages, although such marriages are prohibited explicitly by state law. On March 2, Chicago was chosen to host the 2006 Gay Games, an Olympic-style event expected to draw 60,000 visitors.

On March 10, the Chicago Historical Society museum announced a five-year commitment in telling the story of gays and lesbians as well as bisexual and transgender groups in Chicago, and a local business newspaper recently featured a story on Chicago being a great town for gay judges, with three running for a seat on the Cook County Circuit Court.

Greaves, 52, was appointed in 2000 by Daley as a liaison between the city's gay community and City Hall as part of the Commission on Human Relations. He directs the city's advisory council on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues. The council, Greaves suggested, is the first of its kind in the country.

In February 2003, Tom Tunney, 48, became the first openly gay Chicago alderman, representing the 60,000 Lakeview residents in the city's 44th ward and bringing a new voice to the City Council.

And the good news continues for Chicago's gay community.

"We're home to the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame," said Tracy Baim, publisher of the Windy City Times, which covers Chicago's gay community. Daley in 1991 backed the opening of the hall, considered unique nationally. One of the country's largest gay community centers - housing social services, theaters, and recreation space - is now being planned for the Lakeview neighborhood through state and city and private funding.

There is no precise method to measure the size of a city's gay population. In Chicago, government and community leaders reach their figures by estimating that 10 percent of the total area population is gay, Tunney said.

San Francisco, the nation's oldest gay community, claims 70,000 gay residents. Los Angeles and New York estimate their numbers from 500,000 to 1 million, according to newspapers for the gay communities in those cities.

Chicago was not always this open.

Gay rights activists and community leaders credit Chicago's growth as a destination for gays to the city's growing liberalism, more acceptance of the population by Daley, and the solidarity within the city's gay community.

Fiercely conservative under the late Mayor Richard J. Daley, Chicago was not considered very tolerant 30 years ago. But the

HIV/ AIDS crisis of the early 1980s began to change the city's cultural fabric.

"Twenty years ago, Chicago was not liberal enough nor exciting enough for gays of the Midwest," Tunney said. "By the mid-1980s, Chicago became a destination as gays banded together to fight homophobia and support one another through the mounting illnesses from AIDS."

One of the ways they united was through sports. The Chicago Smelts was founded, a swim team named after a quick but small silver fish found in Lake Michigan. Frontrunners is a club formed for running enthusiasts.

Soon arts groups emerged, bringing to Chicago two gay choruses as well as theaters, bands, and newspapers, with the advances all being celebrated by the popular yearly Gay Pride Parade. "There is no doubt," said Greaves, "that Chicago provides a more vibrant and varied culture than you will find on the coasts, if not the world."

With the elder Daley then gone, liberal mayors such as Jane Byrne and Harold Washington reigned. A major shift in attitudes occurred in 1987 when Mayor Eugene Sawyer penned the Human Rights Ordinance prohibiting discrimination against lesbians and gays.

"That was historic for the city of Chicago," Tunney said. "It was unusual for Chicago, and it was the first time that we were recognized here as human beings."

Lakeview, also known as Boys Town, became the city's first visible gay neighborhood. Bounded by the lake to the east and Wrigley Field to the north, it is where gay life flourished. The city in 1990 erected several towering rain-bow-colored pylons along Halsted Street designating the heart of the gay community.

"When people learn the size of our gay community, the next question is where everyone could possibly live," Tunney said. "Today the community is more integrated and we're as far south as Hyde Park and as far north as Edgewater. Gay communities are also strong in suburbs such as Oak Park [west of the city) and Evanston [to the north along the lake shore]."

A lesbian community also has flourished in the North Side neighborhood of Andersonville.

"Leadership on gay and lesbian issues [has] not come naturally to Daley," Tunney said. His was an educational process that initially was purely political as the mayor recognized, though from afar, the benefits of the gay vote.

This is why Daley's public endorsement of gay marriages marked such a milestone and sent a message to the rest of the country.

"That Daley believes in rights for gays is a huge symbol for the rest of America," Tunney said. "He is a man whom people even outside of Chicago hold in high regard. Imagine people of the Plains or regular blue-collar guys saying to themselves: 'Hey, Mayor Daley is supporting these marriages. Maybe I ought to look at this topic in a different light.'"