



THE TRIANGLE

The Monthly Newspaper from Gay & Lesbian Community Services of Central Florida, Inc.
Serving Orlando's Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community

NATIONAL COMING OUT DAY OCTOBER 11

GayNet News Service

"Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are.."

Not since those immortal words were uttered by Glenda the Good Witch, has so much attention been turned to the term "Come Out". That is, until October 11 when the Gay and Lesbian Community celebrates "National Coming Out Day."

The idea itself has been around for some time. Ever since Stonewall, our community has wanted a day where everyone who is gay is visible to the general population. In 1986, a conference of gay and lesbian activists suggested an event that would increase the visibility of our community, thereby increasing our political clout. The group's goals was to organize a day in which openly gay and lesbian individuals could both show public solidarity and encourage "closeted gays to come out". In the wake of the 1987 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, the idea finally took off.

"We need, more than ever, an annual event to celebrate life, one that will help us renew our commitments to one another. Ours is a community that is coming out of the closet forever."

At its inception, National Coming Out Day (NCOD) was spearheaded by activists with close ties to the Experience Weekend, a program of personal growth workshops started by gay activist Rob Eichberg. The formal NCOD organization was co-founded in Los Angeles by Eichberg and lesbian activist Jean O'Leary. The phenomenal response to the first National Coming Out Day can be attributed, partly, to the success of the 1987 march (over half a million gay men and lesbians came) and, partly, to the overwhelming impact of the AIDS epidemic on the gay community.

October 11, the day chosen for the annual event, marks not only the anniversary of the 1987 march, but also commemorates the inaugural visit of the Names Project (the AIDS Quilt) to the capital. "The national march showed that, even in the face of the AIDS epidemic, our community is vibrant and growing," co-founder Jean O'Leary said in 1988. "We need, more than ever, an annual event to celebrate life, one that will help us renew

our commitments to one another. Ours is a community that is coming out of the closet forever."

Now in its sixth year, the annual event continues to encourage gay men and lesbians to mark the day by taking their "next step" in publicly acknowledging their sexual orientation. Over the years, the day has been observed in a variety of ways. On the local level, activists have staged an assortment of events. In some cities, gays and lesbians have held workshops and seminars on homosexuality while in other activists have coordinated neighborhood volunteer projects where gays have helped the wider community as openly gay individuals.



OCTOBER 11

On a national level there have also been a number of widely publicized events on the day ranging from the rainbow-colored gay and lesbian pride flag being flown over California's capitol building in Sacramento to episodes of the syndicated Oprah Winfrey Show being dedicated to gay awareness. Two years ago, two stars of the 1960s television shows *Dobie Gillis* and *Bewitched* marked the day by coming out on national television. Major newspapers around the country carried stories on National Coming Out Day, including items in *USA Today*. CNN and many news programs included feature stories. Many radio programs featured interviews, updates and debates including features on National Public Radio.

NCOD has been able to further raise awareness of

the day through the extensive marketing of products bearing its popular logo designed by the late Keith Haring. This year, in an effort to expand the annual effort, the NCOD organization merged with the Triangle Institute, the non-profit, educational arm of the Human Rights Campaign Fund. While the group had its share of successes through its grassroots framework, leaders hope that with HRCF's large membership, the annual event will become even bigger and better. The Campaign Fund's ability to reach out to larger numbers of Americans will strengthen National Coming Out Day and allow its efforts to continue to grow. (For more information, or to help organize an event in your community, call Deborah Massa at 202-628-4160.) ▼

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