

# Queer Nation: Homosexuals decide it's time to fight back

■ With violence against gays increasing, several organizations have discarded polite persuasion in favor of confrontational defiance.

By Andrew Selsky  
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — It was a quiet night at King Tut's Wah-Wah Hut bar — if quiet is the word for an East Village saloon where tattooed toughs gather to booze, play pool and listen to heavy metal.

Gradually, a very different crowd filtered in. They wore T-shirts with the legend "Queer Nation" emblazoned over a map of the United States, and settled in under the ultraviolet-lit painting of a skull on fire.

A beefy pool player was about to take a shot when he noticed a pair of the newcomers standing beside him. His jaw dropped.

The two men were kissing, mouth to mouth.

"Oh no! Oh no!" the man with the cue cried, retreating in revulsion to the other side of the table. "Stop that."

They ignored him. This was why they had come — to agitate, to confront people they blame for an increase in attacks on homosexuals. They are Queer Nation — one of several militant gay organizations which have discarded polite persuasion in favor of grab-them-by-the-lapels defiance.

There are Queer Nation chapters in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia, Providence, Toronto, Boulder, Colo., and Ithaca, N.Y. Four-hundred people attend bi-weekly meetings in New York.

Where groups like the Gay Men's Health Crisis responded to AIDS by lobbying for help and by providing services to sufferers, the new generation — ACT-UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power — takes to the streets.

ACT-UP has thrown bagels and noodles at a hotel where President Bush was appearing, blocked Wall Street, disrupted services in St. Patrick's Cathedral — all protests against what it claims is political, business and religious indifference to the epidemic.

It is "a whole new attitude," said Randy Shilts, a national correspondent for the San Francisco Chronicle and author of the critically acclaimed account of the AIDS crisis, "And the Band Played On."

The new militants are "rebellious against straight society but also against older gay people," said Shilts, 39.

It is a pattern that repeats itself in many social movements — radicalization followed by re-entrenchment and new radicalization, said Jim Jasper, an assistant professor of sociology at New



AP Laserphoto

Members of the gay activist group Queer Nation rally outside New York City Hall.

York University.

"The newcomers become disappointed in how ossified the old groups are" and take their own action, Jasper said.

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"Any faggot gets within a 1-foot range, I'm going to knock him out," the pool player declared loudly to anyone who would listen.

But more militants crowded into the little room, outnumbering the regulars. "We're here and we're queer, we're here and we're queer," they chanted.

The chanting grew so loud it drowned out the heavy metal music and the pool player, who was shouting "Shut up, shut up" to no avail.

Later, outside the bar, the homosexuals singled out a skinhead who had shouted a slur. They shouted "Homophobe" and pointed their fingers at him.

They left. "We'll be back and we'll be stronger," they chanted. And: "We're here, we're queer, we're fabulous — get used to it."

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It is safe to say that the 50 demonstrators who visited King Tut's Wah-Wah Hut on that summer night — and had staged a "kiss-in" at the Alcatraz bar down the block earlier in the evening — won no converts. They didn't expect to.

"We are breaking down the barriers of unspoken segregation," said Queer Nation spokesman Jay

Blotcher.

"It isn't going to happen in a week. This harkens back to the Woolworth counter in the South and the blacks coming back again and again and again. Like them, we are a disenfranchised minority fighting for our rights."

Queer Nation's founders were active in ACT-UP, and remain members. "We felt that there were other issues, such as the increase in violence against gays and lesbians, that had to be addressed," said co-founder Alan Klein.

Two of the four men who helped found Queer Nation had themselves been victims of gay bashing, and Klein said the group was formed because the men felt there was no organized response to attacks on homosexuals.

The group organized its first demonstration in April, when a thousand marchers protested a pipe bombing outside a gay bar that injured three people.

Through Sept. 30, there had been 88 anti-gay crimes in New York City this year, said Capt. Charles Senzel of the Police Department's bias unit. Police said there were 47 such crimes for all of 1989 and 43 for 1988.

But the Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, which provides legal help and counseling for victims of gay bashing, gave much higher figures. It listed 425 anti-gay crimes in the city through the end of September, compared with 338 for all of 1989, according to

Another group, the Pink Panthers, patrols streets to protect gays. The members carry no weapons, but walkie-talkies, cameras and whistles. The purpose of the cameras are to photograph gay bashers the patrols apprehend.

The group claims 200 members — all trained in self-defense, according to founder Gerri Wells — and is patrolling Greenwich Village.

"We will hold people for the police and we will bash back if necessary," said Ms. Wells, a lesbian. "We will use equal force (to hold a gay basher fighting to escape)."

The Panthers have not detained anyone since the group was formed in June but patrols have appeared as gays were harassed on four or five occasions, she said. The culprits ran when the Pink Panthers arrived, she said.

"Everyone has a right to defend themselves," said Inspector Paul Sanderson, head of the police department's bias unit. "The local patrols are good as long as they don't get out of hand. If they grab someone who's been beating up

homosexuals and hold him until officers arrive, that's the kind of citizens' action that's needed."

"If I walk with my lover down the street, I face physical or verbal abuse," said Klein. "That's intolerable. I have to make important choices. I have to confront that bias. We have to fight for our rights and I think that can't be compromised."

The militants are not always so confrontational.

Queer Nation goes to shopping malls to distribute leaflets which note that gays have existed for centuries and which list some famous people who were homosexual. The leaflets are partially aimed at gay youths who may be despondent or even suicidal about their homosexuality.

"There's no positive reinforcement from society for them," he said. "All you're told is you will live a life of alienation and disappointment. Adolescents crave acceptance, and this puts some of them over the edge."

"There's nothing out there to tell the kids, 'Hey, it's OK,' and that's why we do this."

David Kirschenbaum, a spokesman for the group.

Police said privately the wide discrepancy may be due to the fact that police have to prove an attack was based on the victim's sexual orientation.

"Our message is gays and lesbians will no longer be silent victims," Blotcher said. "We are here and we're a force to be reckoned with."

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