Splendor in the Pines

December 1, 1999 By Stephen Gendin

The so-called party of the millennium in New York's Fire Island Pines started under a cloud of controversy. The successor to GMHC's Morning Party—the fund-raiser canceled after 16 years due to longstanding charges that it promoted drug use and unsafe sex—this late-August event was promoted as a "community" gathering rather than the crowning gem of the international gay party circuit.

Though the location was the same—the island's disappearing beach—the number of tickets was cut from 5,000 to 3,000 and the time changed from day to night to emphasize its break from tradition. And in what seemed a deliberate attempt to scare away circuit devotees, publicity materials stressed that *everyone* (read "old," "ugly," "straight," etc.) was welcome. The PR worked: Attendance was down—no David Geffen or Calvin Klein—and so were proceeds, which went to the Stonewall Foundation and restoration of the beach.

After an anxious day of high winds, cold air and rain, the weather took a dramatic turn just as things got going. The temperature rose to 70 degrees—ideal disco weather, just right for dancing shirtless—and low-flying clouds provided the perfect canopy for searchlights that swept the sky with a hundred different colors. Ocean waves, no longer pawing at the dance floor, purred gently as they licked at the snow-fencing at the party's perimeter.

The theme was Arabian Nights, and a dozen tents gave the surroundings a festive air—and little else. Off-limits to the masses, most were the spoils of sponsors who had coughed up as much as $10,000 to act like sultans and lounge in isolated luxury.

There was another theme, too. For a month, a "Say No to GHB" campaign had been in full swing. (GHB, an anesthetic notoriously difficult to dose properly, is the culprit in most recent party medical emergencies.) Bright-red stop signs, plastered on every Pines telephone pole, pleaded that the drug not be used at the party. While the last GMHC events were marred by police drug busts and overdoses, this year's medical tent was called "boring" by one physician's assistant. No deaths, no comas. No medevacs by helicopter.

Though billed as the "anti–circuit party," it sure seemed, by the time the second DJ took over the turntable, "pro" to me. The dance floor overflowed with shirtless men, their chest measurements as steroid-enhanced as ever, their faces giving off the warm, loving glow unique to these moments. Many wore eyeliner in gorgeous shades of blue, red and purple. Surrounded by so much happiness, it was hard not to feel beautiful. And as I went through the next week of pills and

appointments, I often recalled how replenishing a night of pure joy can be.

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