The Last Dance

GMHC won’t party like it’s 1999

April 1, 1999 By Gabi Horn

AIDS isn’t over, but the Gay Men’s Health Crisis’ famous Fire Island fundraiser is. Some bittersweet 16 years after it began as a beach-house memorial to the dead, GMHC pulled the plug on its annual Morning Party—the group’s last major fundraiser rooted exclusively in the gay community. The summer Sunday-afternoon-on-the-sand ritual had morphed into one of the nation’s fattest AIDS cash cows, raking in $464,000 from some 4,000 revelers in 1998.

A red-letter date on the gay party-circuit calendar, the event’s drug-rich reputation—reinforced by several busts and a few ODs—was one GMHC decided it could no longer afford. “We were getting it from all sides,” said communications director Greg Lugliani. “The press made it out to be a gay drug orgy. It was undermining our efforts to educate people about how substance abuse relates to HIV.”

Larry Kramer, a GMHC cofounder, fired the first stop-the-party shot in a 1993 *Advocate* column, and other gay writers such as Michelangelo Signorile and Gabriel Rotello then upped the rhetorical ante. Troy Masters, publisher of New York City’s gay biweekly *LGNY*, even played the conspiracy card when he told *The New York Times*, “The Morning Party was a self-perpetuating machine: It gave GMHC not only money, but future clients.”

But many were disheartened by the decision. “It reminds me of the ’80s bathhouse closings,” said Steve Kammon, editor of the zine *Circuit Noize*. “Shutting down parties doesn’t change behavior. It closes avenues of education and funding. Now the money will go to profiteers instead.” The party’s wreck only threatens to worsen the downsizing GMHC’s budget woes. Ironically, plans to recoup may bring fundraising full circle with a return to small beach-house parties, said Lugliani.

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