Runway Realness

Front row at GMHC's Latex Ball

September 26, 2016 By Joe Mejía

Forget the Rio Olympics—the fiercest competition this summer was at GMHC's 26th Annual Latex Ball, held on July 26. It was a night of flamboyant fun, friendly drama and HIV awareness as contestants peacocked and pranced down a runway before a crowd of more than 3,000 spectators. The event is traditionally the biggest for the House and Ballroom community, and this year's ball was no exception.

Dubbed Viva La Glam, in honor of the late Latex Ball cofounder Avis Pendavis's annual '80s ball of the same name, the evening was hosted by GMHC's Luna Luis Ortiz, an early member of the House of Pendavis (and father of the House of Khan). As usual, there were over-the-top performances, a presentation of awards (for trans activism, community leadership and others) and—the pièce de résistance—a fashion and voguing runway competition that spanned a dozen categories, including Trans Men: the Ultimate Fantasy, and Team Realness: Hip-Hop Glam.

Famously showcased in the classic documentary Paris Is Burning, the House and Ball community is made up of predominantly African-American and Latino lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of all ages and is structured around houses, loose collectives of individuals who often have sought refuge in the nurturing ball scene after being shunned by mainstream communities. Houses function like families and are led by mothers or fathers (sometimes both) who serve as mentors and guide their children by offering advice on navigating life in and out of the ball scene. This can mean help in designing costumes, walking the runway, coming out or negotiating relationships and sex.

The Latex Ball was begun in 1990, in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, by leaders of the ballroom community in conjunction with GMHC to honor those lost to AIDS and to promote condom use (hence "latex") as a means of HIV prevention, the best method at the time. Today, the event continues to support public health by promoting antiretroviral treatment for those living with HIV and pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, for those who are HIV negative. The Latex Ball offers on-site outreach, including education, testing and even prescreening for studies, in an unintimidating party atmosphere.

But competition is at the core of the event, and categories like Designer's Delight gave divas of all shapes and sizes the chance to show off homemade fashions and strut their stuff before an audience that squealed, snapped and stomped its approval as veterans of the scene, including

members of the House of LaBeija and the House of Xtravaganza, sat and observed in more subdued judgment.

Reflecting on the significance of the ball, GMHC CEO Kelsey Louie points out that it “provides a strong sense of community for everyone to unite and highlight contributions from an often marginalized community,” adding that “with an increase in hate crimes and murders of people of color, it is essential that this event continue so that these youth and young adults know that they do matter.” Indeed, the ball proves that not only do the members of this community matter, but, as its many diverse categories affirm, they can be whoever they choose to be.



Victor Hogue, Kelsey Louie and Kalyani Sanchez of GMHCCourtesy of GMHC/Luna Luis Ortiz

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