Walking with Mr. Friendly in the New York City Pride March

June 29, 2015 By POZ Staff

By Nicholas Olson (POZ Intern)

To celebrate Pride this year, I was fortunate enough to walk with the Mr. Friendly team in the New York City LGBT pride march on Sunday, June 28. Mr. Friendly is an international grassroots movement whose mission is to reduce HIV stigma, encourage HIV testing and improve quality of life for those living with HIV in friendly ways.

In 2008, Dave Watt created Mr. Friendly as part of the nonprofit Community AIDS Resource and Education Services (CARES). CARES aims to reduce stigma through open and honest conversations about HIV and to remove the misunderstandings many people have about the virus. Today, Mr. Friendly has chapters in cities throughout the United States, and representatives from Florida, Tennessee and Philadelphia among other places came to New York City to march in the parade.

The group made 12 banners to spread its message with slogans in English and Spanish like: “Love Knows No Status,” “Aqui Por Ti, Positivo or Negativo,” and “Live Stigma-Free of HIV.”

During the march, we drew attention from the crowd by having members of the Mr. Friendly team pose with the signs. We stopped to create photo ops in front of the spectators in the crowd as often as we could. The team also handed out business cards for the Mr. Friendly Facebook group to encourage people to tag us and like us when they snapped our picture. The goal was to pose for as many pictures as possible, and to inspire people to follow up on social media.

An example of our photo-op strategy.

Three members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence joined our group, and their glamour helped us gain a lot of attention. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is an order of queer nuns who first appeared in San Francisco in 1979. They devote themselves to community service, ministry and outreach and to promoting human rights, respect for diversity and spiritual enlightenment.

Two wore black-and-white, polka-dot headdresses, and gold, black and white outfits to match. The third wore multicolored sequins from headdress to gown. Their makeup--stark white foundation,

colorful details, dyed beards--added to their allure. The crowd loved the sisters and their gorgeous, graceful presence. Many attendees were eager to snap pictures with them along with the Mr. Friendly signs and group members.

Before the parade, many of the group members went to the Stonewall Inn on Friday night to pay our respects to the birthplace of the modern gay rights movement, as well as celebrate the day's historic Supreme Court decision guaranteeing same-sex marriage equality. They brought along one of the Mr. Friendly banners, which attracted attention from both Stonewall patrons and the reporters who had gathered to cover the event.

Watt says he created Mr. Friendly because he "witnessed many people living with HIV being treated poorly, like second-class citizens." He wanted to create an icon that would be inclusive with "equal weight for both positive and negative" individuals, as a way to remove HIV stigma without indicating a person's status. During Sunday's march, many people in the crowd expressed their gratitude for sharing this message.

Overall, the march was very successful for Mr. Friendly, as evidenced by the number of photos taken by the crowd and shared on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media.

As I walked with my sign, which read "Live Stigma-Free of HIV," I felt like it offered hope and inspiration for everyone reading it . It was an honor to walk with the Mr. Friendly team and spread their HIV destigmatization message during this historic time in LGBTQ life.

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