

Race, Class and Sex Breed Contempt in Greenwich Village

A Neighborhood Grown Older and Wealthier Is Tired of Today's Rowdies

By Michelle García

Washington Post Staff Writer

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NEW YORK -- A pair of shapely legs in low-slung jeans strut through Greenwich Village, sequined rainbows stitched onto the back pockets jiggling from side to side. A lanky teenage girl with red-dyed braids, wearing baggy red basketball shorts, gazes at the rainbows and yells, "I like your jeans."

The rainbow-wearing girl yells back: "I like you ."

The girls trade flirtatious smiles and rejoin the nightly parade along Christopher Street, past Village Pleasure with its inventory of gay erotic toys, past a church, and a gay bar with an older black and Latino clientele, and another frequented by white gays. Just beyond is Badlands, once a notorious leather bar and now a triple-X video shop.



They stroll toward the Hudson River and the action on Pier 45, where the gay teenage crowd practices vogue moves (runway poses immortalized by Madonna), flirt and gossip. But at 1 a.m., when the pier shuts down, the crowd that looks and oozes fabulous chic strolls back up Christopher Street. Their screaming and music drives the locals nuts.

"The young people . . . are raising holy hell," said David Poster, 68, president of the Christopher Street Patrol, a neighborhood watch group. "We pray for rain and snow."

Forget the image of the Village as gay haven; forget the gay liberation movement that rose from its cobblestone streets. The *scene* has moved north to Chelsea, and what's left in the Village is a gay neighborhood gone older, wealthier and stodgier. Some in the area of \$4 million townhouses and lofts says it is under siege by gay kids of color who bring loud talk, drug dealing and prostitution.

It is a conflict, thick with issues of race and class within the gay community, that is now coming to a head.

"They didn't want black faces on the street," said Bob Kohler, who is white, explaining the outcry against the pier crowd. Kohler, a longtime Village resident and former business owner on the strip, took part in Gay Liberation Front that organized some of the first gay rights protests.

He remembers the methadone-clinic houseboat docked at the piers. And the junkies who shot the real deal through their veins and nodded out on brownstone stoops. That generation now visits the gay senior center where Kohler regularly gets into heated arguments about the teenagers.

"Those kids . . . get them off the street," says Kohler, feigning the whining voices of seniors at the center. "They come here and mess up the Village. They steal." Then he adds wearily, "Meanwhile, these old men are trying to score for pot."

The mostly nonwhite teens on the pier are from the Bronx, Brooklyn and New Jersey. The youths and their advocates argue that the Village has always welcomed all types, all colors and all stripes. They say residents unfairly pin problems and crimes, including those generated by the bar scene, on them.

"It wasn't our decision to be gay," said Webster Duvell, 22, who is black and lives in Harlem. Duvell and his friends, dressed in long plaid shorts, laughed and joked while showing off new dance moves. "This is the only place to be ourselves, to be with people who are like ourselves and not be looked down on."

Under pressure from residents, the New York City Council and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg (R) recently increased police patrols, despite statistics showing that the area has one of the lowest crime rates in the city. The social services outreach part of the city's plan begins next month.

But to its denizens, the pier is a "safe place," with a gorgeous view. It's where Jessie, who likes girls, quietly confided in a male friend who wears his hair clipped short to his round head and likes boys. Both are 17 and African American. They're talking, again, about Jessie's girlfriend.

"Her mother sent her to Santo Domingo to get her away from me," said Jessie, whose bookish glasses and tightly coiled short hair add to her boyish look.

"Then they're going to send her to Pennsylvania. I'm going to be mad lonely."

Jessie's male friend has been consoling her for weeks, on the phone, on the pier. Someday they'll settle down, he promises, they'll have their own families and be done with these hassles.

A security guard cruises by. It's the 1 a.m. curfew on the pier. They begin the long, slow walk to the subway, back to Crown Heights, home to working-class blacks and West Indian immigrants.

The increased police presence on Christopher is noticeable. Several police vans and patrol cars line the street, and officers shoo away stragglers from storefronts.

"Trees, trees, trees," chants a headphone-wearing man who greets several of the pier's regulars with hugs. He's chanting about pot.

"My name is Paper. Put that in a big P, in bold. I'm a hustler," said Alan a.k.a. Paper. Despite the police van just five yards away, and his own low-grade homophobia, he keeps chanting. He pulls in \$700 a week just on the strip. "Everyone knows that gays carry mad cash."

That's what keeps him in the Village. And he's one of the reasons Jay Jefferies, 64, fears leaving his Village apartment at night. How many times has he awoken to find people engaged in sex acts on the street or relieving themselves in front of homes?

"It's not that they're gay, it's not that they're black or Hispanic, it's that they are antisocial," said Jefferies, who is gay and a 40-year resident of Christopher Street. "They have no parental control. They come from neighborhoods where that doesn't exist very much."

Jefferies, a playwright who lives in a building once known as Leather Flats, says, "The only people who would rent in my building were leather numbers." Those were the pre-AIDS days, when he and other white men sunbathed and cruised for men on the same piers.

"It was different, it wasn't gentrified," said Jefferies. "These kids do nothing for the neighborhood. They don't solicit the restaurants or the bars. They have no money."

Jessie and her friend linger outside the subway entrance, watching some transvestites at the pizza joint across the street screaming up a storm at another woman. Jessie recognized them as bar-hoppers from the strip.

"Those are the girls that gave us cigarettes. People come here, get drunk, fight and get high," she said, explaining the scene unfolding. "This is where people come to be free."



By Laris Karklis, The Washington Post