

Jewish gays make a colourful statement

Chantal Abitbol

WEARING pink-and-white sequined gloves, white T-shirts emblazoned with a purple Star of David, and some men sporting rainbow *kipot*, Jewish gays and lesbians made a colourful statement at the 24th Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade on Saturday night.

About 160 participants danced a well-choreographed *hora* routine behind a *menorah*-decked float, called "The Stars of David Come Out With Partners, Friends and Family", while *Hava Nagila* blared out. Organised by the Dayenu Association for Jewish Gays and Lesbians, it was the second Jewish entry in the Mardi Gras, after last year's initial appearance sparked controversy within the community.

The previous evening, 130 people attended a sold-out Mardi Gras Shabbat dinner at Temple Emanuel. The function was addressed by Australian Medical Association president Dr Kerryn Phelps, who is both gay and Jewish, and Mardi Gras board member Ilana Kaplan.

With the theme being gay and lesbian parenting, family members walked together — gay fathers with straight sons, straight mothers with lesbian daughters, an elderly man carrying a placard that simply said "Grandpa", lesbian mothers pushing strollers — all marching for the right to be parents and have families.

Netzer youth movement member Nadine Gerber was there to demonstrate pride in growing up with a lesbian mother. "It's important for people to know that as long as there is love in the family and children feel loved, lifestyle is irrelevant. My mother is normal, but her sexuality happens to be lesbianism. To see someone live and learn like my mother is inspiring."

Marching to emphasise the importance of parental support, Ros Glaser walked with her two gay children, Neil and Benita, under the auspices of PFLAG (Parents, Family & Friends of Lesbians and Gays). "I came to stand alongside my children and let them know how tremendously proud I am of them," she said. "People must realise sexuality is a given thing, and I look forward to the time when prejudice against homosexuality no longer exists. I've always taught my children to stand up for their beliefs and to be honest to themselves. I salute all gays and lesbians, especially people out there who do not have parental support. Closets are for clothes, not for people."

Added her daughter, Benita: "It's difficult for anyone to come out to their parents, but it has only strengthened our relationship. They're observant Jews and wonderful parents, and ultimately the best thing is to live your life openly and honestly."

Commented Neil: "Judaism has always been, and will remain, an integral part of me. I hope to be able to make people understand that it is still possible to live a fulfilling Jewish life and be gay."

Gay and Jewish father Rob Conwell said he was able to attend his first Mardi Gras because his gay son, Justin Neely, was at his side. "This isn't just a father supporting a son, it's a son supporting a father. I've always promised myself I'd be here, and it's fantastic I have my wonderful son to walk with me." Added Justin: "The fact that both of us are gay makes it easier to talk about issues, and he can offer me advice. This is my father's first parade, and we decided it would be good for us to do it together."

By mutual request, the Jewish float was situated behind the Lebanese float. Dayenu co-convenor Judy Kell: "We felt it important for the Jewish and Lebanese gay communities to show how important it is to be unified. We wanted not only to lend support, but to acknowledge our common issues and our mutual wish for peace."

A Jewish lesbian carried a sign reading "Shalom and Peace", while a Lebanese gay man marched alongside holding a placard with its Arab translation, "Salaam and Peace".

Defying intermittent rain, 7500 marchers walked with 175 floats, receiving applause from the 500,000-strong crowd. "It's frightening when you see thousands cheering, but then you realise they're supporting you, and it's incredibly exhilarating," said Robyn Clark.

The Jewish group included heterosexual supporters other than family members. "It's important to support Jews who might feel isolated and have a problem coming out," said author Moya Simons. "Sexuality is private, but you should never have to deny your preferences. I'll continue to march, even if it rains. Nothing can stop us."

Large numbers of visitors made the trip from abroad to be part of the festivities. Gay and Jewish Londoner Simmon Gnessen, 35: "I cancelled travelling to Indonesia to be here. Even as a foreigner, it's nice to feel that I can feel welcome among Jews and to participate in the parade."

Participants from France, Canada, Papua New Guinea, Wales, Japan and Korea also marched, as well as from across Australia.

Dayenu member Laurence Luft: "It's more in your face than some would like, but it's what the community needs because we were hidden for too long. Last year, there was controversy, but it turned out to be positive for us. It finally became a topic of discussion, and people who had not given us a thought either way showed us how much they support us."

Added Dayenu co-convenor Malcolm Davidowitz: "All of a sudden, we've become international. We've received calls from Jews against Neo-Nazis in Germany wishing us good luck. They also wanted to know if we had intentions of opening Dayenu in other countries. And gay rabbis from the United States have expressed an interest in joining us next year. Hopefully then we'll have 300 marchers."



Participants in the "Stars of David Come Out" float.

Photographs: Amelia Whitaker

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The Lebanese float, which was directly in front of the Jewish float, by mutual request, carried the sign "Love" in English and Arabic.

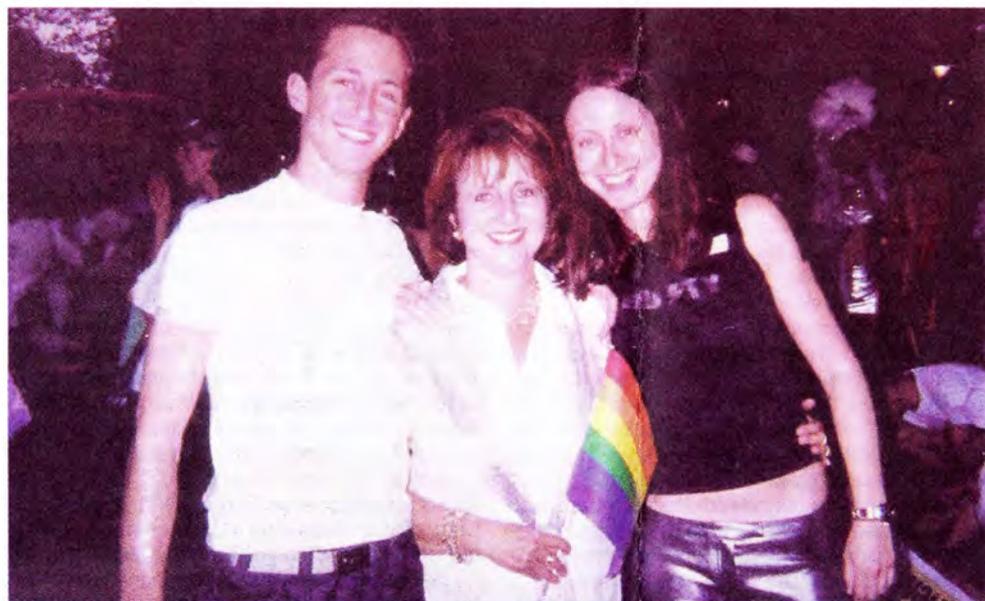


Jewish gay father Rob Conwell at the Mardi Gras, with his gay son, Justin Neely.



Participants in the Jewish float.

■ More pictures, next week



Ros Glaser with her gay children, Benita and Neil.