



News

Equality Forum honors Newsom, the New York Times

by Matthew Ray
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Equality Forum honored San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom at the International Equality Dinner at the National Constitution Center on May 2. (Source:Patrick Hagerty)

Despite what turned out to be a very rainy week, organizers of Equality Forum 2009 said the annual event proved a tremendous success.

It took place in Philadelphia from April 27 to last Sunday. It featured a series of cultural programs, panels, parties and outdoor events. And while organizers were still tabulating the final numbers as of press time, crowds at many events appeared to increase over previous years.

The record-breaking crowds predicted for SundayOUT!, an outdoor street festival, and the March for Equality, however, did not materialize because of heavy rains that drenched the Delaware Valley on Sunday. Many organizations decided to participate in the rally, and attendance was impressive in spite of the downpours.

Doctor Frank Kameny, who is one of the four people who staged the country's first gay and lesbian rights demonstrations on July 4, 1965, in Philadelphia, was among those who took part in the rally.

"The rain wasn't going to stop me from showing the world I'm proud of my sexuality," Conshohocken resident Marissa Wells said. "I brought an umbrella, a raincoat, and my dignity."

Equality Forum founder and executive director Malcolm Lazin conceded the weather put a damper on the outdoor festivities, but he added other events compensated. These included the fifth annual National Interfaith Service held at Christ Church Philadelphia and the International Equality Dinner at the National Constitution Center.

Governor Ed Rendell was among the more than 500 people who attended. He expressed hope lawmakers in Harrisburg will pass legislation that will add sexual orientation and gender identity and expression to the Commonwealth's non-discrimination statutes.

"I believe we can do that," Rendell said.

Equality Forum honored both the New York Times and San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom at the dinner. Newsom, who declared his candidacy for California governor last month, criticized former President George W. Bush for his support of the Federal

Marriage Amendment. He affirmed his decision to allow same-sex couples to marry in his city in 2004. And Newsom applauded the Iowa Supreme Court's ruling that allowed nuptials for gays and lesbians in the Hawkeye State.

"As a fifth generation Californian, I never thought I'd say as Iowa goes, so goes the rest of the country," he said. "Things are evolving. We've made a lot of progress. Separate is not equal. Civil unions are not marriage. Marriage is marriage."

In addition to the dinner, more than 70 people attended a panel that featured five students from across the country who discussed how to start groups for LGBT students and how to influence their schools' policies. Others included the Challenges of the Russian LGBT Community and Safe and Healthy Sexual Expression in the MSM [men who have sex with men] Community.

"Every panel I attend is incredibly informative," Roget Miller, who attended the Challenges of the Russian LGBT Community panel, said. "I think this year the programmers have outdone themselves."

The weather also did not damper the series of Equality Forum-sponsored parties across the city. Sisters Nightclub hosted the 10th annual Girl Fever Party and the Hip 'n Fit Contest, the semi-finals of a competition to discover the hottest lesbian in the country. The rain did nothing to deter the crowd of dancers at Liberation at Pure last Saturday.

"Rain can't stop the gays," Philadelphia resident Mike Dallas said.

Michael K. Lavers contributed to this article.

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