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Easter Pride

Gay families return to the White House to partake in its annual Egg Roll event

By ELIZABETH A. PERRY

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Last year's uproar over the participation of gay families in the annual White House Easter Egg Roll is barely more than a whisper this year.

"I haven't seen anything published by them, so there is nothing to react to," said Mark Tooley of the Institute on Religion & Democracy, a conservative group that spoke out against gay participation last year. "Last year, they were asking their supporters to show up and for people to acknowledge their existence for media attention."

Tooley told the Washington Blade he thought Family Pride Coalition, a gay family organization, was trying to turn the Egg Roll, scheduled for Monday, into a political event by distributing news releases "about their cause."

When asked if he would have had a problem with the group if they had attended without wearing rainbow leis to identify them, Tooley replied, "No, if they weren't there making a political statement."

Jennifer Chrisler, executive director of Family Pride, said the response from conservative groups has been far less visible this spring.

"There has been less vitriol since they found that attacking gay and lesbian families didn't work for them in the last election cycle," she said. "It shows the hypocrisy of these groups. They cried foul last year and are completely uninterested this year. It was completely political."

Last year, Tooley wrote an editorial for the Weekly Standard magazine criticizing Family Pride, Soulforce, PFLAG and a host of other gay and liberal religious organizations for the plan to "crash" the Egg Roll.

"The Easter Egg Roll has remained non-controversial for too long, apparently," Tooley wrote in the magazine. "Soulforce, in cooperation with other homosexuality advocacy groups such as Family Pride, wants same-sex couples and other non-traditional 'sexual minorities' to bring their children to the White House so as to expose America to 'LGBT' families."

Last year Chrisler and her partner, Cheryl Jacques, a gay rights activist and former head of the Human Rights Campaign, took their twins Thomas and Timothy to the Egg Roll. She said there were a handful of protesters who showed up with signs last year but they were so far away from the main festivities, the children had no idea they were there.

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“For them, the day was incredibly fun,” Chrisler said.

The boys are excited about this year’s event, she added, because they get to go on their first camp out—waiting for tickets Friday night on the Ellipse with their moms and thousands of other families. About 100 gay families from New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Washington D.C., Virginia and from places as far away as Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and California are expected to attend the event this Easter holiday weekend.

Cathy Renna and her partner Leah McElrath of New York will be camping out once again with their 18-month-old daughter Rosemary, a second year Egg Roll veteran.

Renna handles communications for Family Pride and said she was amazed by the welcome reception the gay families received from other families last year while they waited for tickets and during the event itself.

“It was raining and we were all in tents, so there was no choice but to bond,” she said.

“We wanted to show people that this is what a gay family looks like. Families come in so many shapes and forms,” Renna said. “Family Pride brought together people with the right intent—and everybody wanted the leis.”

Renna noted another change in press coverage this time around. “Last year, we were making the point that we exist. This year, it’s just, We’re still here,” she said. “This year, we’re the B story,” she added, saying that she doesn’t expect the same interest level from the major networks.

Chrisler said the group will be visible Friday evening on the Ellipse with their glow sticks and on Monday at the Egg Roll with their rainbow leis.

This year Family Pride is bringing extra leis to hand out to gay-friendly families, too.

“It’s hard to say no when you have a four- or five-year-old standing in front of you saying, ‘Give me a pretty necklace,’” she said.

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