

## 'Living Sober' Testimony

# 2800 Gather in S.F. For Gay AA Meeting

By Katy Butler

A tall, elegant woman, wearing a safari skirt and a garland of flowers in her hair, stood up to the microphone inside a packed Brooks Hall in San Francisco yesterday and said, "Hi, I'm Michelle and I'm a drug addict-alcoholic."

A sea of 2800 gay men and lesbians, most of them white, tanned and T-shirted, answered back in one voice, "Hi, Michelle!"

With that ritual introduction, the world's largest gay Alcoholics Anonymous meeting got under way yesterday, bringing to a close San Francisco's 11th annual "Living Sober" conference.

Michelle, 31, a lesbian nurse who had become so involved with alcohol and morphine that she briefly entered a psychiatric ward, has been sober for more than four years.

Like most conference participants, she described herself as alcoholic even though she no longer drinks. She believes that her alcoholism is a fatal disease that can only be handled by abstinence, group support from AA meetings and surrender to a loosely defined but often discussed "higher power."

The size of the conference — and the relative youth of the participants — was testimony both to the amount of alcoholism in the gay community and its newfound health-consciousness, said "Charles," 29, a San Francisco florist. In accordance with AA traditions, he and all other participants requested anonymity.

Charles said that alcoholism in the gay community may run as high as 50 percent (others estimate 15 percent to 25 percent). Until the 1970s, bars were the only place where gay people could meet each other without harassment.

The conference, he said, belied any stereotypes of Alcoholics Anonymous members. "We're no longer little old gray-haired men meeting in church basements," he said, adding that 35 of San Francisco's 333

weekly Alcoholics Anonymous meetings are predominantly gay. "This meeting," he said "is proof I can have fun and not drink."

The conference seemed to be a meeting place for gays who feel uncomfortable in predominantly straight AA meetings and equally uncomfortable with hard-drinking gay buddies.

"Ruth," who has been sober for 20 years, told the huge meeting that once she got furious when an AA member told her "I had to go straight to get sober." She subsequently found a predominantly lesbian meeting, "and I knew I had come home."

She said Alcoholics Anonymous has taught her that God did not have to be the "hellfire and damnation" God of her Baptist New Orleans childhood.

"Last week, I was whooping it up in sunshine in the Gay and Sober contingent of the Gay Pride parade," she said. "As I looked at my friends, I was in conscious contact with God as I understood God. God as I understood God was present that day. If God was the God of my childhood, tell me," she said to applause and laughter, "Why does the sun always shine on Gay day?"

The meeting ended when 2800 gay men and lesbians held hands in an enormous circle around Brooks Hall to recite AA's "serenity prayer."

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

## Long Strike Forecast

Buenos Aires

The strike by pilots of Aerolineas Argentinas, in its fifth day, could last two or three months said representatives of the state airline, which has dismissed more than half of the line's 561 pilots as they fail to show up for work.

Reuters