GAY SOUTH FLORIDA JANUARY 11, 2016 5:28 PM

Gay8 Festival to celebrate LGBT culture on Calle Ocho in the heart of Little Havana

HIGHLIGHTS

Gay8 is a free street festival Sunday to celebrate LGBT art, music and culture in Little Havana

Stores and businesses along Calle Ocho are fully engaged, Gay8 festival organizers say

Four longtime LGBT activists and allies will be honored Friday during a reception at Ball & Chain

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BY STEVE ROTHAUS
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Miami financial advisor Damian Pardo said it's time to shatter the "mythology" that LGBT people are unwelcome — and unsafe —on Calle Ocho.

"There are gay business owners. There are gay people living in Shenandoah and in Silver Bluff. They are already there," Pardo said. "There is a whole community of transgender women that live and work there, and they feel safe, comfortable, happy there. They don't want to live anywhere else. But that story hasn't been told about Little Havana."

Pardo, a longtime gay activist who "grew up on the streets of Little Havana," is co-producing Gay8, a free street festival Sunday to celebrate LGBT art, music and culture in the heart of Calle Ocho between 14th and 17th avenues.

"My school was on Eighth Street and Seventh Avenue, the original Belen Jesuit," Pardo said. "That's the neighborhood I grew up in. And as an LGBT person, as a gay man, it was very important to me to see the movement start really integrating, start really embracing the diversity of this city by moving into it. By sharing it. By being willing to walk into it and have great music, some fun and invite others."

The Day It Snowed In Miami (2014)

Pardo and friend Joe Cardona, a straight filmmaker who spends most days working out of a Little Havana cigar shop, conceived the festival about a year ago, after Cardona produced and directed *The Day It Snowed in Miami,* an Emmy-winning TV documentary co-presented by the Miami Herald and WPBT-Channel 2 about the LGBT-rights movement in South Florida.

“Miami is one of the most diverse [cities] ethnically and culturally, and yet to me one of the most segregated in that rarely do we cross these kinds of imaginary lines in town. One of the advantages the LGBT community has is that it’s forced to cross all those boundaries, unlike any other community,” Cardona said. “Little Havana to me is a very exciting area in terms of its potential culturally, politically, economically. It’s one of the last bastions of ‘real Miami’ — nothing prefabricated or imposed, just kind of real.

“But it needs to open up to the rest of Miami. It needs to be open to all Miamians, not just Cubans, not just Latinos,” he said. “For Little Havana to survive, it needs to open its doors and be a jewel of our community.”

In its first year, Gay8 will cost $75,000 to $100,000 to produce, have about 40 booths and is expected to attract up to 10,000 people, Cardona said.

“It’s about time for the community to come together,” said Gay8 volunteer Alexis Fernandez, AKA drag queen Marytrini. “We all share sexuality, we all share race, it goes way beyond sexual orientation or political parties or beliefs. We’re all part of the human race and because of that we should all be together.”

Cuban-born Marytrini has lived in Miami 16 years. “Little Havana, every day it’s opening more and more to the LGBT community. There’s more acceptance, more tolerance. I hope that after this festival, it helps open more minds. I’m blessed in this community.”

Many media companies, civic, political and social groups are supporting Gay8, including the Miami Herald, El Nuevo Herald, Palette magazine, Univision, The Miami Foundation, Miami Dade College and Florida International University, Miami-Dade Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, SAVE and Equality Florida.

Even more gratifying, say Cardona and Pardo, is support from businesses along Calle Ocho.

“From the beginning, the area and the merchants have been key,” Pardo said. “We could not do this without a Bill Fuller of Ball & Chain. We could not do this without Alex [Hernandez] of El Exquisito Restaurant, or the Little Havana Cigar Factory or Azucar Ice Cream. Many of those businesses have been giving us support all along. We want to make it great for the merchants. That’s the really important thing about this festival.” Calle Ocho merchants Club Havana, Cuba Ocho gallery and Molina Fine Art Gallery also are working with Gay8 organizers.

"It's important to us because it draws and celebrates a demographic that's often not celebrated in the Little Havana community," said Fuller, who co-owns Ball & Chain restaurant and Barlington Group, a Little Havana real estate development company. "Hopefully, this is the beginning of an annual thing. As a community activist and business person I totally support what Damian and Joe are doing. I don't think we have enough gay-owned businesses."

Fuller, a Kendall-born Cuban American who isn't gay, said he was surprised to learn recently at the Gay8 launch party that hundreds of transgender people are believed to live in the Little Havana area, according to TransLatinaProject. "For us at Ball & Chain, we're for the masses, the people. The community is extremely supportive. All the local leaders are supportive It's going to be big. It's going to be a statement."

Friday night at Ball & Chain, the Gay8 festival committee will honor four Miamians who've had longtime, lasting influences on the LGBT community with Pa'Lante Awards. (Pa'Lante is Spanish slang, short for *para adelante* or to push or move forward.)

▪ Publicist and events promoter Louis Canales, "arguably one of the creators of South Beach," according to Pardo. "He was the person who looked at the Beach and said, 'When I look at the Beach, I see the French Riviera.' It was his vision that over time transformed into this international destination."

▪ Feminist and LGBT activist Julia Dawson, who worked (unsuccessfully) for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and (successfully) for Miami-Dade County's gay-inclusive human rights ordinance in 1998. "Here's another person who made it almost a brand in her life — equality and the struggle for equality," Pardo said.

▪ Attorney Richard Gonzalez, a co-founder of LGBT-rights group SAVE. "Here's somebody who's been an activist his entire adult life, contributing with time, money, ideas, energy — and really tedious work," Pardo said.

▪ Attorney H.T. Smith, a straight African American activist who also lobbied for Miami-Dade's human rights ordinance. "He just didn't show up and give a speech in 1998. He was a pioneer in the African-American community with his views on the LGBT community and he continues to do that today with transgender and many other topics that are poorly understood," Pardo said.

Gay8 will feature musical artists including Suénalo, Spam Allstars, Lucy Grau and Palo; six free LGBT films at the Miami Dade College's Tower Theater on Eighth Street and social events for women, men and families.

"I've seen a lot of coming together within the LGBT community, as far as Hispanic, African American, Asian, gringa," said volunteer Amy Bloom, who works at FIU's Robert Stempel College of Public Health and Social Work. She moved from Chicago to Miami about two years ago to be with her Cuban-American partner.

Straight people are welcome, too. "As a community, as we move forward and accept ourselves and become more accepted by our friends and families and colleagues, we can all party together," Bloom said. "We can all have a good time, *juntos, juntas* (together).

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IF YOU GO

▪ What: Gay8 Festival in Little Havana

▪ Where: Southwest Eighth Street (Calle Ocho) from 14th to 17th avenues

▪ When: 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Sunday. Eighth Street will be closed to traffic beginning at 6 a.m. Sunday.

▪ More information: www.gay8festival.com or info@gay8festival.com

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