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Local News

Pride festival to unite Jews, Muslims

Gay groups coming to De la Guerra Plaza

10/11/02

By [LEAH ETLING-STENTZEL](#)

NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

At a Saturday event celebrating gay pride, Jews and Muslims reaching out to others who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender will sit side by side.

The World Congress of GLBT Jews, based in Philadelphia, and the Al-Fatiha LGBTQ Muslims, with headquarters in Washington, D.C., are sending representatives to Santa Barbara's Gay Pride Festival in De la Guerra Plaza, the showcase of a weekend celebrating unity and inclusiveness.

Faisal Alam, founder and director of Al-Fatiha, said despite historical and modern conflicts between their cultures, the two groups get along well.

"It's interesting that the queer Muslims and queer Jewish communities are in more dialogue about issues, including Israel, and dialogue, than the mainstream community is," Mr. Alam said. They've even tried to work on a peace resolution for the Middle East but haven't yet been able to come to complete agreement.

A former board member of the Jewish group, who wished to remain anonymous, said he wasn't aware his group would be next to the Muslims, but said there



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would be no "weirdness."

"Historically, the gay Muslim and gay Jewish groups have been on fairly good terms with each other, as opposed to in the Middle East, where things are not so comfortable," he said.

Both groups will be distributing information about their organizations, along with 58 other nonprofit and community groups. Along with faith-based organizations, there will be voter registration, job recruiting and other national coalitions.

The Gay Straight Alliance Network, which helps high schools develop student alliances, Amnesty International and the Building Bridges coalition will attend.

Charles Rice, coordinator of the event and executive director of the Gay Santa Barbara Foundation, said the event has many missions: to promote



acceptance, allow artistic and cultural expression, and promote Santa Barbara as a gay-friendly destination.

Mr. Rice, 50, came out 10 years ago with the support of a UCSB coming-out group. Today is National Coming Out Day.

"It's a very powerful statement that people make to be able to stand up and say it's OK to be out," he said. "If there's one gay kid out there who sees something positive in me or any of the other people who are doing this and they're able to live their lives freely and openly, then I as an individual will have succeeded."

After putting on last year's event, Mr. Rice realized that one of its most important elements was the memories participants were left with. In addition to Saturday's festival, there will be a rally in the Casa de la Guerra courtyard tonight, followed by an art exhibition. Several nightclubs are hosting parties Saturday night.

Syed Asif Hassan, a board member of Al-Fatiha and a coordinator of their Los Angeles chapter, said he hopes to make people more aware of the 4-year-old group.

The World Congress of GLBT Jews has history dating back to the 1970s.

"One of my hopes in being visible at SB Pride is to meet other people," said Mr. Hassan.

Al-Fatiha has just a handful of members in Los Angeles, where he has been involved for one year.

"Before that, I didn't even know there were other queer Muslims out there," said Mr. Hassan, 27. "A lot of what we're doing is outreach and trying to connect with people out there in the community who think there are no other people to connect with."
