



## Winter Party 2008, A Dance Against Hate

March 10, 2008

Daniel Lastra

MIAMI BEACH (CBS4) — While thousands of revelers from around the world celebrated the 15th Annual Winter Party Beach Festival under picture perfect Miami weather, in the hearts of many, the party took a much more serious meaning.

Coincidentally, the week-long fundraiser that has come to be known as the Winter Party Festival was held in the wake of two violent crimes in Ft. Lauderdale, both suspected of being gay bashings--one that turned deadly for a 17-year-old youth.

Simmie Williams was a 17-year-old African-American male, who according to Ft. Lauderdale police, was shot dead by two men after having an argument with them on Sistrunk Blvd. Detectives say Williams was dressed in women's clothes and would go by the name Beyonce. The killers are still on the loose.

Almost 24 hours later that weekend, 37-year-old Melbourne Brunner was eating at a Las Olas Blvd. restaurant with his partner, when a man from the street walked up to their table and started harassing them with gay slurs. Brunner and his partner finished and left to get their car, but the assailant caught up with him and beat him before fleeing the scene on foot.

Williams will unfortunately be the latest addition to "Gay American Heroes: A National Memorial to Celebrate Their Lives", a traveling memorial exhibit that is in the works to honor all gay, lesbian and transgender people who have been fatally victimized as a result of their sexual orientation. **The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, for which the festival raises money, has once again succeeded in breaking the mold of the typical dance party fundraiser—by hosting a preview and reception for the memorial among its 2008 sanctioned events.**

The exhibit is the brainchild of Scott Hall, who himself was the victim of a beating in Melbourne, Florida years ago in front of a gay bar. Ironically, Hall isn't gay, but recognizes that fatal gay bashings are all too common in the United States.

Ryan Skipper's family was present at the reception held at the Miami Beach Botanical Gardens. The 25-year-old was stabbed more than 20 times and dumped on this side of the road in Winter Haven, Florida before dying.

"I don't understand what would cause someone to have so much hate in them to slit someone's throat, stab them repeatedly, and smash them in the face," said Hall. "That's almost demonic; it's beyond hate."

Simmie Williams's case is still to be confirmed a hate crime by police, but that doesn't stop the memorial's advisory committee to review the case as such, because the issue of police not classifying hate crimes is one that the memorial tackles.

The lack of hate crime legislation protecting gays, and prosecuting those crimes adequately has

made for the group to create their own set of criteria to add the names of victims to the memorial.

"As long as the government continues to treat gay people as second class citizens, with don't ask-don't tell, and not letting gays adopt children in Florida, or not allowing gay marriage, it encourages and justifies everyone else in doing the same," said Hall. "And until then, there will be violent discrimination."

Jerry Chasen, Chair of the GLBT Community Projects Fund at the Dade Community Foundation, is closely involved with the work of the Task Force, and refuses to see the latest attacks as random occurrences.

"They are related to the atmosphere that this mayor [Jim Naugle], and this amendment foster," said Chasen. "If Broward doesn't have the good sense to deal with this situation, it's going to lose its reputation as a liberal and welcoming place for diversity."

Hall agrees with the comments on Mayor Naugle, and says he's created an atmosphere of hate in the Ft. Lauderdale.

"Whenever there is discrimination, it allows people to continue the violence," said Hall. "It's like Mayor Jim Naugle saying that he calls gay people 'homosexuals' because they are not happy people."

**The Task Force Action Fund, which is the lobbying arm of the Task Force, pushed for a federal hate crimes amendment that is inclusive of gay and transgender citizens. The measure was passed by the Senate on September 27th, and is awaiting final action after going to a joint House and Senate conference committee.**

Among the other events that the Winter Party Festival hosted for 2008 was an exhibit titled, "Days Without Sunshine: Anita Bryant's Anti-Gay Crusade", a women's jazz Sunday brunch, and an LGBT Family Picnic at TopeeKeegee Yugnee Park in Hollywood for alternative families and their friends.

Among the other events that the Winter Party Festival hosted for 2008 was an exhibit titled, "Days Without Sunshine: Anita Bryant's Anti-Gay Crusade", a women's jazz Sunday brunch, and an LGBT Family Picnic at TopeeKeegee Yugnee Park in Hollywood for alternative families and their friends.