

THE COLT 45'S

a brotherhood of charity

by George Rimmey

In 1976 a group of 13 gay men organized a self-styled "Western charity club" called the Colt 45's. Although they came from all walks of life, in the early years no gals were allowed, no fussy cosmopolitan-type gents, no tennis club groupies, nor golf-green types either.

In order to join the organization Glenn C. Smith, an early member, said, "You not only had to want to do good works, but you had to own a pair of black and a pair of brown cowboy boots, a black and a brown leather vest, and felt and straw cowboy hats." In other words, to be a member of the Colt 45's you had to be an easy-going cowboy type or an Old West buff who could rope-'n'-ride and was interested in doing what the Lone Ranger called "good works."

Colt 45 members did indeed make striking figures going about from place to place in their Western garb collecting money for various charities and people in need. Much of the Colts' early contributions were raised at an annual Country Carnival held at the Brazos River Bottom. The carnival was always very successful, mixing an evening of ring throwing, darts, wheel of fortune, and raffles with fund-raising.

Proceeds from the carnival were donated to community organizations, including Goodfellows, Variety Boys Club, and the Ronald McDonald House. The Colts did not receive any of the proceeds; all their administrative costs were out-of-pocket, as they still are today.

In 1981 the Colts became a nonprofit organization, and when AIDS appeared on the scene, they were ready to face this



Colt-45's 1981 Ripcord Anniversary: (l-r) Becky Pitner, Jim Moore, Ron Anderson, Ben Moore, Floyd Irvine, Marty Single, Rodney Smith, Daryl Butler, and Randy Chamble.

terrible catastrophe. Members distributed collection boxes marked "Aid for AIDS" throughout the community. It was almost impossible to go into a bar, restaurant, store, or any other business that served the gay community without seeing those collection boxes.

Not only did the Colts collect funds, but they also set up a processing procedure to disperse the money to those in need. The Aid for AIDS campaign was the impetus to the Colt 45's AIDS Trouble Fund.

The Colts were concerned about people diagnosed with AIDS and their inability to afford housing and utility bills after paying costly medical bills. The Colts

allocated funding through the AIDS Trouble Fund to qualifying PWAs (either on disability or living on a limited income) to assist with rent payments and bills.

Since the Colts' membership was limited to 25 at the time, the process of screening and funding applicants was a monumental task only accomplished by strict dedication. The Colts have distributed approximately \$393,000 in direct assistance to more than 1,300 clients in the past 11 years.

Many organizations in the community began raising funds to fight AIDS in the mid-'80s: Miss Camp America, the Dianas, the Royal Sovereign and Impe-

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rial Court of the Single Star, the Krewe of Olympus, A Christmas Songfest, and the Texas Gay Rodeo Association. All of the organizations wanted to raise money but were not set up or prepared to distribute funds directly to those affected by AIDS. The organizational efforts of the Colts were recognized by these groups, which contributed a portion of their fund-raising revenue to the AIDS Trouble Fund.

The Colts always stressed a masculine appearance; members in the early days would never consider appearing in "drag." However, in 1985, a very special person appeared on the scene: Lady Victoria Lust (Marvin Davis). Davis was a retired drag queen who, although sick himself, began performing again to raise funds for AIDS. It was his idea that during the Christmas season special attention should be given to those who were ill in order to brighten up their lives. He put all his tips together made during performances and distributed them in \$20 increments to needful PWAs. Lady Victoria Lust also contacted his friends to raise funds through performances of their own.

The Colts, liking what they saw, incorporated Lady Victoria Lust charitable work into their organization, thus giving his performances and money-raising efforts nonprofit tax status. They also absorbed all of his expenses. The Lady Victory Lust Fund, though, expanded into what is now called the PWA Holiday Charities. Amazingly, before this happened more than \$100,000 had been distributed to those in need. Lady Victoria Lust is long gone, but her legacy lives on considering the PWA Holiday Charities continues to financially contribute to the Colt 45's.

With their assistance, and other community organizations, the Colt 45's are able to maintain the AIDS Trouble Fund and two other main financial assistance programs: the Stone Soup Food Pantry Fund and the Till Thacker III Memorial Fund.

The Colts distributed approximately \$183,000 through its Stone Soup Food Pantry Fund, which is used to pay wholesale food vendors who supply fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats to the food center. The Till Thacker III Memorial Fund was established in loving memory of a cherished Colt 45 member and respected community leader. Grant recipients from this fund are generally AIDS- and HIV-related organizations that support other worthy community efforts. Also allocated from this fund is financial assistance for burial expenses to families who have lost someone to AIDS. More than \$200,000 has been distributed.

The community's confidence in the Colt 45's has been supported by letters of commendation from both President Bill Clinton and Gov. George W. Bush. Former Houston Mayor Bob Lanier also proclaimed June 15, 1996 as "Colt 45 Day" in honor of its 20th anniversary.

Colt member Jim Moore said, "The closeness and friendship among the members, along with the promotion of the Western image and the community confidence makes it all worthwhile."

For the first time, this year the grand marshal for the Gay Pride Parade was chosen by an open community vote. The Colt 45's have been selected as the 1999 Organizational Grand Marshal, recognizing the hard work and commitment of this worthy organization.

Dan Lindquist, the current president of the Colts, said "We will continue to raise funds and distribute as much money as the community will entrust us with to people living with AIDS."

One thing is for sure: If you're a Colt 45, you're a very special person.

George Rimmey is a community advocate with a long history of charitable involvement. He can be reached care of this publication.



TIMELINE 1976-78

From month, OutSmart will feature sections of the Houston gay history timeline as featured in the January issue.

1976 A perfect marriage of socialization and charity was attained through the formation of the Colt 45's. Since its humble beginnings, the group, which initially limited its membership to just 30 people, have sponsored a suite in the Ronald McDonald House on La Concha Street and have entertained at St. Anthony's Convalescent Home on Almeda. In the Jan. 1981 issue of *Upfront*, a description of the organization was published: "The club's aim is to do good works for the gay and straight community to show people what gay people can do." Also, Henry McClurg, who had founded the relatively short-lived *Contact*, launched the *Montrose Star*. From the very first issue of the newspaper, which appeared in July, McClurg sought after a stronger, news-oriented format than was



Gary van Ooteghem

present in other gay and lesbian publications of the time. Many Houston publications can be viewed to this day at the MCCR archives. **1977** In July, Charles Gillis opened Wilde and Stein Bookstore—named after outlandish English playwright Oscar Wilde and feminist writer Gertrude Stein—on Richmond Avenue. The store peddled books, periodicals, and both fiction and nonfiction literature about homosexuality and the gay rights movement. Gillis reportedly launched the store due to his hindered gay upbringing in east Texas in the early 1960s—the public libraries at the time yielded no books about any gay topics of interest. Wilde and Stein served the Houston gay and lesbian community by offering easily accessible (and positively presented) materials to a needy gay and lesbian public. Also, the bookstore served its purpose as a meeting place, serving as a template for stores of its type yet to come. **1978** The first issue of *Upfront* appeared in April, taking on a more critical and substantial view of gay and lesbian issues. Gary van

Ooteghem, the first president of the Gay Political Caucus, established the newspaper, which two years later morphed into *Upfront America*. According to reports, *Upfront's* founder used the publication, more or less openly, to fill a void that was lacking in the coverage of gay issues he thought to be most important. In its first issue, *Upfront's* editorial outlined van Ooteghem's concern for more relative and topical gay publications: "One of the primary goals is to raise the awareness and consciousness of our community through provision of information about issues of national, state, and local concern. Many of us exist in a vacuum, unconcerned and unaware of the serious and dangerous conditions that confront us in the larger community." Another attempt at org-

anizing Houston's community was through the startup of the Montrose Activity Center (MAC) in July. The board of directors of the newly founded MAC—which ran for nonprofit in an acquired 18,000-square foot edifice on Holman Street at the corner of La Branch—professed the center's purpose "to provide a facility for gay groups and organizations at a minimum cost." And used it was, by such influential organizations as the Gay Political Caucus; the social-political group, Integrity; Church of Christ homosexual support group, A Cappella Chorus; gay theater ensemble, the Montrose Players; and the Montrose Marching Band. MAC eventually closed due to insufficient funding. Pick up June's issue of *OutSmart*, when some of Houston's gay and lesbian history highlights are revealed for 1979-1981.

Timeline provided by the Houston Gay and Lesbian Community Center and Steve Brown of the Botts Memorial Library of MCCR. Research obtained from "Twelve Fighting Years" by Bruce Remmington.