

ADVOCATE.COM

Gays Take East Texas Highway by Storm

Posted on Advocate.com September 29, 2009

A stretch of highway sponsored by the "Tyler Area Gays" might not seem too shocking. But in conservative East Texas -- where gays are often thought not to exist -- this simple sign stands to make a world of difference.

By Duane Wells



The closest thing to a gay bar that can be found in Tyler, Texas, is the one evening a week a local watering hole hosts a "mixed clientele" night, when gays are "more welcome than usual" in the notoriously conservative bastion of the country. However, if you happen to find yourself driving through the vast region of the Lone Star State that is commonly referred to as East Texas, you will find, prominently displayed along U.S. Highway 69, a sign that reads, "ADOPT-A-HIGHWAY, NEXT 2 MILES, TYLER AREA GAYS."

As innocuous as it seems on the surface, the simple sign represents a gigantic step forward for a region of America where homophobia is so prevalent that just a few short years ago a local AIDS service organization censored an ad from the then-fledgling Project TAG (Tyler Area Gays) -- which is responsible for the Adopt-A-Highway sign -- simply because the text of the ad mentioned the words "gay" and "lesbian."

"I've lived here [in Tyler] for about three and a half years and I've never lived in a place that was so homophobic," Project TAG chairman and founder Troy Carlyle told Advocate.com. "This organization, Project TAG, was taking out an ad with a fund-raiser for an AIDS service organization here. They have an annual dance and they have a program and we took out a full-page ad in the program to introduce the community to Project TAG... to let them know what we're all about, [and] they removed the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' from [the ad] because they thought they were offensive."

The actions of the organization so incensed Carlyle, an East Texas transplant, that he felt something had to be done to make gays and lesbians more visible in his newly chosen home. It was that righteous indignation, along with a desire to create a sense of community in a town that is perhaps best known as

ADVOCATE.COM

the place where a young gay man named Nicholas West was abducted by three straight men and brutally murdered in the mid 1990s, that inspired Carlyle to launch **the website** that would later give birth to Project TAG and the highway sign that presently has all of East Texas buzzing.

"We're a very backwards community," says Carlyle. "So it was clear to us that we needed to get the word *gay* out there so that people can see it and we can start to desensitize people. And what better way to do that than to get an Adopt-A-Highway sign. We may be one of the last places in America to allow gays to live relatively free of hatred, but we were the first to insist that our roads be free of litter."

Despite his enthusiasm, however, Carlyle recounts that he was initially warned not to proverbially rock the boat in sleepy East Texas by some of his newfound gay friends in Tyler who feared a backlash.

A stretch of highway sponsored by the "Tyler Area Gays" might not seem too shocking. But in conservative East Texas -- where gays are often thought not to exist -- this simple sign stands to make a world of difference.

"I was told when I started doing this -- when I started out with the online community which evolved into Project TAG -- that I would be assassinated within months of starting the website," Carlyle offers matter-of-factly. "I had friends who would come over and they would break down in tears, begging me not to



do this because the gay community [in Tyler] was so fearful that we had to remain invisible. A lot of our problem is within our own population. We've been so beaten down...that we've come to believe some of the antigay rhetoric, so endemic is very low self-esteem [among gays] and a tremendous amount of fear to the point of [paranoia]. Very few people are out of the closet in this region."

In fact, there are so few openly gay people in Tyler that when Carlyle moved to the city a little over three years ago he says he was told that there were "no gay people in Tyler." However, that bit of information turned out to be the furthest thing from the truth. As incredulous as it sounds, Carlyle soon discovered that there were gay people living right next to each other who didn't realize that their neighbors were gay because they were all in the closet.

Asked why he and his compatriots made the unusual choice of an Adopt-A-Highway sign to herald Project TAG's message about being out and proud in East Texas, Carlyle says, "We wanted to do something that was community service-based that let people know that gay people care about the environment and that we're active contributing members of society and that we're people just like

ADVOCATE.COM

everybody else. The Kiwanis club has their Adopt-A-Highway sign and Tyler Area Gays has theirs too. We both care about the community. We wanted to show people that and to get the word *gay* out there. If it's too offensive to put in an AIDS benefit program, then, my goodness, people need to see that word more often."

A stretch of highway sponsored by the "Tyler Area Gays" might not seem too shocking. But in conservative East Texas -- where gays are often thought not to exist -- this simple sign stands to make a world of difference.



Listening to Carlyle talk, it's clear that he is at once a fighter by nature in addition to being a deeply committed advocate for LGBT rights. In fact, for Troy, a former Air Force officer who was court-martialed in 1994 for being gay, fighting and overcoming obstacles seems to be a way of life. Though he says he moved to Tyler basically to die, Carlyle is beating the odds in more ways than one and making a difference in East Texas, however haphazard his arrival in the homophobic region might have been.

"I didn't know it was going to be this bad when I moved here," Carlyle says with a laugh. "I have family here and I was dying of AIDS, so I came here to be close to my family...basically to die. But then I got here and got on a good [anti-HIV] regimen and gradually started getting better. It was then that I realized where I was. I didn't realize when I moved here that the area was going to be like this."

Whatever the reason Troy Carlyle landed in Tyler, it is clear that he and Project TAG are changing attitudes about what it means to be gay in East Texas while simultaneously empowering the local LGBT community. In addition to getting their Adopt-A-Highway sign up in just about three months time, Project TAG, which currently counts 170 members, has begun a number of community-based ventures. For a gay man who was kicked out of his choir, the group has started a chorale so that gay people can have a place where they can sing in Tyler. Likewise for a lesbian who was learning to dance in a ballroom dancing group, Project TAG has started a ballroom dance club.

And the list goes on.

"This is really a place for people to be themselves and to get away from that discrimination," Carlyle says. "We're really hoping that in the process we're going to be combating depression and low self-esteem and the kind of self-induced violence that can lead to it."

Find out more about Project TAG at www.tridd.com.