

Kings of the road

Not ones to idle, Empire City Motorcycle Club members rev up for 35th anniversary

By Paul Harris

For the past 34 years, members of the Empire City Motorcycle Club have gathered on the Friday evening that kicks off Memorial Day weekend for a unique ceremony they refer to as the "christening and blessing of the bikes."

This year's ceremony was conducted by club member Mark Wind, an ordained minister of the Interfaith Fellowship who rides a Harley-Davidson Road King. About 100 people gathered at the Lure, a gay bar in the Meatpacking District, to watch Wind christen 11 new motorcycles and bless 24 others for the riding season ahead.

Each year members of the Empire City Motorcycle Club gather on Memorial Day weekend for the "christening and blessing of the bikes." (by Jake Price)

The club, one of the oldest gay groups in the city, has quite a season planned. Members have organized some special events, including a ride through the Adirondacks to celebrate the club's 35 anniversary.

Many gay New Yorkers recognize the Empire Motorcycle Club as the group that follows closely behind the Sirens, the women's motorcycle club that has historically led off New York City's Heritage of Pride parade. This year 20 members of the Empire Motorcycle Group will participate, with ages ranging from the mid-20s to 75 years of age.

The group, which bills itself as the "oldest ongoing gay organization east of the Rockies," began in 1964 when 12 men decided to launch a gay motorcycling club after a group ride to Washington, D.C. for Columbus Day weekend.

Every motorcycle club has different criteria for membership. The Empire City Motorcycling Club's only requirement is that a prospective member must be a gay man who owns of a bike with a capacity of 500cc or more. Men interested in membership must also be sponsored by two members in good standing.

The club sponsors several group rides throughout the year but many members are also prone to take advantage of good riding days whenever they appear and gather on short notice to take to the highways. Social events are held to both bring the members of the organization closer together and to help others get to know the membership.

Jeff Arnold, a 52-year-old wine and spirits wholesaler who is the club's current president, says the group has become "my family and brotherhood for me."

"They are my support group," Arnold says. "We probably spend more time with each other than anyone else in our non-working lives."

Like many long-standing gay men's organizations, the club has endured its share of deaths to AIDS.

"We've experienced the deaths of members of the club, as well as being there for each other when members lose parents and family members," Arnold adds.

Ten members of the club have succumbed to AIDS. Club members have created 10 panels that are a part of the Names Project's AIDS Memorial Quilt. Members recently donated \$1,000 to the Names Project when they handed over the latest panel in memory of former member and officer Jim Newhard.

The club also involves itself in the wider gay community in two ways. For over 15 years members of the organization have organized "Toys For Tots" drive in which they donate literally carloads of children's gifts to the Leake and Watts Specialized Foster Care Program for children with AIDS.

In addition, the club has organized the "Bikers' Picnic," held each year since 1969 over Memorial Day weekend, which is open to all motorcyclists and their buddy riders free of charge. This year the club spent the weekend to Bucks County. The event attracted 73 bikers from as far afield as Michigan, Vermont, and Florida.

To celebrate the club's 35th anniversary, members have arranged a trip beginning July 16, which will take them cruising around the Finger Lakes and then through the Adirondacks. Arnold describes the trip as "the highlight of the year."

We've been planing it now for over a year," said Arnold, "and needless to say we're looking forward to it."

For further information, call (718) 956-6055 or e-mail ecmc@bigfoot.com. The club also has a Web site at www.webcom.com/biker/.

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