



150 Rally Near Stonewall Site To Demand Prostitution Arrests End

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With speakers recalling the 1969 Stonewall riots that launched the modern gay rights movement, roughly 150 people gathered at the site of those riots to protest the prostitution arrests of gay and bisexual men in Manhattan porn shops.

"We're here today as a community to say we are tired of being profiled," said City Councilmember Rosie Mendez, who spoke at the February 21 rally held at Sheridan Square. "Let's be clear about why we're here, it is because our sexuality is under attack."

Police arrested at least 30 men on prostitution charges in six porn shops in 2008, and those busts are widely seen as false arrests in the gay community. The city then cited those arrests in nuisance abatement lawsuits it brought against five of those six shops, seeking to close the businesses.

Several of the men arrested have told Gay City News they were busted after agreeing to leave the establishments to have consensual sex with undercover cops, and the circumstances of numerous other arrests examined by the newspaper raise significant questions about their validity.

Altogether, police have busted at least 52 men in at least eight shops dating back to 2004, and sued seven of those eight. Two of the seven shops closed while the others stayed open under agreements with the city that restricted their operations.

"Mayor Bloomberg and Commissioner Kelly, let me remind you that at Stonewall we learned how to fight back," said José Lugaro, who represented the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

A number of the 15 speakers who appeared at the rally recalled the Stonewall riots, which began when police raided the gay bar. That bar, in a new incarnation, operates at the same location in Sheridan Square and was within sight of the rally.

The 1969 raid was conducted by a unit of the police department's Public Morals Squad. Many of the 2008 arrests were made by the Manhattan South Vice Enforcement Squad, the new name for the old Public Morals unit.

"Our community, the trannies and the drag queens, rose up and said, 'Enough,'" said Robert Pinter, who was one of the 30 men busted last year. "It's time for our community to rise up again and say enough."

The arrests have sparked an angry response from the gay community. In a February 11 meeting between Brian Conroy, the deputy chief of the police department's Vice Enforcement Division, and members of the Coalition to Stop the Arrests, which organized the rally, activists were told that police had paused in their efforts.

In January, the police department's legal unit, which brought four of the five lawsuits, withdrew a

suit against Unicorn DVD, a porn shop at Eighth Avenue and 27th Street where vice cops made five arrests in 2008.

The coalition has demanded an end to the arrests and prosecution of the men who were busted, and an investigation into the arrests.

The rally also showcased clear dissatisfaction with Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who is seeking another term this November. The crowd repeatedly chanted "No third term" and booed when his name was mentioned.

"If the mayor can't or won't put an end to these abuses, then we'll have to get a new mayor," Andy Velez, a coalition member, told the crowd.

Also speaking were Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, Reverend Pat Bumgardner of the Metropolitan Community Church of New York, representatives of community groups, and elected officials or their representatives.