

The Bronx

Leader of the pack

By Christine Dinsmore

When Carroll Hunter leads the first Bronx Pride parade down the Grand Concourse tomorrow, it will be just one more step in his long march for justice. His role as one of three grand marshals in the landmark event will be an opportunity for him to return to the borough where he made history in 1959.

As a 17-year-old, Hunter started what is thought to be the country's first gay high school group. The members of Gay People for Equality met secretly on a stairwell leading to the roof of Dewitt-Clinton High School.

Hunter, who knew of seven other gay students at the school, formed the club as a way to fight back against bigots.

"As a gay person, I was supposed to be a victim, but nobody told me that," said Hunter. "They took one swing at me and pulled back a bloody stump."

When the school principal discovered the club, he expelled Hunter for "being a bad influence." Without a high school diploma, Hunter found work as a dishwasher at Bronx's Mosholu Parkway Nursing Home. But the lack of a diploma was only a temporary setback for him. Nearly 40 years later, Hunter has a bachelor's degree in black studies and sociology from Lehman College and a master's in guidance and counseling from Hunter College.

The journey hasn't always been an easy one, but that never stopped the 56-year-old retired corrections officer. His older sister, Eleanor Hunter-Jackson, remembers Hunter as a "rock solid" person who was always taking a stand for what he believed to be right.

"He is very persuasive in seeing to it that things get done," she said from her home in Atlanta. "He was never a whiner. He'd just do what he needed to do."

Those around him acknowledge that Hunter hasn't changed much. The man with expressive eyes and a booming voice still insists on speaking up about the world's injustices. He was one of five gay people honored last month by Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer for their "courage and dignity."

As a correctional officer, he worked in some of New York City's toughest jails—the House of Detention for Men at Rikers Island and the Tombs at the Manhattan House of Detention. Yet he has always been open about being gay. To him, there is no other way to be, and he bristles when he talks about people who remain closeted.

"I do believe that one day gay people will be treated like everyone else," said Hunter. "So when we get to dine at the banquet, those who were hidden in the closet, like frightened mice, will be the first to run to the table. And in their rush to sit there, they just may knock you down."

When Hunter was selected to serve as president of the New York chapter of the Gay Officers Action League in 1993, most of the membership saw him as a

person who could bring people together. But Colleen Meenan, who was the group's executive director at the time, remembers receiving several phone calls insisting that she was making a mistake if she appointed him.

"One, they would say he is not 'masculine' enough, and I would say, 'I don't know what that means, that doesn't translate for me,'" said Meenan. "The second was color."

Meenan, convinced the organization needed his strong leadership, decided to ignore the members who opposed Hunter and do the "right thing."

When Hunter learned about the objections, his response was to say that he couldn't "hide the color of his skin." While the group may have lost a few members when Hunter became president, the organization flourished under his four years at the helm.

Hunter currently serves as the president of Law Enforcement Lesbian and Gay International, the worldwide organization for gay police officers.

Hunter showed his mettle during his years with the Gay Officers Action League, said Meenan. But just because he's brave, she said, doesn't mean he's reckless. She remembers one time several years ago when she and Hunter were leaving a dinner engagement. As they started driving home, a van with four police officers with their guns drawn pulled them over. While Meenan "politely" asked the officers why they were stopping them, Hunter never took his hands off the dashboard. He told the police that he had identification and quietly showed the police his corrections shield.

"Well, afterward I was indignant," said Meenan. "I said to Carroll that they had no right to do that and asked why he didn't say something. Carroll laughed and said, 'Can't you see that I'm a black man? I could have ended up on all fours in the road in my brand new suit.'"

Hunter acknowledges that the struggle for equal rights is far from over. He says he is still appalled that some gay people think that money and social position insulates them from the larger struggle of human rights. Equally offensive to him are black heterosexuals who do not see gay rights as a civil rights movement. He says he has been stung by homophobia in the black community.

"I wish I had a nickel for every time a black person called me a faggot," said Hunter. "I have a degree in black studies, I know more about black history than most others."

His battles for equality included a protracted court battle with his partner's family. When his partner of 20 years, Lou Rosenfeld, died of stomach cancer in 1991, Rosenfeld's family contested the will. His fight was not about money, said Hunter, but about the recognition of their relationship. When the court sided with him in 1993, he collapsed upon hearing the decision.

"I collapsed," said Hunter, "because it was finally over."

Five years after Rosenfeld died, Hunter met his current partner, Stephan Sanford. And Sanford will be cheering him on as Hunter leads Saturday's parade.

While Hunter said that he is flattered that the Bronx gay community asked him to be a grand marshal, he said he didn't join the struggle for gay rights to win accolades.

"Nobody who works for gay rights does it because they want to march in a parade and wave at the crowd," said Hunter. "You do it because it's right. It's a civil rights struggle."