



Toy Party (Photo by Sher Pruitt)

Holiday Hoopla

Parties and concerts top gay scene

By **RYAN LEE**
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Gay Atlanta's holiday calendar is about as long and full as Santa's gift list, but a certain grinch is looming its head and threatening to cancel one of the city's marquee women's events.

Organizers of the annual "Atlanta Women's Holiday Ball" will decide later this week whether to proceed with what has become the holiday kick-off party for many lesbians, or whether to cancel this year's event and bring it back in 2009. At press time, this year's ball is scheduled to take place Dec. 5 at the Druid Hills Golf Club.

"There's obviously a real problem economy-wise, and it's impacting the event," says Dixon Taylor, a Holiday Ball organizer. "It's just a tough year for anybody to have a spare \$85 [for a ticket to the ball]. And if we have to call it off, it will be with great sadness, but it will be back next year."

This year's Holiday Ball will get the green light if more than 150 tickets are sold by the end of the month. Organizers increased ticket prices by \$10 from last year, as attracting corporate sponsorships turned out to be harder than usual.

More than 200 women attended the 16th annual Holiday Ball in 2007 and raised about \$16,000 for the Women's Resource Center and the Partnership Against Domestic Violence.

Returning to the list of Holiday Ball beneficiaries is the Atlanta Lesbian Health Initiative, a longtime recipient of Holiday Ball donations that declined to participate in last year's event because it was taking place at Druid Hills Golf Club. In 2005, a city of Atlanta panel found the ritzy golf club guilty of discriminating against two gay and lesbian members, Lee Kyser and Randy New, by refusing to grant marital benefits to same-sex domestic partners. The club staunchly defended its policy and threatened to sue the city before Atlanta officials backed off.

Having the event at Druid Hills Golf Club not only keeps costs down due to in-house decorating and

liquor, but also allows Atlanta lesbians to blaze new trails, Taylor says.

"Last year was the first time there had ever been a gay or lesbian event — and I don't mean a fundraiser, but dancing, socializing and being romantic — at a country club in this country," Taylor says. "We've been excited about watching the progress with Druid Hills."

Taylor was able to secure Druid Hills relatively late in 2007, and she thinks that contributed to ALHI opting-out of last year's Holiday Ball.

"I really didn't give them enough time to take it to their board and process all of that," says Taylor, who notes that both of the gay Druid Hills members that filed a complaint against the club support it hosting the Holiday Ball. Kyser is a member of the Holiday Ball steering committee, and New's law firm, Kitchens New, is a corporate sponsor.

AS THE HOLIDAY BALL HANGS in limbo, the final touches are being put on many other gay and lesbian parties this season.

After drawing about 4,500 people in 2007, this year's Toy Party continues to build momentum. The event takes place Dec. 7 at the AmericasMart 3 downtown, and attendees must bring a \$15 unwrapped gift or gift card.

"Despite the economy, we've had an incredible amount of success this year," says Frank Bragg, president of For the Kid in All of Us, the non-profit organization that produces Toy Party.

"The Toy Party is a very accessible party," Bragg adds. "For a \$15 toy or gift card that people know is going to go to a needy child, it's an easy party to go to. I'm just so proud of our community coming together."

Organizers think they may even see an increase in Toy Party attendance this year, as those who may have gone out of town are cutting back on holiday travel. An increase in attendance would be welcomed, especially since Toy Party has added at least five more children's charities to the list of beneficiaries.

"For those that a \$15 toy isn't a big deal, we'd love to see them bring two toys," Bragg adds. "Those kids need it more than ever with all that has happened this year."

For the first time in its six-year history, the Toy Party will also feature a silent auction that is usually reserved for VIPs and sponsors. Items up for bid include airline tickets from Delta, and getaways to a cabin in the mountains, or a seaside beach house.

OTHER GAY GROUPS ACROSS the city are also planning their holiday parties. The gay social group Asians & Friends hosts its annual Christmas Party ...

Dec. 6 at the home of two of its members. People interested in attending must e-mail organizers for the address to the party.

The Atlanta Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce throws its annual holiday party at the super chic Wine Loft downtown on Dec. 10. The event features free champagne and a raffle. A day later on Dec. 11, gay business bigwigs gather for the Atlanta Executive Network's holiday party and mixer at Trois in Midtown.

The MEGA Family Project transforms St. Mark United Methodist Church on Dec. 13 for its second annual "Winter Wonderland" party for gay parents and their children.

There are also a few slightly less family-friendly events. The Midtown lesbian lounge Bellissima hosts a "Sexy Santa" holiday party on Dec. 19 that features dancers and erotic performances. The Heretic is also hosting an anniversary/holiday party on Dec. 8, where attendees will have a chance to take a photo with Santa.

Gay sports buffs also have several opportunities for fellowship during the holidays, like Hotlanta Softball League's holiday party at Bellissima Dec. 11. The party benefits Child Kind, and attendees are encouraged to bring an unwrapped gift.

THERE'S MUCH MORE TO DO during the holidays than party, as gay Atlanta's stocking is stuffed with diverse cultural offerings.

The gay holiday season officially kicks off with the third annual GLBT Tree Lighting at Outwrite Bookstore & Coffeehouse on Dec. 3. Attendees are encouraged to add their personal ornament to the tree. The feminist and lesbian bookstore Charis Books & More celebrates the holiday in slightly more contrarian fashion, with a Solstice Celebration on Dec. 11, featuring photographer Kathryn Kolb signing copies of her new book of nature photos.

Southern Voice gets in on the action at a special performance of the venerable stage play "The Santaland Diaries" on Dec. 4. Half-price discount tickets are available for those who bring a toy to the show. To make sure no one feels left out at the holiday edition of P.A.L.S. Bingo, Bubba D. Licious hosts an all-inclusive "Christmashanakiuzaka" theme on Dec. 10.

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra has several holiday offerings that appeal to gay classical music lovers, including a "Gospel Christmas" concert Dec. 5 and 6, "Christmas with the ASO" on Dec. 11-13, and "A Very Merry Holiday Pops" concert Dec. 20.

The gay and lesbian chorus ensemble Our Song serenades music fans with its "Holiday Spice" concert Dec. 5 and Dec. 6 at Grace United Methodist Church. The two-day concert doubles as a fundraiser for the Atlanta Community Food Bank, as attendees are encouraged to bring non-perishable foods.

Members of the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus have been practicing since early September for their biggest performance of the year, the Dec. 12 and 13 "All Spruced Up and Know Where to Go" holiday concert.

"One of the challenges in programming a holiday concert is to keep the singers challenged with new material while offering our audience the kind of music they expect," says AGMC artistic director Kevin Robison.

Few things spark the holiday spirit better than seasonal music, Robison says.

"Music, like our sense of smell, evokes memories. I think when we hear a traditional carol, we are reminded, on some level, of when we first sang it —the first Christmas pageant we were in — the anticipation of Santa Claus," Robison says. "For most of us, holiday music recalls a very positive time in our lives."

For those who want to sprinkle a little spirituality into their holidays, Congregation Bet Haverim, a Reconstructionist synagogue founded by lesbians and gay men, is having a Hanukkah service Dec. 21 featuring a Jewish Klezmer band.

The gay-friendly Unity Christ Center in Suwanee hosts a candlelight service on Christmas Eve; other gay-inclusive congregations are certain to announce Christmas services as the holiday nears.