

PUBLIC LIVES Gay-Rights Leader Sees Shift Toward Public Acceptance

By TIM WEINER. The New York Times

WASHINGTON. Elizabeth Birch seems unusually calm for someone with year-old twins who expects a quarter-million guests for the weekend.

Along with her colleagues, Ms. Birch, the 41-year-old executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest lesbian and gay organization, is staging what she hopes will be the biggest gay-rights extravaganza ever to come to the capitol – a rock, country and rap concert in a football stadium, a two day street festival and a march with more than a few couples with kids in strollers and back packs.

"We're in the middle of a gayby boom," she said. "I hope that gets noticed by mainstream America."

People noticed when Ms. Birch and her partner, Hilary Rosen, who runs the nation's biggest music-business group, the Recording Industry Association of America, adopted twins, a boy and a girl, born in Texas last year.

The adoption was attacked by conservative groups that wanted Texas to bar gay adoptions, a position endorsed in principle by Gov. George W. Bush of Texas. Ms. Birch and Ms. Rosen were denounced by the pop psychologist Laura Schlessinger.

"How could any adoption agency give twins to two lesbians who don't even want to care for them?" she asked in a nationally syndicated column. "This has gone too far. We cannot continue to sacrifice our children on the altar of 'freedom' and 'diversity.'"

This brouhaha went on as Ms. Birch and Ms. Rosen nursed the twins, born prematurely, through separate severe medical crises. "It was an incredibly wrenching and difficult period," said Ms. Birch, declining to discuss the details.

She went into it thinking there were "two kinds of people in the world, gay and straight. Now she divides the world differently: "people who are parents, and people who aren't."

Ms. Birch's parents in rural Ontario knew early on that their daughter was a tomboy with a taste for a stage bigger than a little town could provide.

At 10, she cheered on feminists who disrupted a televised Miss Canada contest (while she simultaneously rooted for Miss Manitoba). At 13, she briefly ran away from home to see the singer Anne Murray signing records in Winnipeg.

At 17, as her high school's student council president, she canceled Sadie Hawkins Day and staged a folk-rock concert instead. And upon graduation, she fled – not to a women's commune, but with the squeaky-clean international performing group known as Up With People.

“Although it may be embarrassing to admit, it was incredibly enriching,” Ms. Birch said, traveling throughout Europe and North Africa, and encountered people who were different in the same way she was.

“It was my first exposure to gay people,” she said.

Flash forward 20 years, from the 70’s to the 90’s, past college in Hawaii and law school in California, from the chorus line to the corporate suite: Ms. Birch became a commercial litigator for Apple computer, and helped convince the company to extend benefits to the partners of gay and lesbian employees. In 1995, she landed in the executive director’s seat at the Human Rights Campaign.

Today, she looks and dresses much like the lobbyists who populate the K Street corridor, around the corner from the Human Rights Campaign’s headquarters.

Her office is a little different from most: there is the playpen for starters, and the photographs, many unframed, of herself and her Hilary with the president of the United States and his Hilary, and of herself tête-à-tête with Vice President Al Gore, whom her organization has endorsed.

In her five years, the group’s budget has quadrupled to \$21 million and its paid membership is up six-fold to 300,000. Much of that goes to trying to elect friendly candidates and to defeat hostile legislation; to building what the group sees as gay pride and to attacking what it sees as anti-gay prejudice.

Other gay-rights groups are grumbling about the way the campaign has dominated the planning and organization for this week’s Millennium march; some of that anger is left over from the campaign’s endorsement in 1998 of the incumbent New York Republican Alfonse M. D’Amato, a conservative New York Republican but an abortion-rights advocate over his Democratic challenger Charles E. Schumer, who beat Mr. D’Amato.

“I thoroughly believe the only way we are going to make a difference in public policy is with a bipartisan approach,” Ms. Birch said. “You are strongest when no one owns you and you can leverage one side against the other.”

But she said the shift toward public acceptance of gays and lesbians “has little to do with state legislature or Congress,” where the campaign focuses much of its time and money.

“At some point in a gay person’s life, you have to face this truth within yourself and have the courage to be honest with others,” Ms. Birch said. “And that’s what’s happening around dining room tables in Utah and Alabama. It’s having a dramatic effect.”

Fear and rage will still confront gays and lesbians who want to love one another, or marry, or have children, she acknowledged. “You’ve got to be strong to fight the last

battle in America,” she said. “We all want the same thing, and that’s equality. And the reason we’re seeing more rage is that we’re winning.”