

Something Like A Phenomenon

Icon or Relic? Bob Kunst Pushes the Envelope

Again With Gubernatorial Candidacy

By Ian Drew

When Bob Kunst announced his run for Governor of the State of Florida in August, it came as no shock to the masses who have never seen the impassioned activist slow down.

Kunst has been at the forefront of gay, Jewish and political issues for over 40 years. Whether protesting last year's presidential election debacle or organizing protests over Nazi war crimes, the 59 year-old Kunst has been called a man of extreme personal convictions by some and a self-serving media whore by others.

No matter what people think, it has been hard to ignore Kunst. He has been a constant presence in the media for decades as the subject of nearly 23,000 news stories and interviews.

Still, Kunst insists that his constant crusades have little to do with him and everything to do with being a vehicle for important issues. "America is fighting to reconnect with its own power," he says. "The essence of my campaign is to use me to unite the people. I will go and protest for their issues and rights as I always have. I am an activist, not a politician, and the real issue here is giving the people the empowerment to fight back."

The Miami Beach native says activism is in his blood. He was born in 1942, the son of an Orthodox Jewish dry cleaner in Miami Beach and the grandson of the president of New York's Henry Street Settlement, a famous refugee hostile during World War II.

Kunst grew up rallying people together while learning to accept himself as both a homosexual and a Jew. "I recognized my gayness at about 6-years-old, and never felt guilty about it or who I am. I had a clubhouse with all of my friends, boys and girls, and I used to organize orgies for us. I just knew who I liked better at that time," he says.

His first forays into activism came during high school by organizing marches to integrate Miami as part of the Congress of Racial Equality. While in college, Kunst became more interested in activism and dropped out. He spent the next 13 years as a part of the anti-Vietnam War movement in New York and Miami while working a series of menial jobs to support himself.

From what he saw as a hypocrisy and lack of involvement in real issues by the Democratic Party, Kunst entered the political arena in 1967 by forming the New Party with an old friend, psychologist Dr. Alan Rockway. At the same time, the duo started organizing hippie "Love Is" Festivals and orgies in Coconut Grove to enter the holistic sexual liberation movement. The duo also hosted a popular radio show of the same name.

From these festivals, Kunst and Rockway opened the Transperience Center, the nation's first federally funded gay and bisexual support center and network. During this time, a fury erupted that put Kunst into the national spotlight.

After opening the center, and subsequently being fired from a public relations position by the Miami Toros soccer team for being gay, Kunst was approached to write a story on the gay lifestyle for *Miami Magazine*. Kunst says that in order to have something to write about, he created the Dade County Coalition for Humanistic Rights of Gays in 1976. As a primary

initiative, Kunst and Rockway authored the Affectional and Sexual Preference Ordinance to the Dade County Equal Rights Amendment, which sought to include sexual preference.

Kunst says today that he had not intended for it to turn into a political battle, but that it was done to promote the welfare of the people that were being counseled at his center.

"We did it for preventative mental health reasons. We simply felt that allowing gays to live in a more supportive environment would reduce their stress level and allow them to lead happier, more productive lives," he says.

In a now-historic move, citrus spokeswoman Anita Bryant and the Reverend Jerry Falwell organized a group that eventually knocked down their efforts. Though it was considered a massive blow to the gay rights movement, Kunst still considers his movement a success. "Many gays were upset with us, but we helped the movement tremendously by bringing it entirely out of the closet. Finally, 'gay' was a household word, and we brought millions out of the closet through the attention we received. Also, our boycott of the Florida citrus industry cost it millions of dollars in losses," he says.

He also cites the ordeal as being a



them to want to get rid of me." The abrupt decision threw Kunst into tackling yet another new role – Jewish activist.

After visiting over 31 Nazi death camps throughout Europe, Kunst noticed "passivity among the Jewish community" and formed Shalom International to combat the trend. His more notable activities have included a 1993 protest against Nazis at the Holocaust Memorial in Miami Beach and a series of protests against the Polish Government over the commercialization of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Kunst claims his activities are all related. "This is therapy for me. Insanity and justice both inspire me. I am a student of history, and you can't play passive or they will ruin you. The Cayman Islands not allowing gays in, which I protested against in 1997, is the same thing as what the Nazis did. It is all persecution, and if you don't stop it before it spreads, it will kill even more people," he says.

Today, he says he has had enough. After leading 190 protests against President Bush's "false victory" across the country, Kunst says he is now running for Governor for the second time to again bring the issues to the forefront.

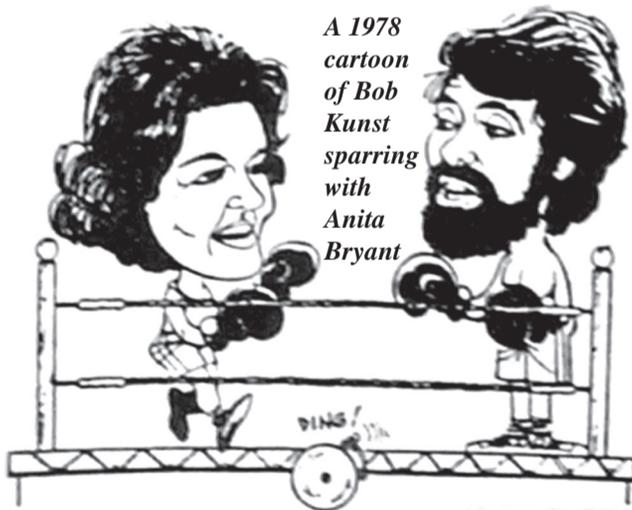
He still blames current Governor Jeb Bush for "stealing the election" for his brother and overpopulating the state, and he blames fellow Democratic contender Janet Reno's apathy for the same situation. "Janet Reno kept her mouth shut during everything so I can't support her. Besides, her closet mentality makes me question why she is hiding what everyone else knows. She also wasn't there when I was the only democrat organizing the protest in Palm Beach with Jesse Jackson," he says.

Kunst, who still lives in Miami Beach with his lover of 13 years, Marvin, says he will have no problem qualifying for the ticket in June. He continues to make money and support himself as he has for over 15 years – from private donations and the sale of the bumper stickers and merchandise that bare his catchphrases, including "No More Bushit" and "Impeach the GOP."

Kunst sees himself as the proverbial everyman, a Nietzschean ideal for the common voter. "I have been a successful pioneer my whole life. I am a gay man who represents the best of what America is all about. I am talking about the issues of everybody. I am here to legalize everything," he proclaims.

When asked if he thinks he will see victory in the Democratic Primary next September, he says, "I have already won. You can call me Governor now. I have won because I am fighting back." There is no sign that Kunst will be stopping anytime soon.

For more information on the many faces of Bob Kunst, visit www.kunstforgov.com, or www.oralmajorityonline.com.



success for leading to the establishment of the statewide Privacy Rights Act in 1980, which decreed that citizens have the right to privacy in their own homes. Kunst formed his political organization, the Oral Majority, that year to promote this victory and form a permanent oppositional force to Falwell's Moral Majority.

Kunst then moved to Gainesville and began to build up a campaign to run for Governor in 1982 against Bob Graham. He ran on the platform of marijuana rights, and though he lost, he again claims victory for gathering 75,000 votes on a paltry \$5,000 budget. He would later unsuccessfully attempt to beat Graham again in a 1986 bid for a US Senate seat.

In 1985, Kunst learned that his longtime business associate, Rockway, had contracted the AIDS virus, and he immediately started caring for him. This began a new period of activism against AIDS that led Kunst to protest International AIDS funding outside the Reagan/Gorbachev Summit in Geneva, Switzerland. He also founded Cure AIDS Now, a Miami-based AIDS service organization that would eventually deliver meals to more than 2,000 homebound people with the disease.

In 1991, Kunst was ousted from Cure AIDS Now because his "big mouth caused

Speaking of Kunst...

Major Players Sound Off About Kunst's Gubernatorial Run

"Bob brings an interesting energy to the race. He says a lot of things that many people think ring true. My focus, though, is on Jeb Bush as a threat, not Kunst. He has a lot of interesting things to say, and a lot of them I have actually thought."

Lois Frankel, Democratic Leader of the Florida State House of Representatives and Democratic gubernatorial candidate

"I don't consider Kunst to be necessarily running against me. He is running for governor, and I am happy to see anyone get in the race against the unacceptable performance of what is now going on. It is true that Kunst does not have much experience in public office, but he is a person who really cares, is passionate about his subjects and makes good arguments. He will strike a nerve with some audiences. I enjoy listening to him because he says the things that all of us can't say."

Darryl Jones, Florida State Senator and Democratic gubernatorial candidate

"Every Democrat in the governor's race wants the same thing – to get Jeb Bush out of office. Especially because we have no run-off election next year, I would urge Democrats to vote for the candidate they feel has the best chance of beating the Governor, [even if it is Kunst]."

Bill McBride, Democratic gubernatorial candidate

"Kunst is not a major player for the Democratic nomination for governor. He generates some colorful quotes and occasionally raises some valid issues, but the fight for the Democratic nomination is really between Janet Reno and Bill McBride. Kunst was not even invited to speak at the recent state Democratic Party Convention."

Ron Gunzburger, longtime South Florida political campaign consultant and Associate Publisher of *The Express*

"I first met Bob 25 years ago while doing a remote in Orlando. He is a true relic of the Sixties that loves to [protest] even though it is largely an exercise in futility. This run for governor will help him raise money for himself, but I wouldn't move his furniture into the mansion just yet. It is true that there are no candidates today that are saying what he is saying, but the public generally doesn't care about that. The fact is that he has little in terms of issues going for him. America has turned around and made George W. Bush a national hero, so running against [his brother] right now is just bad timing."

Steve Kane, radio talk show host and media personality

"Bob raises important issues that others are afraid to mention. However, they are a distraction to the true issues about the health and welfare of running the state. We should be concerned with education and taxation. Kunst's issues are really a periphery focus of the democratic campaign. He does have an opinion on everything, but he has no solution for anything."

Dean Trantalis, former President of the Dolphin Democratic Club and candidate for reelection this February

"Bob Kunst has a monstrous ego and always needs to be in the limelight. That is what propels him. He seriously can't be elected for anything."

Jack Campbell, Member of the Miami-Dade County Democratic Executive Committee and Steering Committee of the Dan Bradley Democratic Club