

## GAY PRIDE



*Villager photos by John Bayles*

FIERCE members strategize at their headquarters before a Community Board 2 Waterfront Committee meeting.

### FIERCE switches from protest signs to PowerPoint

By John Bayles

To hang out at the office of FIERCE on W. 24th St. is to witness a convergence of worlds: The world of L.G.B.T.Q. youth, the world of political activism and the world of ideas, among others, all collide on a daily basis in between the office's bright-pink brick walls.

Last Thursday FIERCE (Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment) held a Campaign Steering Committee meeting at their office and 20 members and staff between the ages of 15 and 25 broke into groups to discuss their strategy for an upcoming Community Board 2 meeting. One member suggested using a megaphone during the

public comment session and everyone talked about it and it seemed like a good idea. Then a voice from a distant cubicle yelled, “In New York you need a permit for that.”

They discussed doing phone banking one day next week to get West Village residents to come to the meeting or to write letters on their behalf. One member said he couldn’t because he had to go Six Flags.

This is the world of FIERCE, where a tight-knit staff of young adults oversee a nonprofit group that is ultimately run by its members, the average age of which is roughly 18. At 8 p.m. in the evening when the typical young adult or teenager might have been at home on Facebook or in a bar or club or doing just about anything other than discussing strategy for how to best utilize a public comment period, the FIERCE office was buzzing.

The group was founded in 2000 and its mission is to foster the leadership and power of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (L.G.B.T.Q.) youth of color in New York City. While its mission has remained constant, its strategy is always evolving.

“We change our strategy based on what’s happening,” said Desiree Marshall, FIERCE’s lead organizer. Executive Director Rickke Mananzala said the strategy all along has been to “redefine the notion of community” not only for L.G.B.T.Q. youth of color but for all people.

“The new thing we’ve added to the mix is working to propose policy around public-space development,” he explained.

“What’s happening” now for FIERCE is a coordinated effort to have the West Village community’s voice more than just considered when it comes to redeveloping Hudson River Park.

FIERCE’s baby is the Christopher St. Pier, Pier 45, or simply “The Pier” as it’s known in the L.G.B.T.Q. community. Since the ’60s the pier has been a gathering place for gay and lesbian youth who feel uncomfortable elsewhere.

In addition to working to improve conditions on the Christopher St. Pier — particularly in the evenings, from increasing bathroom access to getting better-quality food-vending carts — FIERCE also has been focusing on the nearby, far larger Pier 40’s redevelopment.

When the Hudson River Park Trust first began talking about redeveloping the 14-acre Pier 40 at W. Houston St. back in 2002, FIERCE began lobbying for a 24-hour L.G.B.T.Q. drop-in center, where young kids could access resources and services, such as counseling, or just hang out with friends in a safe, comfortable place. Drop-in center or not, however, FIERCE’s main concern is maintaining public access to the Village piers and Hudson River Park in the face of private development.

Two requests for proposals, or R.F.P.’s, for Pier 40 have been issued and closed by the park Trust over the past six years and FIERCE has been in lockstep with the community as they opposed various plans submitted by private developers. FIERCE doesn’t want to see the waterfront drastically transformed and the one place where many queer youth go to feel at home

just disappear. But more than that, they don't want to see the park gobbled up by a developer that doesn't have the community's best interests at heart.

In the beginning, FIERCE showed up at public hearings and community board meetings en masse, with signs and banners and T-shirts. They were angry and they were loud and they let people know exactly what they wanted, whether it was to protest a curfew on the pier or to demand more police accountability in the face of harassment. But as things evolve in the park, so does FIERCE. Recently they joined with the Urban Justice Center, a group that lends legal expertise to nonprofits. Earlier this year, along with U.J.C., FIERCE issued its first "white paper," detailing exactly what they believe the park Trust should pay attention to moving forward.

Marshall said it was a deliberate move to put down the protest signs and pick up the PowerPoint presentations. But she was quick to make clear that the "R" in FIERCE stands for "radical" and they will always be a radical group regardless of how much they cater to the system, such as using legal language to make a point instead of activist rhetoric to make demands. Marshall said simply the fact that they are young and they are demanding to be heard makes them radical.

Azrael Morales is 22 and has been a FIERCE member for a little more than a year.

"Even though I'm 22, and a lot of [the members] are much younger, we have a cause, we have something to fight for and we want to be heard," he said. "I've learned that I can be taken seriously."

At the heart of FIERCE is the belief that everyone has a voice and everyone should be counted. When he joined, Morales said he didn't know much about the issues with the waterfront.

"Desiree said they're proper protocols, that we don't want to just come out like angry people," said Morales. "We want to do it in the proper way and show we're also part of the community."

Mananzala also spoke to the idea of becoming more organized.

"That shift has helped us clarify what our goals are," said Mananzala. "We'll certainly protest when we need to, but we'll be doing it in a way that shows we're viable stakeholders in the community."

Currently, the redevelopment of Pier 40 lies in limbo. So without an R.F.P. open at the moment, FIERCE finds itself left looking at the bigger picture. Mananzala said the long-range goal was to get the youth drop-in center on Pier 40. If that doesn't happen, he said whatever goes on the pier, FIERCE wants to ensure that the community has a say.

"The bigger picture, of course, is making sure the West Village is a safe place for our community," he said. "Are we offering solutions that are just benefiting us or ones that will benefit everyone in the community? That has shown the community that we're serious about saving it," said Mananzala.

On Thursday it was decided they would try to bring at least 35 members to the meeting the following Monday; power in numbers. Someone made the suggestion to lower the number because having too many “kids” could be a bad thing and would look too “immature.”

Marshall reminded everyone that FIERCE owed its existence explicitly due to that train of thought.

“Our members are so used to being dismissed so quickly, or not even asked,” said Marshall. “It’s like we’re not even acknowledged. As youth, that’s what were taught: We should be seen and not heard. And when we’re heard too loudly, we’re doing something wrong.”

The Christopher St. Pier is also a recruiting ground of sorts for FIERCE. Because so many L.G.B.T.Q. youth of color hang out there, it’s a natural means of increasing the group’s membership base. John Blasco, 20, runs the base-building component at FIERCE. He was at the pier two years ago when a member of the organization’s outreach team approached him, and he just recently made the transition to staff. Because FIERCE is a membership-led organization, his peers had to vote on his promotion.

“For me and for my friends, before we came into the organization we didn’t know much about what was going on,” Blasco said. “We didn’t know about the redevelopment at Pier 40. Besides the amazing energy and just feeling safe, we’ve learned so much.”