

Atlanta's Femme Mafioso



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Not long ago, when Aly Stealey and some fellow femmes donned sparkly makeup, short skirts and fierce heels to Atlanta's lesbian hot spot My Sisters' Room, they faced a wall of blank stares.

"The bartenders wouldn't serve us," she recalls. "No one would talk to us."

One patron, unhappy at what she perceived to be a straight girl invading queer space, threw a lit cigarette at Stealey's dress, burning a hole in it. "I was like, 'All we're trying to do is find some butches,'" she says.

Fast-forward months later, to when Stealey and her girls were welcomed with open arms at My Sisters' Room and other bars around the city. Today they march in the gay and black pride parades. They volunteer in the community. They invade leather bars where, Rachael Smith says, "the boys love us."

How did Smith, Stealey and their friends find such sudden femme acceptance — and how can you, too? Simple: Join the mafia.

The Atlanta Femme Mafia, a 115-member strong group of femmes of all genders, ages and sexual orientations, was founded in 2005 to empower femmes within queer communities. When the women were isolated, they appeared to the educated eye to be straight. When they showed up 30 strong, with their partners and dates in tow, they became a force.

"Atlanta is a very queer place, but I noticed that there didn't seem to be a femme presence at all," explains Smith, founder and prima donna of the mafia.

Smith, Stealey and other mafia femmes discussed their femme community at Femme 2006's "The Atlanta Femme Mafia: Exploring and Creating Our Fabulous Femme Communities." Want to create a mafia of your own? Smith says the group is franchising; there are already mafias forming in Milwaukee and in Springfield, Mo.

If you'd like to start a homegrown femme group, here are some tips from femmes who've been there:

- Kill the cliques. To make your femme society a real reflection of the femmes who live in it, you can't discriminate by gender, race or personality. Invite bi, trans and male-bodied folks to join if they self-identify as femme.
- Ditch the drama. If Kiki won't come because Annie is coming, don't get involved. Invite everyone, and let them work it out.
- Get the word out. Grow your femme mafia the old-fashioned way: word of mouth. These days, that can include everything from MySpace pages, Craigslist announcements and evites to flyering queers at the grocery store. Print up business cards to hand out in casual conversations. Get everyone involved by posting flyers at the queer bars you don't visit as well as at the ones you do.
- Get out the glitter pen and set a date. Regular social events can give those starved for femme camaraderie something to look forward to. Plan an event for the same time every month, and be sure everyone knows about it.
- No bois allowed. The Atlanta Femme Mafia found it was important to have a dinner that was femme-only for the femmes to bond and talk about "pink and politics," as one member said. After dinner, retire to a local bar or another social place and invite allies, partners and femme lovers to join the fun at a later time.
- Be silly. Keep the group approachable for closeted femmes or femme lovers by ditching the ice-femme mystique. Got silliness? Share it with photos and games.

For more information about joining the Atlanta Femme Mafia or starting your own franchise, visit femmefafia.com. — Heather Boerner