

Pimp & no

'Pimp-and-Ho' protesters have big problems with party's message

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The annual Pimp-and-Ho Halloween Party at Transit nightclub is a fun-filled gathering of beautiful people, according to the event promoter.

Provocatively dressed women and men in big hats, fur coats and brightly colored suits come from around the city, the suburbs and even across state lines for the event at Transit, 1431 W. Lake St.

The party—which marks its sixth year on Saturday—attracted a record 1,200 guests last year, local event creator and promoter Brad Altman said.

"Local celebrities show up, my friends fly in from out of town, and we have the best time," said Altman, who also promotes masquerade and Sweetest Day parties at Transit. "This is just another theme party we do, and it's the first time we've ever had anyone say there was a problem."

That problem is that protesters have been calling Altman asking him to change the name of the party.

The effort was organized by the director of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, Rachel Durchslag. She, along with other community activists and a former prostitute who talked to RedEye, said parties that glamorize pimping and prostitution are a disservice to women destroyed by that lifestyle. The party is one more disturbing reminder that pimps, who abuse women and prey on girls, are considered pop culture idols with drinks, a popular MTV show and cups named after them, they said.

Locals love to get pimped out all year round, according to the manager of Fantasy Costumes Headquarters at 4065 N. Milwaukee Ave. Pimp costumes and accessories have been among the hottest-selling Halloween items for at least five years, store manager Cathy Bunger said, adding that locals wear them to '70s parties throughout the year.

"People love the big rings with fake diamonds in them, pimp chains, rhinestone-encrusted watches and big gold jewelry that says 'pimp' or 'player,'" Bunger told RedEye.

Impersonating pimps at parties is wrong no matter how harmless it seems, Durchslag said.

"Throughout our culture, we've normalized the pimp and ho relationship," said Durchslag, 28. "It's a very racist stereotype that is being used to promote anything from baby clothes to a custom car on 'Pimp My Ride.' This is not something to dress as or laugh at."

At least 50 locals have spoken with Altman by phone to protest the name of the party, he said, adding that many of them were women well outside the twentysomething to thirtysomething demographic of the party.

"The people who are calling me obviously have never been to my party," said Altman, who got the idea in 2000 after attending a long-running, similarly themed, celebrity-studded party in Las Vegas. "Our party is a bunch of postgraduate kids who go out to the nightclubs once a year, and instead of wearing a typical Halloween costume, they dress a little sexier."

The definitions of pimp and ho have changed, according to Julia Shell, spokeswoman for Vision nightclub, 632 N.

Dearborn St., who said the club's Pimp 'n' Ho Halloween Ball annually attracts about 1,000 guests.

"Nowadays, the word pimp, by most in this demographic, think of the word as being a player and a ho is a sexy girl,"

Shell said, adding that Vision's event—celebrating its sixth year on Friday—has never gotten a negative reaction. "Those who choose to come to the event attend because they know what to expect: a good party that's a little wild, and all in the name of fun."

Bucktown resident Kourtney Slack sees no problem with these themed parties. Slack, 21, called the concept an "awesome idea" when asked about it by RedEye.

"It's not making fun of real pimps and prostitutes," Slack said. "It's Halloween. It's just having fun dressing up."

Those kinds of explanations do not sit well with Lucretia Clay-Ward, who said she spent more than 20 years as a prostitute, saddled with drug addiction and prison time. Clay-Ward, 41, recently got married and hasn't used drugs in four years, she said, but she still carries a reminder of her past: HIV contracted from a pimp.

That's why Clay-Ward said she finds the idea of pimp-and-ho parties "disgusting."

"It's belittling because I'll bet if you went up to one of these young people and asked, they'd tell you they don't want a ho anywhere near their street corner," Clay-Ward said. "But, for fun, they want to embrace that and portray that image without even understanding the pain that these women go through or the horrible things pimps do to them."

One 28-year-old Lincoln Parker said she could see why such parties are problematic.

"I wouldn't go as far as protesting this kind of party, but I wouldn't attend one myself," Michelle Moore said when asked about it by RedEye. "The name has a negative connotation."

Even anti-pimp-party organizers acknowledge that changing event names is a small step in the fight against glamorizing pimps.

"That song 'It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp' won an Oscar," said Samir Goswami, associate director of policy at the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless and an advocate for women leaving prostitution. "Pimping is everywhere, but still, these kinds of events need to be addressed. Idolizing pimps says to victims of prostitution that they don't matter."

Altman said he understands the concerns of protesters, but there is something he wants them to understand as well:

"This isn't that Player's Ball," Altman said, referring to an annual event headlined by admitted former West Side pimp-turned-preacher Archbishop Don Magic Juan. Last year, the 30th annual Players Ball Convention drew protests from residents of the western suburb of Maywood, a state representative and several community groups who decried the event's crowning of the "international pimp of the year," according to a Tribune report.

"We're just providing people with a chance to be something different than they are in everyday life," Altman said. "In fact, the event name is not as reflective as it used to be. Over the years, we've seen less of the actual pimp costumes and more of the devils, zombies and other kinds of costumes."

Still, Altman said discussions with protesters prompted him to re-evaluate the event's name.

"If I didn't have so much brand equity in this party name, I would change it in a heartbeat," Altman said, adding that he will talk with Transit owners about possibly changing the name of next year's event.

Clay-Ward said she thinks Altman's decision would be easier if he and party attendees could walk in her shoes.

"What would these people do if one of their kids was a prostitute?" Clay-Ward asked. "These promoters aren't thinking about the young girls out there who hear this name and start thinking this could be a way out for them. If they did, they'd