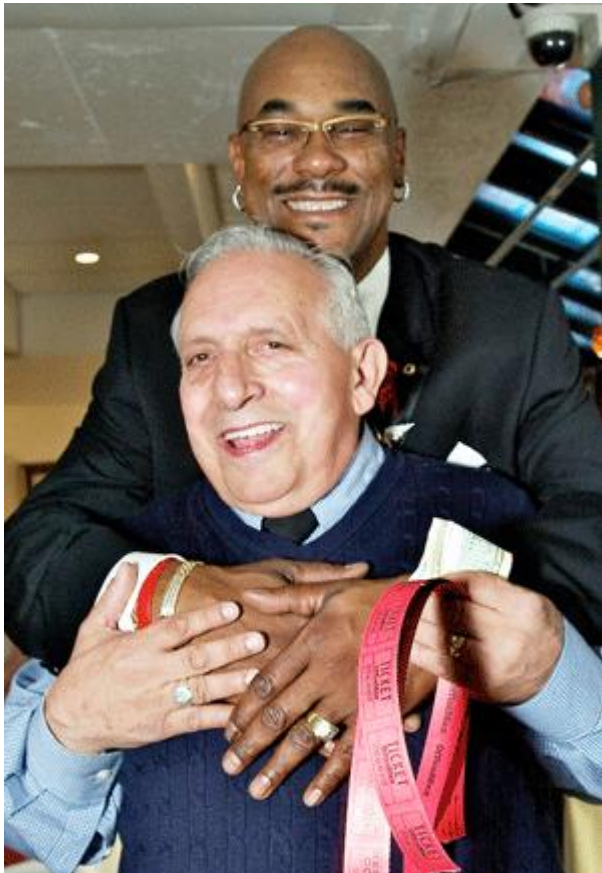


Castro Lions welcome first black president

NEWS

Published 06/16/2011

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1 Castro Lions' incoming president, Troy Brunet, back, with immediate past president Dennis Hale at last week's installation dinner. (Photo: Jane Philomen Cleland)

Castro Lions' incoming president, Troy Brunet, back, with immediate past president Dennis Hale at last week's installation dinner. (Photo: Jane Philomen Cleland)

When Troy Brunet assumes his duties July 1 as president of the Castro Lions, it will mark the first time the philanthropic club has had a black president.

Dennis Hale, who is stepping down next month and will become the club's immediate past president, said Brunet is believed to be the first person of color to lead the Castro Lions since its founding 27 years ago.

"As far as our club is concerned, we are colorblind," said Hale, adding that in addition to having members of various ethnic backgrounds, the group also welcomes straight members despite it being the first LGBT-identified Lions club. Brunet joined the group, which raises money to fight blindness and for local nonprofits, in 2007. A Castro resident, he has been serving as the club's first vice president.

In an interview with the Bay Area Reporter, Brunet downplayed the importance of his becoming president. But he said he hopes it does show people there are welcoming groups in the LGBT community.

"It shows it is possible to be a part of an organization that wants the same thing you do. People of different backgrounds can pull together and make things happen," said Brunet.

While he would like to see more people of color join the Castro Lions, he said his main goal is simply to recruit anyone interested in helping to raise money for worthy causes. The club currently has 35 members, and Brunet hopes to bring that number up to 50.

"It doesn't matter to me, honestly. I want to see people who want to serve. That is hard to find in any color scheme or race," said Brunet, 46, who retired from a career in the health care field. "We are not getting as many members as we used to. I hope to change that this year and get a few more members and raise more money."

He has already made a mark on the group, said Hale, adding that Brunet has the exuberance needed to be a successful leader.

"What I do know about Troy, he is a doer and he gets things done," said Hale. "He is great with other people."

Born and raised in New Orleans, Brunet attended Tulane University and worked at a variety of jobs throughout the South. Looking for a change, he had first relocated to Chicago where he had family.

But the city wasn't the right fit. One day in 1998 while Brunet was watching TV, a Rice-a-Roni commercial, with its "the San Francisco treat" jingle, caught his attention.

"I saw that TV spot and two days later I was on a train here," recalled Brunet, who lives with his partner of seven years, John Kiltinen, an artist and pool player. "It was a good decision. Luckily, I was watching TV."

Brunet, who is HIV-positive, has dedicated himself to fundraising and promoting events. For the last five years he has served on the board of Tenderloin Health, and he also sat on the boards of the Golden Gate Business Association, Community Housing Partnership and the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco.

He is a member of Mama's Family in Leather and is also a star walker in the annual AIDS Walk, having raised \$1,000 or more each year he has participated.

He threw himself into charity work after nearly dying 11 years ago. Diagnosed at the time with full-blown AIDS, Brunet landed in the hospital fighting off pneumocystis pneumonia and was in a coma for two months.

"I came out of that coma and hospital and was finally able to walk freely. I said I am going to do the AIDS Walk and I have been ever since," said Brunet, who has had five hip replacement surgeries as well as a shoulder and knee replaced. "It makes me feel good I can do something for somebody else."

Only recently have the Castro Lions sought to raise their profile within the larger LGBT community and city as a whole.

"For a number of years our club was sort of ... Lionism itself preached not to toot your own horn. To do things just for the sake of doing them," said Hale. "In recent years the Lions has changed that aspect of itself."

As president Brunet said he plans to continue working on increasing awareness of the Castro Lions and its contributions. Last year the group donated more than \$22,000 to charitable causes.

"We have a lot of fun," said Brunet.

Castro Lions members are invited to join the group by a current member. Anyone interested in becoming a member is welcome to attend a meeting, held the first and third Wednesdays of the month, at the Sausage Factory, 517 Castro Street. The next meeting will start at 6 p.m. on July 6.

For more information, call (415) 905-4667 or visit <http://www.castrolionsclubsf.org/>.