



By Melissa Dribben
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Shady Pines is momentarily out of sass. The 7-foot beauty, in black vinyl gown, fishnet stockings and studded leather choker, retreats to a chair on stage at the Gershman Y. She has spent the last two hours clambering onto tables where audience members were eating pizza and playing bingo. Stomping her colossal platform heels in their faces. Demonstrating, solo, a sexual position that requires two. She has offered ribald birthday greetings to a delighted middle-aged lady and asked a translator for the deaf to teach her sign language for “fake vagina.” Her audience expects her to shock them. Shock and flirt and enlist them in goofy competitions. Amid all the glee, they sometimes forget they’re here to raise money to fight AIDS.

This month marks the first anniversary of Shady’s gig as *Gay Bingo’s* host. Even with the deflated economy, she draws sell-out crowds.

The event has been held one Saturday evening most months since 1996 and raises about \$140,000 a year. Philadelphia’s version is one of the longest-running Gay Bingos in the country, which combine

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the church-lady game with a bodacious drag show. Each month, businesses, nonprofits and individuals serve as sponsors and take turns calling out bingo numbers.

“It’s always been a huge success,” says Rob Reichard, executive director of the AIDS Fund, the show’s organizer. “But it’s kind of unheard of for an event like this to become an institution.

The evening is not for gays only. Last month the crowd included child-care workers from Pennsauken, a lesbian couple from Center City, a Will and Grace duo from Manayunk, a divorced guy

from South Philly, an X-ray tech and his wife enjoying a night off from the kids, an associate professor of nursing at Penn and a 60-year-old school superintendent.

Gay Bingo has always been R-rated, but with Shady Pines as its reigning queen, the indelicacy has soared.

She has legs like Cyd Charisse’s and a waist like Scarlett O’Hara’s. Black bouffant hair like Gina Lollobrigida’s and awning eyelashes as fabulous as Tammy Faye Bakker’s. Shady’s face is as fine as Nicole Kidman’s before Botox. And her mouth?

Mercy.

Little of what she says can be printed without the pages burning in your hands.

As she takes a breather in her chair, she is joined by a sponsor and asks what her organization does.

“We provide human tissue and organs for research into diseases like diabetes and AIDS,” the woman says.

Shady, searching for a joke, is flummoxed. She stares blankly, then throws up her hands, sheathed in black opera gloves. “I have nothing,” she confesses. “There is just nothing funny about this.”

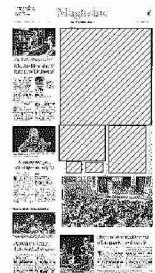
By this point, the 700 audience members know that Shady is no lady. *She is a he.*

But it’s only now, when she softens, that she risks the big reveal: Beneath this brazen exterior lies a man of good breeding, great compassion and surprising reserve.

At the William Way Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center at 13th and Spruce Streets, Kelly Groves sits behind a steel desk making calls.

The 32-year-old director of community outreach for the AIDS Fund is one of four full-time staffers. He writes grants, solicits corporate donations and helps organize the AIDS Walk.

Clean-cut, wearing jeans and an oxford shirt beneath a gray V-neck sweater, Groves looks more like Jimmy Olsen of the *Daily Planet* than a guy who morphs into a flam-



ing drag queen.

The truth is that he surprises himself every time Shady Pines comes alive.

He grew up in Dallas, a good Baptist boy who went to church with his grandfather, a retired U.S. Marine. After school, Groves helped his dad, who was a florist, deliver bouquets. And at night, he watched *Dallas* with his mom, who was a teacher.

He did his homework, played French horn, and mostly stayed out of trouble.

Groves studied acting at Boston University's School of Fine Arts, then moved to New York. He landed a few good roles, wrote an award-winning play, and with his affinity for *outré* women, found jobs working as an assistant to Joan Rivers and a publicist for Tammy Faye Bakker.

In 2004, tired of the wobbly life of a struggling actor, he came to Philadelphia and got into politics.

Groves was elected Democratic committeeman in Ward 5. (It's the highest office he dares hold, he says. "I'm high-strung. If I met a Republican, I would unhinge my jaw like a snake eating a rat.") He then joined the Kerry/Edwards campaign, serving as state chairman of the Stonewall Democrats.

It was in this capacity that he first came to Gay Bingo. Appearing as his unassuming self, he would urge audience members to register to vote, and discuss public policy.

"A lot of people," Groves says, "don't realize that in Pennsylvania, you can be fired from your job or denied housing if you are even *perceived* as being LGBT."

After the show, the hosts approached him. "They told me I was too pretty not to dress in drag," he recalls. But he could not imagine himself as a Bingo Verifying Diva (BVD), the cross-dressing volunteers who roller-skate around to check players' cards for accuracy.

"I'm not a drag queen and I'm not a transvestite, not that there's anything wrong with it." And he worried how dressing as a woman would affect his professional life because he lobbied in Harrisburg and regularly met with high-ranking officials, including the governor. "The two images seemed incompatible."

It took his friends four months to persuade him. He thought he'd do it just once — for the annual Black-Tie Gay Bingo in April, the year's biggest fund-raiser.

He stole his stage name from the sitcom *The Golden Girls* (Shady Pines was the nursing home where Bea Arthur's character sent her mother), and kept his costume simple — a black evening dress, heels and a wig. That night, as he was about to welcome guests, he spotted Gov. Rendell and other politicians he knew in the crowd.

Groves panicked. "I didn't realize they would be there," he says. "That's when Shady Pines got her sunglasses."

Large, dark sunglasses.

No one recognized him. "Somewhere there is a picture from that night of Shady Pines with her arm around the governor."

He volunteered as a BVD a few more times, while working for Kerry/Edwards. When that campaign went down in flames, Groves, 24 and disillusioned, stuffed three T-shirts and a pair of jeans in a backpack and bought a one-way ticket to Guatemala City.

He landed on New Year's Day 2006 and volunteered in an orphanage for children with HIV and AIDs and developmental disabilities.

"These were kids who had been cast off by society," he says. "A lot of them were in makeshift wheelchairs. Many were horribly disfigured. There were no toys. Their diapers were only changed once a day. It was almost as if they'd been kept in cages."

Groves bought an old boombox and played music for them. One boy, Muhammed, had a cleft palate and was mute. "I would sit him on my lap and play Peter, Paul and Mary and Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall. He would put his head on the table to feel the vibrations," Groves says. "It was astonishing."

His favorite child, Gloria, was HIV positive. "I would hold her and

rock her. I thought she was about 6 months old." Curious about her background, he checked her chart. "I could not believe it. She was actually 6 years old. She looked like an infant! I don't think she had ever been let out of her crib."

Groves wrote to friends and relatives, asking for donations for the orphanage. "A small amount made such a difference."

By June, he was lonely and out of money. "And I never wanted to eat rice and beans again," he says. "Ev-er."

He returned to Philadelphia, changed. And unprepared for how his inner slut was about to transform his life.

In Central America, Groves had realized that he missed the stage. Now he began acting again, doing odd jobs to support himself. At Gay Bingo, where Shady Pines was a regular, friends knew he was looking for a steadier income. When a staff position opened in October, Reichard asked Shady if she wanted to be outreach coordinator for the AIDS Fund.

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"Why don't you talk to me when I'm a boy?" Shady replied. "I will not entertain any serious job offers in eight-inch heels."

During an interview in his one-bedroom apartment in the gayborhood, Groves cautions, "I don't want to sound more noble than I am." He considers himself an "accidental activist" and can't believe his luck.

In acting class, "I was not funny. And I was horrible at improv. Horrible. Horrible."

Shady just emerged like some fully wrought alien. "She's a clown with attributes that are feminine."

Her bawdy language, Groves says, is almost as

foreign to him as her wardrobe. "I don't cuss as a human being," he says. Once she's on stage, though, he doesn't rein Shady in.

"As a classically trained actor, I may have stumbled upon the best role of my life, and I give back to the community. People laugh and have fun. That's a great gift," he says. "Which is strange coming from someone who has made a career out of cursing and insulting people."

At 6 p.m., an hour before the January show, Groves stands in a dressing room, buzzing a shaver over his chin. The BVDs are stuffing bras with foam padding and laying out tiny pots of blush, eyeshadow and concealer.

Groves is a relative minimalist. He doesn't do breasts. Between sips of Red Bull, he applies foundation and pencils his brows.

Shady begins to take over. She wriggles into her dress and asks a friend for help tightening the corset laces.

"Tighter!" she commands. "I want to have the smallest waist in four counties!"

The BVDs head for the door to warm up the crowd.

Donning her wig, Shady says, "Knock 'em dead, whores."

Fifteen minutes later, she struts onto stage, cracking a leather whip. Then she launches into a raucous dance number to Britney's "Womanizer."

The crowd goes wild.

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Shady Pines in full shtick, above, as host of the rollicking Gay Bingo, which draws sell-out crowds to the Gershman Y to raise money to fight AIDS.

Gay Bingo

Saturday at the Gershman Y, Broad and Pine Streets. Tickets: \$15-\$20. Information: 215-731-9255 or aidsfundphilly.org



Shady Pines
— gorgeous, raunchy
queen of Gay Bingo —
is, underneath the
fishnet stockings
and leather choker,
quite the gentleman.

AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer



Shady Pines, 7 feet of luscious ribaldry, chats with Alicia Uhl of Boyertown during a Gay Bingo session. "She" actually is Kelly Groves, above, clean-cut director of community outreach for the AIDS Fund.

AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer