

Saturday, June 15, 2013

The Stonewall Riots and Beyond



By Ramon Johnson

The history of the gay rights movement can be traced to the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village, which is considered by many to be the launch of the modern gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights movement. June of 2009 marked the 40th anniversary of the protests at Stonewall Inn. This brief history of the Stonewall Riots explores the angst by LGBT young adults and police entrapment that led up to the riots and the early activism and marches that ensued throughout the country:

LGBT Angst and Police Entrapment

The Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 is widely considered the beginning of the modern LGBT rights movement. The six-day riot, which began inside of the Stonewall Inn in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, was the breaking point of years of tensions between police and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender street

youth and pedestrians.

The 1960's were a heightened time for human and civil rights issues in the United States. Tensions boiled as the population tired of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam. Race dynamics were compounded by continued disenfranchisement of African-Americans, bubbling the rise of the Black Panthers and calls by Louis Farrakhan and Dr. King to stand against discrimination and disempowerment were being heard. And lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people grew increasingly intolerant of continued harassment and arrests by police.

LGBT people were subjected to civil laws that criminalized sodomy and, in New York City, allowed bars to refuse service to LGBT patrons. Arrests, harassment and instances of entrapment by police were frequent. Civil laws reinforced their actions. Establishments often cited Section 106, Subsection 6 of the New York State Penal Code to refuse service to queer patrons. The code barred premises from becoming "disorderly houses." Many, including the courts, considered homosexual patrons to be disorderly.

And, in establishments where LGBT patrons were served, they could not touch each other while they danced. Section 722, Subsection 8 of the New York State Penal Code made it an offense to "solicit men for the purpose of committing a crime against nature." Again, it was argued that homosexuality was an act against nature. Queer patrons were often entrapped by plain clothes police officers, posing as regular bar patrons. Transgender people were openly arrested on the streets.

One establishment where LGBT patrons found refuge was the mob-run Stonewall Inn. To enter, bar goers paid a \$3 cover and signed a register (often with a fictitious or humorous name). Bar management was often tipped off when the local police district planned a raid on the bar and would warn LGBT patrons by turning on the lights.

However, on the morning of June 28, 1969, instead of the usual command, the NYPD First District raided the bar. But that particular time, the drag queens and street youth fought back. There were reports of stilettos, bottles, coins, bricks and debris thrown. The altercation spilled into the streets and more queer street youth joined in the uprising. As word spread, more LGBT people from surrounded

neighborhoods joined the riot. The rebellion, which lasted six days, marked the beginning of the modern LGBT rights movement.

Very few images of the Stonewall Rebellion of the summer of 1969 were captured by the press or participants. The handful that have circulated, like these images, capture the atmosphere after the dispersion of thousands of rioters. However, few images exist that mark the beginning of the rebellion, which was initiated by transgender and street youth.

In his letter, "Mother Stonewall and the Golden Rats," Stonewall veteran Tommy Lanigan Schmidt describes those that started the modern day LGBT rights movement:

"This wasn't a 1960's Student Riot. Out there were the streets. There were no nice dorms for sleeping. No school cafeteria for certain food. No affluent parents to send us checks. [This] was a ghetto riot on home turf. We already had our war wounds."

Late transgender activist Sylvia Rivera, at the time in full drag, recounted her protest to police: "You've been treating us like shit all these years? Uh-uh. Now it's our turn!... It was one of the greatest moments in my life."

Soon after Stonewall, a new wave of gay rights organizations, such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) were formed in response to what was thought of as ineffective, more subdued, protests by groups like Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis.

The Gay Liberation Front

On the third night of the Stonewall rebellion, thirty-seven men and women founded the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), a more vocal and daring organization. They were the first LGBT organization to use the word "gay" and aligned themselves with other civil rights groups like the Black Panthers and anti-war

organizations. The GLF organized same-sex dances, demonstrations and worked to include gay issues within the social movements of the Black Panthers and populist organizations. They believed that together, they "could work to restructure American society."

GLF, who often called for LGBT people to come "out of the closet and into the streets," had no bylaws or formal leadership. Cells, modeled after the Mattachine Society structure, were formed all throughout the country. GLF believed that patriarchy and sexism were the root cause of the disenfranchisement of people in the States. GLF also believe that assimilation wasn't the answer and that in order to gain rights, LGBT had to take to the streets.

The Gay Activist Alliance Is Born

Some GLF members grew increasingly frustrated with the organization's focus on militarism, racism, and sexism as well as LGBT rights and in 1970 formed the Gay Activist Alliance, which focused exclusively only on LGBT issues. A number of other LGBT organizations splintered from GLF, including the lesbian feminist organization Lavender Menace, later to become Radical Lesbians.

The Gay Activists Alliance was most active from 1970 to 1974 and housed its headquarters on Wooster Street in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. Their home, the Firehouse, was burned down by arsonists in 1974.

The GAA adopted the lower case Greek letter lambda (λ) as their logo, symbolizing "a complete exchange of energy" or balance and unity. The organization dissolved in October 1981 and would later become Act Up! GLF held its last meeting in 1971.

After the Stonewall riots in 1969, many LGBT people—even those that did not witness the rebellion—were inspired to contribute to the cause. Gay rights had entered the national spotlight. LGBT people began organizing, protesting and mobilizing. On July 4, 1969, a year after the Stonewall riots, the Mattachine Society along with Frank Kameny, Craig Rodwell, Randy Wicker, Barbara Gittings, Kay Lahusen and many others, picketed in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia in what was called the Annual Reminder. The protest was quiet and organized to

the dismay of Craig Rodwell who felt Frank Kameny and Mattachine's methods of calm protest were not enough.

Rodwell returned to New York City and organized Christopher Street Liberation Day. The march, held on June 28, 1970, was the first gay pride march in the U.S., covering 51 blocks from Christopher Street to Central Park. Today, LGBT pride parades are held annually in multiple cities and countries throughout the world. The month of June is widely considered Gay Pride Month.

Forty years after the Stonewall riots, world headlines are filled with news about the progression of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues; gay activists have taken their protests from the streets and into the virtual atmosphere, sending messages further and wider; and laws are slowly changing to ensure equal protections for all gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Birthed from the Mattachine Society, the Daughter of Bilitis, the Gay Liberation Front, the Gay Activist Alliance, a number of national, regional and local LGBT organizations have emerged, providing services that range from political activism to legal and economic assistance.

These organizations have been successful in assisting many openly LGBT political candidates, LGBT teens in school and college, LGBT-headed families, same-sex marriages and relationships, and the media is becoming increasingly more LGBT-friendly. However, despite the many victories since Stonewall, we continue to face challenges of inclusion, acceptance and diversity within both general society and the LGBT community.

There are still only five states with legal same-sex marriage and many states where same-sex adoption is still prohibited. Gays and lesbian can't serve openly in the military and in 31 states LGBT people can be fired just for being LGBT. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens make up a third of all teen suicides, the fable of the "pink dollar" has been deflated with reports of many LGBT-headed families living in poverty, and binational same-sex couples continue to face immigration challenges.

Yet, despite the many difficulties we face as LGBT people, the past has been one of much progress and the picture of the future of LGBT equality has changed from the

improbably to the inevitable. Progress is indeed evolutionary and with a force of LGBT activism is at its greatest heights, equality can, and will, be achieved.

Our challenges in the next forty years will not mirror the forty of the past, but progress will move forward. Our voices, though unified, come from many of different backgrounds and of varying character. The diversity within the LGBT community is perhaps more known today than it was when the first transgender street youth threw her stiletto at oppressive police. The diversity which I refer to, not within the context of general society, but among the ranks of LGBT people all must be celebrated if we are to become a true community. We must be representative of the entire rainbow, of different likes and ideals and hues, linked of a common colorful thread.