

12e – Birth of a Movement



Few people thought about equal rights for gay and lesbian people before June 17, 1969. The reason: Gay men and lesbians were commonly thought of - and commonly thought of themselves - as on the wrong side of the law, morality and mental health.

In many states, they could be arrested for having sex. Most religions considered homosexuality a sin. And the American Psychiatric Association designated it a mental disorder, something that was used as grounds to bar them from employment in the military, government and other professions.

So deep was society's prejudice against gay men and lesbians that they risked being physically attacked, even killed, by simply revealing their sexual orientation. To protect their jobs, their safety, and their lives, most gay men and lesbians chose to hide this aspect of their identities.

But on that summer night in 1969, something changed. First, law enforcement officials raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar on New York City's Christopher Street. Then, they ordered everyone to line up and examined their clothing: Those wearing clothes thought inappropriate to their gender were rounded up, arrested and led outside to a paddy wagon. Those thought to be dressed appropriately were released.

Nothing up to this point was unusual. Raids occurred at the Stonewall monthly. But what was remarkable was that, this time, as the arrests were being made, people fought back. They shouted "pigs" at the police and threw bottles, cans and whatever they could find. Some rocked the paddy wagon; others escaped from it. And the next night, as word of the event spread, several thousand people came out and rioted again.

Indeed, after that night's spontaneous rioting, gay men and lesbians nationwide began to fight back against the forces that would define them as criminals, immoral and mentally ill - and they began to fight for equal rights. Although gay men and lesbians had stood up for their rights before the Stonewall riots, such occurrences were rare. The events that evening marked a turning point. Now gay men and lesbians were standing together in large numbers and refusing to be invisible any longer. It was the birth of a new civil rights movement.

The first significant step forward came just four years after the Stonewall riots, when the American Psychiatric Association rescinded its designation of homosexuality as a mental disorder. But the legal battles gay and lesbian people faced would prove much tougher.

As of the early 1960s, some form of law barring sexual relations between two people of the same gender existed in all 50 states. Gay and lesbian activists targeted these laws as unjust and succeeded in overturning many of them. But as of 2000, such laws remained on the books in 16 states, according to Lambda Legal Defense and Education Network.

Activists soon began to fight for laws that would bar discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, housing or education - much like the laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender or disability. But fewer than half the states had such laws by the close of the 20th century. And proposed federal legislation that would prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation still hasn't been made law.

More recently, activists have also turned to fighting for the rights of gay men and lesbians to serve in the military (see [To Serve With Honor](#)), to marry and to become parents. But while Vermont made history in 2000 by passing the first civil union law granting gay and lesbian couples the same rights as married heterosexual couples, as of the same year 33 states and the federal government had passed laws prohibiting marriage between gay and lesbian couples.

There remains, in short, a very long way for gay and lesbian people to go to achieve equal rights under the law. But many are convinced that they will eventually succeed because, they say, they are on the side of what is right.
