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Leah K. Rosenbaum
Lakeridge High School

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE STONEWALL RIOTS

Leah Rosenbaum

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Dr. Karen Hoppes
Portland State University
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THE INFLUENCE OF THE STONEWALL RIOTS

New York had been a site for people in the LGBTQ community to find each other for decades prior to the 1960s and the Stonewall riots. In the 1920s, people in the community moved to New York from all over the country in order to come together to form their own culture in the city. They simultaneously fought against the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. During the 1930s, the rights of the LGBTQ community had not improved and the discrimination continued. However, people began to write books and plays about homosexuality as well as perform studies on the subject. In the 1940s, a larger community was brought together by the war effort for WWII. However, homosexuals still had to remain secret about who they were since the Army regarded homosexual sex as a crime. During World War II, the Defense Department reinforced its exclusion of homosexual servicemen and women “tripling the World War II discharge rate... These punitive discharges stripped thousands of veterans of the benefits” from the GI Bill of Rights.¹ The history of oppression and silence from the LGBTQ community continued on, until the end of the 1960s when people finally decided to fight back. After the Stonewall riots, the progression of the rights given to the LGBTQ community became radical in comparison to the previous decades. Instead of staying silent while enduring the oppression, the LGBTQ community pushed back and began demanding their rights.

¹ David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York St. Martin’s Griffin, 2004), 14.

The history of homophobia and discrimination as well as the LGBT experience in New York in 1969 factored into reaching the climax the night of the Stonewall riots. Prior to the Stonewall riots being “in” or “out” of the metaphorical closet, did not exist. People only had one choice, to be “in.” If an adult was found out to be gay, they could lose their license to practice in their career field, ranging from a doctor’s license to a license to practice law to even a beautician's license could be withheld. There were no laws, either federal, state, or local, that protected gay men or women from being fired or denied housing. There were “no openly gay policemen, public school teachers, doctors, or lawyers. And no political party had a gay caucus.”² Children that identified as gay were often sent to religious camps to rid them of their sin or they were kicked out of the house and shunned by their families. Sometimes families went farther than just outcasting their own children. A young man that lived on Christopher Street “had an enormous burn scar covering his face and most of the rest of his body. His mother had decided that she didn’t want men to be ‘tempted’ by her son’s good looks and had held his face in the flames herself.”³ Others suffered from the same mistreatment when their families discovered that they were gay. To be gay was seen as a mental illness, people would be sent to asylums in order to be treated for their “illness.” The doctors would use aversive conditioning which is where they would “show you pornography and then give you an electric shock.”⁴ The theory that the doctors were working under was that if a gay man was shown a picture of a nude male and then electrically shocked, eventually he would be unable to become aroused. With New

² *Ibid.*, 1-2.

³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴ Martha Shelley, interview by David Heilbroner, 16 June 2010, New York, NY, video recording.

York's large population, many people in the LGBT community moved there in order to be able to live in peace and find other people like them.

Those who were part of the LGBTQ community experienced many restrictions in their lives during the 1960s. Both local and national government implemented various laws in order to make the common behavior among gay and drag queens illegal. An example of these restrictions in New York was it was illegal for anyone to wear "fewer than three articles of clothing appropriate to their sex... according to subsection 4 of section 240.35 of the New York Penal Code."⁵ In every state with the exception of Illinois, homosexual acts were prohibited by law. By the early 1960s, "laws in America were harsher on homosexuals than those in Cuba, Russia, or East Germany."⁶ In the height of the restrictions, around 500 people per year were arrested for being homosexual, between 3,000 and 5,000 people were arrested for solicitation and loitering.⁷ Homosexuals "found themselves in the worst legal position they had been in since the republic's [United States's] birth."⁸ The restrictions on homosexuals also created a market for criminals to open gay bars, upcharge their customers, and pay off the cops. The mafia and other criminal groups found a large profit from providing gay bars as a refuge to the oppressed people. Since "The New York State liquor authority had a rule that one known homosexual in a licensed premise made the place disorderly" legitimate bar owners could not own a gay bar for fear of being shut down.⁹ The crime families were able to cut costs with safety requirements and

⁵ Carter, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ William Eskridge, interview by David Heilbroner, 16 June 2010, New York, NY, video recording.

⁸ Carter, 14.

⁹ Richard Leitsch, interview by David Heilbroner, 16 June 2010, New York, NY, video recording.

increase the price in drinks since others were unwilling to take the chance on owning a gay bar. Since Greenwich Village was run by the Genovese family, the sixth precinct was paid off by the mafia. This created a safe haven for the drag queens and the homeless gay youth who congregated on the streets. The remodeling of the Stonewall Inn into a gay bar and the protection of the Genovese family made Greenwich Village the center of gay life. Tony Lauria and three other men invested a total of \$3,500 in the Stonewall Inn; on Fridays and Saturdays, the bar would make between \$5,000 and \$6,000 a night. The bar “made back all of its investment and then some the first night.”¹⁰ The Stonewall Inn was the place to be for all of the socially unaccepted, it was the pinnacle of gay society in New York. In order to ensure that their impressive profits remained consistent, the Stonewall Inn paid off the police. The *Pageant* magazine suspected that the Stonewall Inn paid the Sixth Precinct \$1,200 per month in an article five months after the opening of the establishment.¹¹ Even with the payoffs from the mafia, it was common practice for gay bars to be raided. Although officers were on the take, they were still required to raid the bars if they were ordered to. In general, a raid on the bar was tipped off to the Genovese family and would take place early in the evening so the bar would still be open later that evening for the nightly rush of customers. When the bar was tipped off, money was taken out of the bar to prevent it from being seized, there was less liquor present, bosses disappeared, and all of the customers were allowed to leave.¹²

Mayor John Lindsay wanted to be reelected in the following year, in order to gain support he had the police increase their crackdowns on gays. The act of raiding gay bars happened more

¹⁰ Carter, 77.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹² *Ibid.*, 82.

frequently, other citizens turned to vigilantism and they coordinated and attack gay people. The raid on June 28 was out of ordinary for the Stonewall Inn because it occurred during prime time for dancing and the bar had not been tipped off. This act signaled a threat to the customer's right to dance and drink in the Stonewall Inn and congregate in Greenwich Village. Although the gay community knew the mafia was only interested in exploiting them, they offered space, security, and freedom during a time when that was a rare occurrence for the people in the gay community. "The club fused these elements to create among most of its regular customers a sense of gay community and identity and thus a loyalty to the Stonewall Inn."¹³ The threat that the unusual raid presented, motivated the homeless youth to fight back because that part of town and the Stonewall Inn represented their way of life. "The open gay people that hung out on the streets were basically the have-nothing-to-lose types."¹⁴ The fact that these young men had nothing to lose allowed them to fight back with less backlash from society than those that were married, had jobs, or a place to live. The safe haven for these street youths was in danger and they decided that they were not going to stand silently as they were beaten and carted off to jail that night. Instead they stood up and fought for their part of town, instigating the riots, sparking the gay revolution.

During the re-election campaign, the raids were more frequent and "There were no instructions except put them out of business."¹⁵ Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine "was tired of busting these Mafia clubs only to see them reopen the following day."¹⁶ That is why on June 28

¹³ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴ Jerry Hoose, interview by David Heilbroner, 16 June 2010, New York, NY, video recording.

¹⁵ Seymour Pine, interview by David Heilbroner, 16 June 2010, New York, NY, video recording.

¹⁶ Carter, 131.

the Stonewall Inn did not get tipped off about the raid and Pine got a search warrant in order to keep the bar closed for over twenty-four hours after that night's raid. However, when the police raided the popular gay bar, the patrons decided not to comply. The raid started out unusual as it was 1:20 am and eight policemen entered the bar with a search warrant. The customers were confused about what was happening because this was the first time the bar had been raided at night. People started to panic that they were going to be arrested and suddenly some started to get angry. Another unusual aspect of the raid was once people were let out of the club they stayed and stood in the street to watch, forming a crowd. For some who had felt that the bar had acted as a sort of home for them began to feel indignant as the police raided their sacred place.¹⁷ Another reason people stuck around outside is that they had come in a group. Those waiting outside for their friends became agitated because "they believed that these people [being kept inside the Stonewall Inn] were being beaten by the police."¹⁸ There is some debate over whether or not a particular lesbian was present at the riot and heightened the tensions, causing the crowd to snap; however, there are many witness accounts that attest to her presence and part in the Stonewall riots. The lesbian struggled with the police as they forced her into a police car. Once they got her inside she escaped, the police caught her and the whole process repeated itself two or three times. This lesbian's struggle with the police lasted for five to ten minutes as she yelled at those watching to do something, "the harder she fought the more the cops were beating her up and the madder the crowd got."¹⁹ Many of the patrons of the Stonewall Inn that the cops had loaded into the paddy wagons were left unsupervised and therefore, escaped. Once those arrested

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁹ Lucian Truscott IV, interview by David Heilbroner, 16 June 2010, New York, NY, video recording.

escaped, many stuck around adding to the growing crowd outside of the Stonewall. People began to taunt the police about taking payoffs by throwing change at the cops. Soon after the objects being thrown began to escalate in size. “A general assault now began on the Stonewall Inn using anything and everything the crowd outside could get its hands on.”²⁰

The police retreated to the inside of the Stonewall, but the crowd did not stop, they threw objects at the walls of the Stonewall. A group of gay men tore a parking meter out of the ground and used it as a battering ram. Others ran down to a nearby cigar stand, got lighter fluid and began to throw molotov cocktails at the cops barricaded in the Stonewall Inn. For the first time the gay people felt as though they were winning, as the cops were reduced to hiding inside of the bar. The fact that the cops were unable to communicate with the outside world and call for reinforcements made them frantic. The cop’s radio “was cut off everytime we got on the police radio” and the phone lines had been cut.²¹ Eventually, an officer was able to climb out of a back window and called for reinforcements to come. As reinforcements came in they tried to contain the crowd and subdue it. However, due to the location that the bar was in, the crowd was able to run around the block and show up behind the cops, surrounding them. The next night the Stonewall Inn was up and running with patrons drinking in the bar and on the street. The riots continued for five nights, with a larger turnout than the previous nights. Those other than the homeless gay youth that had jobs and homes to lose, as well as heterosexuals, began to join the resistance. Other precincts were brought in to help subdue the increasing number of rioters as the riots continued. Eventually as the work week continued, numbers dwindled as people had to go to work in the morning and could not be out all night.

²⁰ Carter, 160.

²¹ Seymour Pine, interview by David Heilbroner, 16 June 2010, New York, NY, video recording.

Although the first Stonewall riot was enormous few news publications printed stories about the riot in the following days. Many of the big stories in the newspapers about the riot came the following week. However, the story did not stay in New York, it traveled across the country. Even California had newspaper articles about the Stonewall riots soon after they happened. The *Berkeley Barb*, an underground newspaper, ran the story in its publication for July 4-11, praising the members of the New York gay community for standing up to the police oppression and brutality, referring to the police as “pigs.” The author wrote, “The Homosexuals took the streets last weekend and joined the revolution.”²² The main publications in New York were not as supportive as the *Berkeley Barb*. The *New York Times* described the group as attacking the police who had every right to be shutting down the bar for illegal distribution of alcohol. The anonymous author described the scene by writing that, “Hundreds of young men went on a rampage in Greenwich Village shortly after 3 A.M.”²³ It was a small column in comparison to the large revolt that took place on Christopher Street. *The Daily News* also published a column about the riot which was slightly larger than the *New York Times* story. Another similarity between the two stories was the siding with the police. The article referred to the thrown objects as “missiles,” without mentioning the police brutality that occurred that night.²⁴ But once again it was a small story buried within the many pages of the newspaper publication. The first front page story came from *The Village Voice* on July 3 with two articles written by employees who were present at the Stonewall riots. The newspaper had an office was down the street from the Stonewall Inn and when the two writers heard the commotion on Friday

²² “Gays Hit NY Cops,” *The Berkeley Barb*, 9:1 (July 4-10, 1969), sec. IX, 5.

²³ “4 Policemen Hurt In ‘Village’ Raid; Melee Near Sheridan Square Follows Action at Bar,” *New York Times*, 118:40 (June 29, 1969), sec.XII, 33.

²⁴ “3 Cops Hurt As Bar Raid Riles Crowd,” *Sunday News*, (June 29, 1969), sec. I, 30.

night they walked down to check it out. The article written by Howard Smith was not quick to take sides like the earlier articles. Instead, the author focused on the emotions of the parties involved. He wrote about the palpable fear from the police inside the bar and the rage emanating off of the crowd. He also does not censor the police brutality, recording that the police, “slaps the prisoner five or six times very hard and finishes with a punch to the mouth.”²⁵ The other article in *The Village Voice* also did not condemn the crowd for their actions. Instead, the author described the almost gleeful feeling of the crowd as they fought back and finally made the police the ones who were uncomfortable. The author described a moment from Friday night when the drag queens formed a Rockette line and began singing, ““We are the Stonewall girls/ We wear our hair in curls/ We have no underwear/ We show our pubic hairs!””²⁶ On July 6, *The Daily News* published a second story about the Stonewall riots and once again it was not in favor of the gay community. The article made fun of drag queens and their choice to dress as women. The whole riot was described as if it was one big joke, the author wrote that, “The lilies of the valley had become carnivorous jungle plants.”²⁷

Previously, San Francisco’s gay community had also revolted when the police began raiding and shutting down their gay bars. In 1961 an openly gay drag queen ran for city supervisor in order to prevent further raids by passing around a petition throughout the gay community. The gay community in San Francisco gained enough political momentum to host nights where people running for a political office would be endorsed if they were pro-gay. In 1966 the first gay community center was opened and by the next year it had become the United

²⁵ "Full Moon Over the Stonewall," *The Village Voice*, 14:38 (July 3, 1969), sec. IV, 25.

²⁶ "Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square," *The Village Voice*, 14:38 (July 3, 1969), sec. V, 18.

²⁷ "Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Stinging Mad," *Sunday News*, (July 6, 1969), sec. II, 1.

States's largest homophile organization.²⁸ However, gays were still not accepted into society and gay sex was illegal. In 1969 Canada was in the process of legalizing gay sex and West Germany had passed laws legalizing homosexual sex which would take effect by labor day.²⁹

The people in the gay community recognized that the Stonewall riots were a significant moment in history and they had to act quickly if they were going to enact change in their own country. After the Stonewall riots had ended, people were energized, one woman thought "We have to have a protest march of our own."³⁰ The next night at a Mattachine Society meeting Martha Shelley proposed the idea and the vote was unanimous. People began to hand out pamphlets for gatherings, and the first gay pride march was planned on the one year anniversary of the beginning of the Stonewall riots. The march started off with around 120 people, the marchers went at a quick pace out of fear. They were no longer in Greenwich Village, it was dangerous to go out during the day and identify as gay, it was unheard of at the time. However, as the march continued, the number of people grew into the thousands. At certain places in the march people could see no end and no beginning to the masses that had gathered. As they arrived in Central Park, their final destination, they rejoiced because "that's when we knew. We were ourselves for the first time."³¹

The Stonewall Riot influenced people in the gay community across the country to stand up for their rights. The gay pride march in 1970 was one of the first nationally planned acts of resistance by the gay community. Marches for gay pride also happened in Los Angeles and

²⁸ Carter, 104-105.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁰ Martha Shelley, interview by David Heilbroner, 16 June 2010, New York, NY, video recording.

³¹ Doric Wilson, interview by David Heilbroner, 16 June 2010, New York, NY, video recording.

Chicago, and San Francisco. However, each city put their own spin on the demonstration. In San Francisco people led a march that ended with a gay-in at Speedway Meadows in Golden Gate Park. The Berkeley Barb reported on the front page that the police shut down the gay-in, “the pigs weren’t happy with their fun in the park. They busted seven people and are holding them incommunicado.”³² Chicago started their celebration of gay pride a day early on June 27, 1970 and the demonstrations lasted for a week. The gay pride celebration consisted of speeches, dancing, and a march to the Civic Center Plaza. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that, “The 150 participants listened to speeches at Washington square, Clark and Walton streets, before starting the march down Chicago avenue.”³³ The festivities of the first day ended with a dance in the park “as the marchers shouted, ‘Gay power to gay people.’”³⁴ In Los Angeles the gay organizations obtained a permit for their march on June 28, 1970. The next day the *Los Angeles Times* reported that, “One thing the hour-long, mile-long procession lacked was violence from spectators.”³⁵ The police department had anticipated a violent backlash from the parade, originally requiring a \$1,500 bond in order to get the parade permit. However, a judge ordered that the permit be given without conditions according to the freedom of expression amendment in the constitution.³⁶

Something happened during and after the Stonewall riots that was not only able to radically change public opinion about people that were part of the LGBTQ community but created a movement of people actively fighting to the rights of that community. People who were

³² “Lonely Porkers Crash Gay-In” *The Berkeley Barb*, 10:26 (July 3-9, 1970), sec. I, 1.

³³ “Gay Liberation Stages March to Civic Center” *Chicago Tribune*, 12: 27 (June 28, 1970), sec. IA , 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ “Homosexuals Stage Hollywood Parade: Event Evokes Boos and Catcalls but No Violence” *The Los Angeles Times*, LXXXIX: 10 (June 29, 1970), sec. I, 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

a part of the community suddenly came together, but also people who were not gay, lesbian, or transgender joined the movement. Before, members of the gay community would get upset when they read misinformation printed by the media when discussing homosexuality. But after the Stonewall riots, two copies of a negative report by the *Daily News* were hung outside the Stonewall Inn.³⁷ This signified that those who were a part of the gay community no longer cared about the scrutiny from society, they were going to be themselves. For decades, the LGBTQ community watched silently as they were oppressed by the government as well as the overall public opinion about what it meant to be gay. They stayed silent as their way of life was made illegal by legislation and people in their neighborhoods or cities took it upon themselves to assault people who were gay, lesbian, transvestite, drag queens, or queer. There was a significant increase in members of LGBTQ rights groups, most notably, the Mattachine Society. However, the new members were more assertive and radicalized than the groups regular members. The new activists wanted change and they wanted it fast. People who had once felt oppressed now felt empowered by the recent events. Many new gay activist groups were formed including the Gay Liberation Front. While the existence of the Gay Liberation front was short-lived, “enough people had recognized the unique opportunity created by the Stonewall Riots to form a new, radically militant homosexual organization.”³⁸ Since the Stonewall Inn was placed at the epicenter of gay life in New York City, it allowed the news to travel fast enough to keep the momentum of the movement going. The fact that the riots happened in such a large city that is well known across the country with gay activists that possessed the leadership skills and follow through to allow the movement reach its potential contributed to the widespread radicalization of LGBTQ activists. The final part that allowed the Stonewall riots to inspire the gay rights

³⁷ Carter, 24, 183.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

movement across the country was the media coverage of the event. People who did not live in New York, still read newspapers from New York City. Although the media coverage started out small, the story grew with time as people recognized the significance of the riots in Greenwich Village. The riots at the Stonewall Inn were influential in creating the spark that lit fire of the LGBTQ rights movement.

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