

The 1st Queer March on Washington

A Veteran Community Organizer Commemorates the Twenty-fifth Anniversary

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The first March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights and Liberation drew 100,000 people to the streets of the District of Columbia on October 14, 1979, at a moment in our community's history vastly different from the one we occupy today. As I thumb through my scrapbook and archives of organizing materials from that effort, and as I listen to the record and the videotapes produced capturing the '79 march, a range of memories and conflicted feelings rush through me. Clearly, the world has changed in our lifetimes.

In 1979, I was a 24 year old schoolteacher and member of Boston's radical Gay Community News collective. That winter, a group of collective members rented a car and drove through the New England snows to what would become an historic event at the Quaker Meeting House in Philadelphia. Converging that weekend were over 200 grassroots activists from throughout the nation who came together to debate whether or not to launch the massive organizing effort we knew it would take to bring our rank-and-file to Washington.

I am surprised how much I recall about that weekend. The frigid winter air became electric as out gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender activists met counterparts from other locales (yes, bi and trans organizers were there from the start). Women's music met disco clones; revolutionary socialists linked arms with the nascent gay leadership of the Democratic Party; smug San Franciscans sat side-by-side with smug New Yorkers. While voices were present aiming to interrupt the energy flow towards marching, it was clear from the outset that the chamber was filled with men and women eager to ratify a call to march. The 60s were still alive for many of us, and marches on our nation's capital retained tremendous symbolic power: to hit the radar screen as a national movement demanded a pilgrimage to Washington.



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Our work that weekend was torn by the divisions of the day: tensions between lesbians and gay men, racism and calls for specific outreach to communities of color, attempts by Left sectarian groups to dominate organizing efforts. Yet we united around visionary ideals of a world without homophobia, sexism, and racism,

and a movement which valued economic justice, youth liberation, and sexual and reproductive freedom.

The tepid national gay groups sent mostly stealth emissaries to the event, hoping that the rag-tag refugees from the 60s who embarrassed them so, would become enmeshed in internal bickering over narrow political points and grind to a halt the drive to march before it got out of the gate.

Their hopes were dashed by a vote which endorsed the march and that weekend a call went out from Philadelphia to queers around the

United States to use whatever means necessary to bring the masses to Washington. I threw myself into the effort, chairing the national policy committee and serving as one of the lead media organizers. A follow-up meeting that summer in Houston and one in Washington, D.C. cemented our determination to work through the highly-charged politics of the time (debates about trans inclusion became ugly) to bring off the march of our dreams. It was a heady time but an exhausting time, those years before faxes, phone conferencing, and e-mail. We licked thousands of envelopes, plastered posters on the sides of buildings, and found ourselves facing personal phone bills for hundreds of dollars.

Our challenge was formidable: we knew we needed to turn out a large number of queers but no one had done this before. While some of the coastal and urban communities already were home to networks and formal organizations, we had to work overtime to identify and catalyze gay people in many states. I remember the frustration we encountered thumbing through early gay guides, trying to identify activists in Arkansas, Alabama, North Dakota and Montana and the delight at our New York City headquarters when a call came in informing us that Alaska was sending a delegation to the Houston meeting.

continued on page 13

Why We Marched

The 1979 march commemorated the 10th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, which occurred in 1969 when New York City police attempted to raid a gay bar in Greenwich Village. Anita Bryant had been on her homophobic rampage for a couple of years and, in November 1978, openly gay San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk was assassinated.

For these reason, people came together to march on October 14. The demonstration had as its manifesto five specific demands:

1. Passage of a comprehensive lesbian/gay rights bill in Congress;
2. Issuance of a presidential executive order banning discrimination based on sexual orientation in the Federal government, the military and federally-contracted private employment;
3. The repeal of all anti-lesbian/gay laws;
4. The end of discrimination in lesbian mother and gay father cases;
5. The protection of lesbian and gay youth from any laws which are used to discriminate against, oppress, and/or harass them in their homes, schools, jobs and social environment.