

# HOW THE GAY RIGHTS

***It took nearly  
20 years  
to get the  
gay rights bill  
passed in  
Connecticut.***

***What made  
1991  
the magic year?***

**by  
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and  
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**W**hen Governor Weicker signs the gay rights bill into law on May 1, it will mark the end of a legislative struggle that has endured for nearly two decades. During that time, an evolution has taken place in the lesbian and gay community here in Connecticut, an evolution from political naivete to a community invigorated by a broad range of political perspectives.

In 1969—the year of Stonewall—Connecticut became the second state in the nation to remove sodomy from the penal codes. And since the early 70's, a civil rights bill has been repeatedly introduced in the Connecticut General Assembly. Early in the gay liberation movement, lesbian and gay rights advocates made considerable gains, operating in the wake of gains made by the civil rights and women's movements of the 1960's. In 1975, a gay civil rights bill passed the state Senate by a margin of 25 to 11 and came within 14 votes of passage in the House. Connecticut became the first state in the country to push a gay rights bill through one of its legislative houses.

Chris Pattee, a lesbian activist who lobbied that session, believes legislators felt confident voting for the bill because the right wing opposition had not yet mobilized. This was "before the rats came out of the woodwork," Pattee says—before the Mary Ann Pressamaritas and William Wholeans succeeded in dominating the debate.

Former state Senator Betty Hudson, who introduced the bill in 1975, remembers the social climate during that period as being conducive to progressive change—such as gay rights and feminist legislation. "The reform years of the early 70's saw a new breed of legislators rise to power who wanted to change the system and correct the inequities of the past," Hudson says.

But by the end of the decade, support for gay rights had eroded. It was part of a national trend. Whereas the gay liberation movement had come on strong in the early-to-mid 1970's, by the latter half of the decade Anita Bryant's national anti-gay campaign had made

an impact. Harvey Milk's election as the first openly gay supervisor in San Francisco was tragically offset by his assassination in 1978.

Back in Connecticut, the gay rights bill was re-introduced in the General Assembly in 1976, 1977 and 1979. In stark contrast to the near-victory of 1975, each time it was defeated by the House. By 1979, the margin of votes needed for passage in the House had increased to 25. At the time, the major gay political organization in Hartford was the Lesbian and Gay Task Force (LGTF), which coordinated for the gay rights bill statewide. The LGTF itself was an outgrowth of the earlier Kalos Society, which had been the primary gay organization of the 1970's.

## **Setbacks in the Reagan 80s**

In the early 80's, the prospect of passing a lesbian and gay civil rights bill became even dimmer. The rise of conservatives and the election of Ronald Reagan mobilized right-wing groups to actively oppose gay rights and other progressive legislation. The advent of AIDS not only signaled a new urgency for gay rights legislation, but it also brought about the religious right's declaration that AIDS was "God's punishment" on homosexuals. Armed with such hatred, the Connecticut Legion of Decency and its Blue Berets—led by Mary Ann Pressamarita—became increasingly vocal in their opposition to gay rights in the early 1980's, and their influence within the Catholic Church seemed formidable, especially in their alliances with Church lobbyist William Wholean.

During the Reagan years, the lesbian and gay rights movement suffered crushing defeats. In 1981, the civil rights bill died in committee and never even made it to the floor of the House. Still, activists looked to 1983 as being the year the bill would pass. Indeed, the Senate passed the bill in April with a vote of 20-15. The LGTF—a dedicated group of political novices—began lobbying legislators in the House. It looked as if the bill had bipartisan

# BILL WAS WON

support, but when Senate Bill 398 was introduced into the House, opponents seized it. Chief among these was Majority Leader Timothy Moynihan, now chairman of the Greater Hartford Chamber of Commerce. Activists expected the bill to come up on May 5. But Moynihan contrived to have it put up for a vote on April 28, and it lost.

"Legislators lied to us," activist Tony Norris wrote in the May issue of *The Force*, a publication of the LGTF. "We played the game by their rules. We dressed like them, leaving our lavender buttons at home. We talked their language; we made all the courtesycalls to stroke the egos of those that hold the power." He particularly cited Rep. John Rowland, last year's Republican candidate for Governor, as an opponent of the bill. But Kathaleen Linares added in that same issue: "We will challenge them again, lest they think we are not united and strengthened for the next round." It was perhaps, the critical turning point in the maturation of the community. Here the seeds of discontent with the electoral political system were planted. Norris' frustration with "playing the game by their rules" in 1983 would be echoed seven years later when direct action and civil disobedience became a part of the gay political agenda.

## The Formation of the CT CLGCR

A small band of activists decided that the struggle needed to be expanded. The small, Hartford-based LGTF was not going to be sufficient to muster enough votes around the state. Diane Martell wrote in *Metroline* in 1983: "One of the main reasons the bill did not pass was because we lacked the widespread support of legislators outside of the Greater Hartford and New Haven areas." Thus the birth of the CT Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights. In early 1984, the LGTF folded, supporting

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**AT RIGHT: GAY MEN AND LESBIANS CELEBRATE AT THE STATE CAPITOL. (photo by Kevin Williams)**





**THREE OF THE REASONS THE BILL PASSED THIS YEAR: ABOVE, THE DIRECT ACTION PROTESTS OF SUCH GROUPS AS QUEER NATION. (Photo by Cary Chapin)**



**AT LEFT, THE PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT OF REP. JOE GRABARZ THAT HE IS GAY. (Photo by John T. Blair)**



**BOTTOM, THE ELECTION OF LONG-TIME GAY SUPPORTER LOWELL P. WEICKER AS GOVERNOR.**

the formation of the Coalition.

Among the first leaders of the statewide Coalition were Alan Dennison, Nancy Buckwalter and Ruth Howell. Attention was focused on contacting legislators around the state. This was facilitated by the forming of chapters: Hartford, New Haven and Fairfield were the earliest. These chapters were spearheaded by two newcomers in 1985 and 1986: John Bonelli, a recent Trinity College graduate, and Crispin Hollings, recently moved to the area from his home state of Virginia.

It was a more seasoned and politically sophisticated community that approached the gay rights bill in 1987. The Coalition, then chaired by Hollings and Charlotte Kinlock, hired a lobbyist, Betty Gallo, who had a proven track record for progressive causes. "Parties for Gay Rights" were held around the state and an elaborate network of contacts fanned out across Connecticut. Fundraising became a big operation, and suddenly dances, films, and lectures sprang up, providing a new social milieu for the gay community. Betty Gallo convinced a number of formerly anti-gay legislators to vote for the bill; personal lobbying by an army of gay men and lesbians convinced even more. It looked good, real good.

This was despite a national mood of increased gay bashing and AIDS-phobia. It seemed, however, that after a decade of setbacks, the gay political agenda was again making strides. Wisconsin had passed a statewide gay rights bill, and here in Connecticut, the election of a number of liberals had displaced many conservatives swept into the General Assembly in the Reagan landslide of 1984.

Nancy Buckwalter was quoted in *Metroline* as saying there were three factors which made a difference since the 1983 bill. She listed them: "Having a paid lobbyist, the support of organized labor, and many legislators lobbying each other to support the bill."

Indeed, a new sense that this was the right thing and a just cause had emerged within the Capitol. Rep. Richard Tulisano (D-Newington) became a tireless champion, consistently introducing the bill in the House for the next several years. Rep. Eric Coleman (D-Hartford) said at the time, "Homosexuals are human beings and their access to employment and housing should not be hindered." Rep. Jay Levin (D-New London) argued at the Judiciary Committee hearing, "We protect gays because it is the *just thing* to do."

But this new sense of justice needing to be done galvanized not only supporters, but opponents as well. Recognizing the emerging political power of gay rights advocates, the Catholic Church stepped up its opposition, led by Wholean. Pressamarita and the Blue Berets became increasingly strident to the press, which granted them unusual access and visibility. And anti-gay legislators began regular and systematic attacks on the bill and the gay community in general.

Rep. William Wollenberg (R-Farmington)—who would become known for his shrewd strategies of opposition—attempted to argue that the legislation would be unfair to the poor. "Children who can afford to go to a religious school don't have to be in the presence of people whose sexual status they disapprove of," he said. And Rep. Eugene Migliaro (R-Wolcott) lashed out in his familiar, nonsensical but vicious manner, and even Gov. William A. O'Neill began a well-orchestrated behind-the-scenes lobbying effort against the bill.

Still, the bill passed the House—the first time in history. Activists were elated and confident. Attention shifted to O'Neill: would he veto it? There were indications he would. The cheers were heard again when the bill passed the Senate, but this time with an amendment, forced on by Sen. Joseph Harper (D-New Britain). This amendment was a further exemption for religious organizations whose beliefs conflicted with the acceptance of homosexuality. The bill went back to the House, where it died on a tie vote, due in part to fierce, last-minute lobbying by the Catholic Church. That night was perhaps the lowest of the struggle: to have come so close, yet fail.

## A New Agenda is Born

But optimism prevailed. "In less than one year, the support for the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights has grown from a small group of individuals to well over 1,000 people," said Charlotte Kinlock. "We consider this one more step towards victory." Indeed, the Coalition had become an incredibly active organization, conducting seminars and panels around the state. Education/Outreach committees were started, and three new chapters: Tolland/Windham, New London and Middlesex were formed. (The New London chapter has since disbanded.)

After 1987, the Coalition began expanding its priorities beyond the gay rights bill. The brutal gay-bashing beating of Richard Reihl in 1988 prompted the Coalition to form the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project, which provides speakers and educational programs to address violence issues. Other electoral action was seen as necessary as well: the founding of the Coalition's political action committee in 1988 led to the group's inclusion in the statewide Legislative Electoral Action Program



(LEAP.) That year, too, the Coalition allied with Hartford's progressive third party, People For Change, and gay support helped elect two PFC candidates to the City Council. One of them, Marie Kirkley-Bey, acknowledged: "Without the lesbian and gay community, I would not have been elected to office." It was a major public recognition for the growing clout of the gay community.

The defeat of the bill in 1987 had been a turning point. Some lesbian and gay activists, disillusioned by the political process, formed a direct-action group which has demonstrated during each session of the General Assembly. Originally called the Lesbian and Gay Direct Action Committee, the group became Queer Nation/Hartford in 1990 to align itself with the national Queer Nation direct action movement.

When the bill again failed—this time in the House—in 1989, the direct-action group risked arrest by demonstrating in the gallery of the House. Others lined the walkway to the Legislative Office Building to cheer supporters and hiss opponents. This kind of direct-action response was seen as a logical growth in the politics of the community. But legislators were disturbed by the image of powerful gay activists, flaunting protocol and convention. Wollenberg would return again and again to his complaint that he was "spit upon" by gay activists in the walkway, although observers insist there was no spitting. Still, it was unnerving for both supporters and opponents of the bill to witness the gay community no longer asking for passage of the bill, but demanding it.

"Is there going to be any demonstration from the gallery?" This was the whispered question from legislators, lobbyist and others. The inherent implication was that if there was, votes might be lost. Queer Nation answered that it was outrageous that legislators would switch a vote on such a basic issue as civil rights because they were angry over civil disobedience. When lesbian activists disrupted Gov. O'Neill's budget address in 1990, citing his opposition to gay rights, even many members of the gay community became fearful that the bill would lose in 1991. Many wrote to *Metroline* condemning the action.

But the protest ultimately served its purpose: it made everyone—legislators, the media, the gay community alike—sit up and take note of the long years of frustration in being denied something as basic as a civil rights bill. "Like any

other movement, you need people who put themselves on the line," Steve Gavron, a member of the Coalition, told *Metroline*. "That will translate into votes because it turns the volume up. It creates the feeling of demand for civil rights, makes us [as a community] more visible and less afraid."

Queer Nation also served to make the Coalition seem a moderating influence rather than the radicals they were perceived as being in the early 1980's. This helped by allowing legislators to feel there were "people they could deal with."

Another person they couldn't help but deal with was Rep. Joe Grabarz (D-Bridgeport), who came out as a gay man publicly last December—several months before the bill was raised. "I do this at this time because of the need within the gay and lesbian community to have open spokespeople, people they can identify with in positions of power," Grabarz said at his press conference. The announcement made headlines and topped local TV newscasts. Grabarz made the case for gay rights a highly visible one, and the influence he had in swaying his colleagues was considerable. Such former opponents as Rep. Jodi Rell admitted she changed to a "yea" vote because of Grabarz.

O'Neill's decision not to seek re-election was also heralded as a good omen, and with the election of Lowell Weicker, success seemed imminent. Weicker, a longtime supporter of gay rights, did the opposite of O'Neill: his

behind-the-scenes lobbying was done for—and not against—the bill.

The 1991 vote was also, of course, helped tremendously by the position of non-opposition by the state's Roman Catholic bishops. Rev. Thomas Barry, secretary to Archbishop John Whealon, was designated to coordinate the bishops' response to the bill, a move which forced lobbyist Wholean to the sidelines. The year previous, during the debate on the hate crimes bill, Wholean had led a campaign of misinformation against the inclusion of gay people. Aligning himself with Pressamarita, Wholean ended up embarrassing the bishops, who eventually came out in favor of the bill. Victory for the hate crimes bill was called significant for passage of the gay rights bill, largely because of the modified position of the Church. It was clear from that point that the Church wanted desperately to find a way to support the gay rights bill and reconcile with the gay community, while at the same time holding onto its anti-homosexual activity position. Tulisano's careful language in drafting of the bill—which excluded religious organizations from complying—proved acceptable to the bishops. "With this proposed legislation, [the bishops] concluded they wouldn't need to oppose it to be consistent with the teachings of the Church," explained Barry.

Clearly, the Church's non-opposition was significant in the bill's passage.

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## WHAT THE BILL DOES—AND DOESN'T—DO

The bill prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation in:

- HOUSING
- EMPLOYMENT
- PUBLIC ACCOMMODATIONS
- ISSUANCE OF STATE LICENSES
- GRANTING OF CONTRACTS

The bill excludes all religious organizations from this law, allowing them to continue discriminating. It also exempts the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, citing the military's ban on homosexuals.

In housing, the bill also exempts landlords of owner-occupied four-family housing units. That means, if you go to rent an apartment in a two-family house where the landlord lives on the first floor, he or she can still deny you housing because you are gay or lesbian.

The bill also carries a number of disclaimers, added to placate religious lobbyists. First, it does not indicate the state condones homosexuality; second, it does not authorize homosexual marriages; and third, it does not require adoption agencies to place children with gay parents. However, neither does it say they cannot.

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When Archbishop John Whealon called discrimination against gay people "always morally wrong" in his column in *The Catholic Transcript*, it made headlines—and inroads into the consciences of legislators.

Much of the credit—or blame, depending upon one's viewpoint—for that shift in position must go to Barry. When the bill passed both the House and Senate last month, Barry was charged by Pressamarita and such conservative Republicans as Wollenberg and Rep. Peter Nystrom of Norwich with lobbying for the bill, instead of being neutral. Barry strongly denies the charge. Nonetheless, his moderating influence on the bishops has been perceived as a genuine attempt to bring the Catholic Church's actions more in line with the compassionate teachings of its founder.

## The 1991 Vote

Betty Gallo says that a convergence of "so many things" turned the bill's fortunes around in 1991. Not least among them, she says, was "the incredible lobbying effort by the Coalition." By now, the political base of the lesbian and gay community was well entrenched throughout the state—from Fairfield County to New Haven to Hartford and into Eastern Connecticut. Many legislators recognized the valuable assistance the gay community had provided in getting them elected. Says Coalition member Diane Goldsmith, "We did strive for and we did achieve a

statewide presence." Adds longtime bill proponent Susan Omilian: "'I think that's when we gained real power.'"

In addition, the eloquence of Victor D'Lugin and Janice Warren at the Judiciary Committee hearing—especially in contrast to the irrational testimony of opponents (including Pressamarita)—seemed to move undecided legislators to the bill's corner.

Still, the House vote was considered too close to call even up to the day of the debate. Just days before, Leslie Brett, chair of the State Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, came out as a lesbian, further making the case for civil rights visible and immediate. Betty Gallo led an intense lobbying effort with the dozen or so undecided legislators. And on the day of the debate, Grabarz made an impassioned and personal speech on the floor of the House, imploring his colleagues to support the bill.

A last-minute attempt by the right-wing forces within the Catholic Church—led by Whealon and at least initially supported by Bishop Daniel Rielly of Norwich—to oppose the bill fizzled. Tulisano agreed to amendments that pacified Rielly but added little substantial change to the bill. It was simply one more move on the part of the right-wing forces inside the Church to go on record as saying that despite their position of non-opposition, they still had a problem with homosexuality.

The debate in the House was lengthy and often tedious. Despite several weak attempts to send it back to committee, the House passed the bill by a comfortable 81-65 vote margin.

The debate in the Senate, by contrast, lasted just under one hour. The only drama occurred when opponents nearly succeeding in sending the bill back to the House by tacking on an amendment—the very same strategy that killed the bill in 1987. The proposed amendment would have required people who file discrimination complaints to pay the

legal fees incurred by the accused person if the complaints were found to be false. The amendment was defeated by just one vote: 18-17. But having survived its last trial, the bill passed the Senate—21-14.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

That day in the Senate gallery, many people used the word "anticlimactic." There were cheers and tears of joy—but also the aching emptiness that it had taken so long and been so brutal. "For 17 years we've been going for this," Ruth Howell told *Metroline*. "We've heard so many terrible things from the people who hold the power. It should have happened a long time ago."

But perhaps that was impossible, Howell adds, "We created this political climate [that allowed the bill to finally pass.] We brought it to where it is." Indeed, it was only when the gay community's political muscle began to be felt that change occurred.

The political maturation of the community is staggering for those who've watched it grow over the past 17 years. "The best example of it is the multiple use of strategies," said Victor D'Lugin, a current Coalition member. "We learned that a combination of direct action, mass demonstration and traditional lobbying succeeds."

So where does the gay community go from here politically? Some now talk about domestic partnership legislation. Others talk about age of consent laws. But a growing number seem to focus on less of a legislative agenda and more on other things. One of the most active committees of the Coalition is the Speak Out program, which provides speakers for schools. Internal education and sensitivity is also being discussed, and on May 23 a town meeting will be held to address issues of inclusion and invisibility in the community. Some say this is long overdue, that the lesbian and gay community is in dire need of examining how racial, sexual and other barriers have kept the movement predominately white, male, and middle-class. Others have pledged to continue direct action events to promote gay visibility, which they argue to be more important than any piece of legislation.

In the meantime, however, the gay community revels in the victory. And reveling is certainly something gay people know how to do well. The big Victory Party is set for June 8. Watch *Metroline* for details.



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