

Stonewall: The Lost Chapter of Modern History

By Robert Daigle

I was born in Danbury, CT in 1993 during the middle of the snow storm. Apart from my sexuality, I had nothing else really working against me. I was white, male, and upper middle class. When I was younger, I used to be extremely religious, so much so that my grandfather nicknamed me "the little priest." I liked the idea of Catholicism. I liked to think that if I was pious enough, I would be rewarded by getting into Heaven. Little did I know the very thing that comforted me when I was little would cause me so much turmoil as I grew older.

Vinny was lucky. Born in 1950, he had everything going for him, biologically speaking. Straight, white, and Italian, living in New York City. Growing up in the age of conformation taught him not to speak out, to subscribe to religious values, to feel a strong sense of patriotism, to know that some day it was expected of him to have at least partly fulfilled "The American Dream."

Visitors to the Stonewall in 1969 were greeted by a bouncer who inspected them through a peephole in the door. The legal drinking age was 18, and to avoid unwittingly letting in undercover police (who were called "Lily Law," "Alice Blue Gown," or "Betty Badge,") visitors would have to be known by the doorman, or look gay. The entrance fee on weekends was three dollars, for which the customer received two tickets that could be exchanged for two drinks. Patrons were required to sign their names in a book to prove that the bar was a private "bottle club," but rarely signed their real names. There were two dance floors in the Stonewall; the interior was painted black, making it very dark inside, with pulsing gel lights or black lights. If police were spotted, regular white lights were turned on, signaling that everyone should stop dancing or touching. In the rear of the bar was a smaller room frequented by "queens;" it was one of two bars where effeminate men who wore makeup and teased their hair (though dressed in men's clothing) could go. Only a few transvestites or men in full drag were allowed in by the bouncers. The customers were "98 percent male," but a few lesbians sometimes came to the bar. Younger homeless adolescent males, who slept in nearby Christopher Park, would often try to get in so customers would buy them drinks. The age range of the clientele was between the upper teens and early thirties, and the racial mix was evenly distributed among white, black, and Hispanic. Because of its even mix of people, its location, and the attraction of dancing, the Stonewall Inn was known by many as "*the* gay bar" in the city.

All around the edges of the photograph stand police officers. Their uniforms look crisp and new. Their expressions are all unmerciful and uncaring. One officer is standing to the right of the frame. His arm is cocked back, ready to swing forward and bring a billy club on to the subject in the center of the frame. The man subject to the officer's blows is being restrained by the other officers. His face is twisted up, mid scream, perhaps pleading with the officer to stop his assault.

At California's Atascadero State Hospital, known soon after its opening as "Dachau for Queers," men convicted of consensual sodomy were, as authorized by a 1941 law, given electrical and pharmacological shock therapy, castrated, and lobotomized.

I'm a former Jehovah's Witness, so after I came out, I probably lost about 90 percent of my "friends." Considering the nature of the friendships, it wasn't much of a loss. Of course my parents kicked me out shortly after and I moved up to San Fran, so the rest became long distance. The people who were closest to me are still my best friends though. And my boyfriend moved with me up to SF. Now we're just slowly trying to meet new people.

School definitely didn't help me out much either. I was always a sport-centric kid, and as a result, I usually stuck with the jocks. Unfortunately, the locker room isn't exactly the most conducive location to understanding your sexuality. It seemed calling someone a faggot was commonplace and casual. I felt I needed to push myself deeper and deeper into the closet, terrified of the consequences of coming out. I always felt like the outcast in conversations at lunch. Other guys my age would spend so much time talking about girls and I would just nod and agree because I didn't fully understand what the guys saw in them. I jaded myself into thinking that one day I would wake up and my sexual orientation would magically change, that I just had to wait.

School was never particularly difficult for him. Yeah, he could have worked a little harder, but he never ran into much trouble with bullies. Vinny learned early on that blending in was far better than sticking out. A scuffle here and there for posturing or to win the heart of a girl, but nothing too brutal. Perhaps a little more focus on the books and less on the parties could have earned him a college education, but he was satisfied with joining the police force once he graduated. The pay was decent and it was an honorable profession.

At 1:20 in the morning on Saturday, June 28, 1969, four plainclothes policemen in dark suits, two patrol officers in uniform, and Detective Charles Smythe and Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine arrived at the Stonewall Inn's double doors and announced "Police! We're taking the place!" Two undercover policewomen and two undercover policemen had entered the bar earlier that evening to gather visual evidence, as the Public Morals Squad waited outside for the signal. Once inside, they called for backup from the Sixth Precinct using the bar's pay telephone. The music was turned off and the main lights were turned on. Approximately two hundred people were in the bar that night. Patrons who had never experienced a police raid were confused. A few who realized what was happening began to run for doors and windows in the bathrooms, but police barred the doors. Michael Fader remembered, "Things happened so fast you kind of got caught not knowing. All of a sudden there were police there and we were told to all get in lines and to have our identification ready to be led out of the bar."

The photograph is vertically separated by a wall of police officers. It seems to have been shot from above. The officers are pushing back a wave of protesters. Mouths agape, they scream out. The combination of adrenaline, unity, and hope is powerful fuel. In the center of the frame two men with buzz cuts wear shirts that say 'Queer as Fuck' in massive block letters.

Once all manner of sanctions had been created to make it difficult for homosexual men and women to meet their own kind, the police aggressively patrolled the few places where homosexuals could mingle: bars and bathhouses (both private and public) and outdoor cruising places such as streets, parks, and beaches. Agents planted microphones in park benches and used peepholes and two-way mirrors to spy on homosexuals in public rest rooms.

My mom started crying hysterically, screaming, "How could you know? You've never been with a woman," and started asking all these ultra sexual questions about what I had or hadn't done. I cut her off, saying it's not about the sexual act; it's about what I find attractive. I find men attractive. I told her she had to calm down or I couldn't reason with her. She then looked at me dead in the eye and told me: "I tried to raise you right. You aren't my son. You need to move. Get out of my house. I disown you."

As expected, nothing changed. I still felt the way I did about the same sex. It didn't help that I already had serious self-esteem issues and crappy grades. I began to shrink away bit by bit. I started to not care how I looked. I was inconsiderate of others and sunk lower and lower. It got to a point where I honestly no longer cared what happened to me. I hated myself for being different, and most of all I hated God for making me the way I was. It wasn't fair. But I still deluded myself; I thought with a little bit of patience and effort I could 'fix myself.'

Vinny remembered his first kiss clearly. It was the end of a junior high dance, and his date, Clara, led him outside by the hand. It happened so quickly and so unexpectedly. She leaned in and gave him a tender peck, then ran off towards her parents' car. Vinny had stood there dumbstruck for several minutes as questions swirled around his head. Did he do okay? Would she call him back? Should he have practiced for that kiss?

The raid did not go as planned. Standard procedure was to line up the patrons, check their identification, and have female police officers take customers dressed as women to the bathroom to verify their sex, upon which any men dressed as women would be arrested. Those dressed as women that night refused to go with the officers. Men in line began to refuse to produce their identification. The police decided to take everyone present to the police station, after separating those cross-dressing in a room in the back of the bar. Maria Ritter, who was known as Steve to her family, recalled, "My biggest fear was that I would get arrested. My second biggest fear was that my picture would be in a newspaper or on a television report in my mother's dress!" Both patrons and police recalled that a sense of discomfort spread very quickly, spurred by police who began to assault some of the lesbians by "feeling some of them up inappropriately" while frisking them.

There is only one photo in known existence of the very first night of the riots. Several officers are pushing back against a clearly agitated crowd. The facial expressions are fearful, but there is something different about them – a certain confidence. Something new was brewing.

In response to the great influence that these societies exerted over politicians, police vice squads – which New York City was the first to create – attempted to control homosexuals by observing locales where they congregated, using decoys to entice them, and raiding gay bars and baths.

A year ago today, I told my mom, "I like guys the way I am supposed to like girls." My mom told me having a gay son was worse than cancer; that I would never be accepted and that I had ruined her dreams for my future. That night everything I owned was crammed into my car, and I slept on Laguna Beach on a blanket with my boyfriend and a bottle of wine. I spent the next two months staying at friends' houses and with my grandparents in Canada until I got my job in San Francisco. My boyfriend and I waited for six months in a long distance relationship until he

could move up here with me in early June. I spent countless hours alone, dejected, depressed, upset, angry, and even hopeless.

One of the most frustrating things about being gay is dealing with homophobes. For one, their logic is completely maddening. Why is what I do in the privacy of my own bedroom any of their business at all? I'm not forcing them to engage in homosexuality or forcing my way into their churches. The problem is that we live in a moralist society. Rather than judge things logically and by whether or not they do damage to others, we judge purely off of a set of standard accepted values.

The first time Vinny heard of homosexuality, he heard it in hushed whispers. To him, they were nothing but a bunch of sick perverts who defied common decency in order to satisfy a carnal pleasure. Poofers, limp-wrists, teapots, faggots; it didn't matter how you painted it, he found the idea of same-sex relationships revolting. Worst of all was that they preyed on children. How could one possibly do anything to hurt a child? Patrols had thankfully started cracking down harder and harder on the so-called 'gay community.'

A scuffle broke out when a woman in handcuffs was escorted from the door of the bar to the waiting police wagon. She escaped repeatedly and fought with four of the police, swearing and shouting, for about ten minutes. Described as "a typical New York butch" and "a dyke-stone butch," she had been hit on the head by an officer with a billy club for, as one witness claimed, complaining that her handcuffs were too tight. Bystanders recalled that the woman, whose identity remains unknown, sparked the crowd to fight when she looked at bystanders and shouted, "Why don't you guys do something?" After an officer picked her up and heaved her into the back of the wagon, the crowd became a mob and went "berserk." "It was at that moment that the scene became explosive."

The photo is focused on a throng of angry men. Arms cocked back and ready to return fire upon the police with any object they could get their hands on. Something is different here as well. Instead of bearing expressions of unbridled fury, everyone in the picture is smiling. If one ignored the rest of the photo and only saw the faces, one might think that the photo was taken following a lovely evening out. But that couldn't be further from the truth.

In the mid-1960s - the very time when a wave of freedom, openness, and demand for change was cresting - New York City increased its enforcement of anti-homosexual laws to an extent that amounted with an attempt to impose police-state conditions onto a homosexual ghetto.

So I waited till he had recovered and chose a good time to tell them both. I came back home one weekend with the sole purpose of coming out to them. That was the longest two and a half hour drive I've ever made. I got home, had dinner with them then asked them to sit with me at the table because I had something I needed to tell them. So we sat there and I tried as hard as I could to actually tell them I was gay and I just couldn't do it. As I was on the verge of tears, one of them, I can't remember which, asked me if I was gay. I took a deep breath and told them yes. I immediately apologized for not being able to tell them, but that it was so hard I just couldn't find the strength to do it. My mom started crying and saying that she didn't understand and my dad stood up and looked at me and I thought for sure he was going to tell me to get out. Instead he

came over, told me to stand up and when I did he gave me a hug and told me that he loved me and that all he wished for in the world was for me to be happy. My dad, the Chairman of the Deacons of a Southern Baptist church, the man I was most afraid of telling, had just told me that he didn't care and he wanted nothing more than for me to be happy. I remember that being the only time in my life where I honestly felt, and I mean really felt, a weight being lifted off of my shoulders. He looked at my mom told her to hush, that I wasn't any different than I was when I first walked in the door and that everything was going to be OK.

It wasn't until the end of my junior year in high school that I finally started to accept that aspect of myself. I realized that being gay wasn't something that I could simply change, and that I was going to have to accept it and learn to live with it. In coming out, I found that many of my fears about being rejected were relatively unfounded. I felt that my period of depression, while it led to serious personal growth, was unnecessary.

The Stonewall Inn was the root of the problem. It was a real dive for fags. Mafia-owned and operated, the place was a haven for debauchery. Vinny had come along on a few raids like this before. The cops would show up, line everyone up, and check ID. Then they would check to make sure all of the women were wearing at least three articles of clothing assigned to their gender and that the men were not dressed in drag. If they were, they were arrested and hauled away promptly.

Multiple accounts of the riot assert that there was no pre-existing organization or apparent cause for the demonstration; what ensued was spontaneous. Michael Fader explained:

We all had a collective feeling like we'd had enough of this kind of shit. It wasn't anything tangible anybody said to anyone else, it was just kind of like everything over the years had come to a head on that one particular night in the one particular place, and it was not an organized demonstration... Everyone in the crowd felt that we were never going to go back. It was like the last straw. It was time to reclaim something that had always been taken from us... All kinds of people, all different reasons, but mostly it was total outrage, anger, sorrow, everything combined, and everything just kind of ran its course. It was the police who were doing most of the destruction. We were really trying to get back in and break free. And we felt that we had freedom at last, or freedom to at least show that we demanded freedom. We weren't going to be walking meekly in the night and letting them shove us around... it's like standing your ground for the first time and in a really strong way, and that's what caught the police by surprise. There was something in the air, freedom a long time overdue, and we're going to fight for it. It took different forms, but the bottom line was, we weren't going to go away. And we didn't.

Coming from a deeply religious family, it took me a while to build up the courage to tell my parents. I figured they would freak out more together than apart, so I decided to tell my parents separately. Just so happens my mom was the first one home the day I decided to break it to them. I'm not a butch, jock type. But I more or less pass as one of the guys. I like sports, I used to date girls frequently, and I'm obsessed with outdoors stuff. So I wondered if my parents suspected or not. I got my mom alone, told her we needed to talk, and sat her down. I'm a pretty stable guy, but I was shaking a little bit; she knew something big was up. I looked her in the eye, with tears welling in mine, and told her: "Mom, I don't know how to tell you this. I'm attracted to

other men.” There was a small eternity of silence while she processed what I'd said. Her eyes went wide, and she seemed to hold her breath. I just sat in silence, waiting for her to speak. Finally she got composure to blurt out, “Oh wow! I'm so relieved!” It was my turn to sit in stunned silence. “Um, what?!” I asked. “I thought you were going to tell me you got a girl pregnant!” she answered. Having a gay son is way better than having an unexpected grandson, I guess. It was not the last time I got that reaction when I came out to someone.

Slowly but surely I began to come out of my shell. It wasn't easy at first, but things got better as time went on. I was no longer ashamed of myself, and I didn't harbor fears of being found out. I wasn't out yet, but for the first time in my life, I didn't really care if I was outed. Yes, it would have upset me if someone violated my trust and told everyone. But more importantly, I was no longer afraid of the consequences of being out in the open.

Vinny hated the scourge of the homosexual. What gave them the right to flaunt such ignorance to God's will? Leviticus 20:13, “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.” Vinny was raised on those values. He had never known anything different or questioned it.

The feeling of urgency spread throughout Greenwich Village, even to people who had not witnessed the riots. Many who were moved by the rebellion attended organizational meetings, sensing an opportunity to take action. On July 4, 1969, the Mattachine Society performed its annual picketing in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia, called the Annual Reminder. Organizers Craig Rodwell, Frank Kameny, Randy Wicker, Barbara Gittings, and Kay Lahusen, who had all participated for several years, took a bus along with other picketers from New York City to Philadelphia. Since 1965, the pickets had been very controlled: women wore skirts and men wore suits and ties, and all marched quietly in organized lines. This year, Rodwell remembered feeling restricted by the rules Kameny had set. When two women spontaneously held hands, Kameny broke them apart, saying, “None of that! None of that!” Rodwell, however, convinced about ten couples to hold hands. The hand-holding couples made Kameny furious, but they earned more press attention than all of the previous marches. Participant Lilli Vincenz remembered, “It was clear that things were changing. People who had felt oppressed now felt empowered.” Rodwell returned to New York City determined to change the established quiet, meek ways of trying to get attention. One of his first priorities was planning Christopher Street Liberation Day.

When I look back at how far the LGBT community has come, I realize how lucky I am to have been born when I was. I harbored so much animosity and stress related to my own fears about coming out, but these fears were trivial compared to the struggles overcome in those early days. That's not to say that everything is perfect nowadays. I still cannot marry under federal law, and in some states I can be fired simply for being gay. Recently, a mayoral candidate who was gay was murdered in Mississippi. Whenever I leave Boston with my boyfriend, I become wary of showing any kind of affection in public. When I first came out, I remember when a car pulled up alongside me and my boyfriend at the time with its window down so that the driver could scream “Faggots!” in our faces. All because we were holding hands on his front lawn.

If I ask anyone outside of the gay community if they know about the Stonewall Riots, I'm usually met with blank and confused stares. I tell my friends about how bad it used to be, about the oppression and struggle for equality. No one seems to fathom the severity of the homosexual condition in the early days of the movement. We *still* aren't teaching it in schools. The Stonewall Riots were a significant part of history, yet we choose to ignore them simply because some 'don't agree with it.' The hate still exists even if it gets painted to seem friendly. 'Love the sinner, hate the sin.'

Vinny wasn't a bad person. No one is truly bad deep down. Just misguided. Hate isn't human nature, it's human *nurture*. Being raised in a conformist society taught him early on to adapt and to not stick out. He never had any reason to question the ethics of the law, or the Bible, or even society. Homophobes, for the most part, are just undereducated on what it means to be a member of the LGBT community. They dehumanize what they don't understand by painting with broad strokes.

I've found that putting a face to a sexuality helps. The friends who I was most concerned about coming out to have turned out to be my strongest allies. They never realized that a gay man could be something more than a 'queen' or over the top flamboyant. Therein lies the importance and the necessity for something like the Stonewall Riots to happen. For the first time in history, homosexuals were recognized as an organized group. No longer meek to the abuse, they finally started to stand up to the intolerable conditions forced upon them. Without Stonewall, there would be no fire, no spark to ignite the flame of hope that burned so bright for many in the days, weeks, and years following Stonewall.

This year, the Supreme Court is finally taking a look at repealing the laws that banned homosexual marriage. This year, the end goal is finally in sight. This year, we are finally *free*.

June 28, 1969. He was exhausted and wanted to get done with his shift so he could head home to his family. Vinny was riding in the patrol car with his partner, Ben, who was watching the buildings slide by outside. Ben was pretty fresh to police work, so he figured a raid would be a great way to introduce him to what life was like on patrol. It was exciting and interesting while lacking any real present danger. Vinny twisted the wheel to the right and headed down Christopher Street. They were headed for the Stonewall Inn.