

FORGING A COMMUNITY: THE RISE OF GAY POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN HOUSTON

by John Goins

On the evening of January 2, 1971, the University of Houston's Gay Liberation Front (GLF) staged a demonstration in front of a local bar called the Red Room. A social movement organization, the GLF was protesting the downtown bar's racial segregation policies, and participants handed out flyers printed with the following:

BOYCOTT THE RED ROOM — The Gay Liberation Front of Houston regrets that the gay brothers and sisters of Houston are not together. The management of a local Gay Bar, the Red Room unfortunately refuses service to blacks. The discriminatory actions of the Red Room management are clearly racist moves that are a continuation of the repressive and racist attitudes of white Houstonians. These racist attitudes oppress all gays as long as the Red Room and others discriminate against blacks. Disposal of oppressive attitudes is a necessity and demand. We are all prisoners of the Amerikan death culture.¹

The bar's management notified the Houston Police Department (HPD), complaining about the protest in front of their establishment. What made this complaint significant was that the Red Room was calling for assistance from law enforcement at a time when police harassment was at the forefront of the minds of homosexuals as they sought places to meet and socialize. This incident exposed deep-seated differences that existed in the Houston gay liberation movement in the early 1970s and revealed a community fraught with disagreements and questions.

An examination of the GLF, along with Integrity/Houston, and the Gay Political Caucus (GPC), provides an excellent window into the rise of the homosexual community's political power and its evolution—from the radical tactics of the GLF in 1971, to the formation of the more politically savvy GPC later in the decade. During this period gay social movement organizations in cities around the nation discovered the value of power wielded by working inside the system to create change rather than waging war against it; however, no one group represented



Mayor Annise Parker on election night with (from left), son LuJac, partner Kathy Hubbard, and daughters Daniela and Marquita.

Photo courtesy of photographer Dalton DeHart.

the entire gay population. Houston was, and still remains, host to a large and diverse gay community with members at various stages of confronting their sexualities. While some were college students who might identify with a movement such as the GLF, others held business or professional jobs that would not permit it.

The Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969 are most often associated with the birth of the nationwide gay liberation movement. On the eve of the Stonewall Riots, fifty gay and lesbian social change organizations existed across the country; in 1973, the number had risen to at least 800. While the Stonewall Riots were the spark that started the movement, the solidarity achieved during the AIDS crisis—which is considered to have hit Houston in 1982—is most often credited with its long-term successes.² Throughout the period, Houston was experiencing the same problems as other major cities: police harassment, discrimination in the workplace, and repression through archaic penal codes. It also witnessed the emergence of local gay social movement organizations within the community.

THE POST-STONEWALL CLIMATE IN HOUSTON

In the early 1970s, Houston's gay movement organizations reflected disparate goals and lacked any concrete strategies for change. One historian wrote of Houston in the 1960s that "[a] side from the mostly straight-owned gay bars and the hundred or so 'A-list' gay men who hosted the Diana Awards, a parody of the Oscars, there were mostly closeted individuals, some of whom displayed the southern fondness of eccentricity."³

In addition to this community, a small contingency formed with an aim toward political organizing. Three soon-to-be activists, Ray Hill, David Patterson, and Rita Wanstrom, created the Prometheon Society to serve as a support group for gays in the city. Ray Hill lived in Houston as did Rita Wanstrom, who owned a bar called the Roaring Sixties. David Patterson contributed his familiarity with homophile organizations and bar communities around the rest of the country. The Prometheon members' short-lived activism resulted in negotiations with police to create a moderately safer atmosphere in the bars. Prior to their efforts and remaining true afterwards, gay Houstonians regularly feared arrest when visiting their favorite bars. Before forming the Prometheons, Wanstrom's bar had been raided and twenty-five lesbians arrested for wearing fly-front pants. Although things improved after Prometheon's efforts, harassment still occurred. Police raided the popular gay bar, Mary's, in 1979 and in 1980 during Gay Pride Festivities. On one such occasion sixty-one were carried off to jail on various charges.⁴

Creating a better relationship with the police presented a dilemma for liberation activism. Now that gays and lesbians could more safely meet in bars, many became less compelled to risk coming "out of the closet." This majority considered their jobs and the rest of their lives more important than marching in the streets.

An editorial by editor Jim Lloyd in Houston's *Nuntius* noted comments that were oft-heard during this period: "Oh, I think they're going too far; they're just antagonizing everybody," and, "Why don't they stop rocking the boat--all they do is attract a lot of attention to us, I think its better if the straights don't know so much about us." Lloyd addressed these points by reminding readers that social change had never occurred without a "lot of people being antagonized."⁵

By 1971 a Houston chapter of the GLF began meeting on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the University of Houston. It garnered greater attention than the Prometheons but was not well received by everyone in the gay community. Holding the same radical attitudes as the GLF in New York, it used anarchistic rhetoric with few specific proposals for confronting the community's most urgent needs.⁶

According to a February 1971 issue of the University of Houston's campus newspaper, the *Daily Cougar*, the organization consisted of thirty to forty people "trying to awaken others in this area to self liberation." The editorial column in Houston's *Nuntius*, "The Gay Guard," spoke very negatively of the GLF by referring to their "goon-squad tactics and their cowardly, anonymous threats to destroy the property and businesses of their fellow gays who do not agree with them."⁷

In another article, "A View of the GLF," a reader asked why the Front had chosen to liberate all people, even those that seemingly have no concern for gays. He continued, "The Front has taken upon itself the task of liberating all people: Blacks, Housewives, Political Dissenters, Mexican-Americans, Indians, etc. I do not believe that it is fair for this group of people to call themselves GAY when that is but a small part of their activities." Like many post-Stonewall activist groups, the GLF chose too many battles and consequently lacked a solid focus on gay liberation.⁸

The *Daily Cougar* reported that the GLF hosted a Gay Pride Conference on campus in June 1971 in conjunction with Gay Pride Week. The article saw its movement as "a process of political and social action around its member's needs." The column quoted the GLF's intentions to "build more meaningful lives without shame or guilt."⁹

While the GLF sought to contribute to the community in a positive manner, it created controversy instead when the conference received the attention of state representatives. Local members of the House questioned whether the on-campus activities had made inappropriate use of state funds under Section 4 of the



The GPC announced its formation at a 1975 press conference. From left to right: the Reverend Bob Falls, Ray Hill, Jerry Miller, and Pokey Anderson.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.

House Appropriations Bill. Houston Republican Representative A. S. Bowers began a personal investigation that was aimed at GLF, as well as women's liberation, and an anti-war group.¹⁰

In 1970 another significant organization, Integrity, emerged in the gay community. Developed from a small group that met each Sunday at the Holy Rosary Church on Travis Street, Integrity began when a group of gays approached a Catholic priest about having meetings at the church. Eventually, it expanded beyond religious aims and became independent of the Catholic Church renaming itself Integrity/Houston (I/H).¹¹

I/H did not seek the radical restructuring of society advocated by GLF. Instead, it maintained a speaker's bureau to address educational opportunities for both gay and straight audiences in Houston. It offered screenings for venereal disease in a setting where gay men could be tested without fear of judgmental medical staff.¹² Further, the group was the first to go before the Houston City Council to ask support for gay causes.

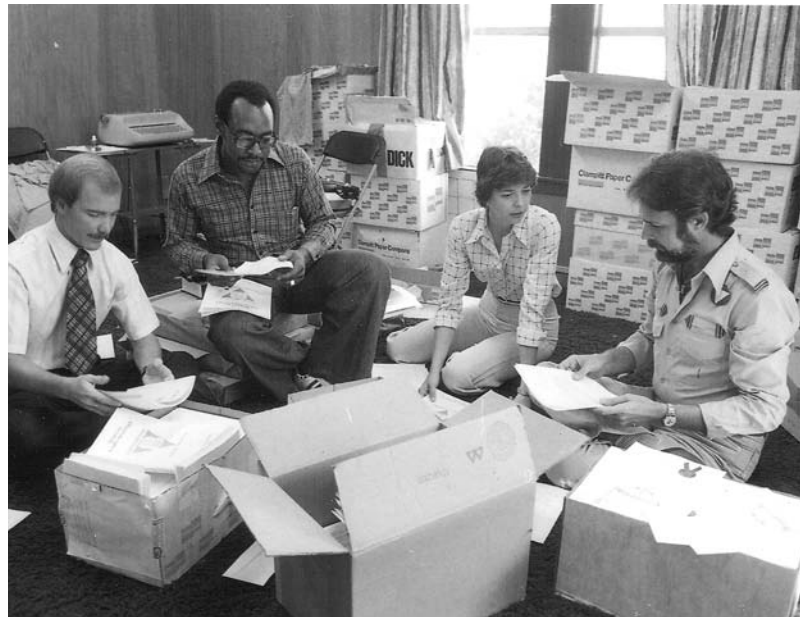
I/H made its first true political strides by conducting a secret interview with mayoral candidate Fred Hofheinz on October 28, 1973. Hofheinz came to the closed-door session alone and conversed openly with members for an hour. They asked for four main points of reform: equal consideration in hiring for civil service jobs, an end to police harassment, a liaison with the police department, and instruction in the police academy on sensitivity to minority issues. I/H members left the meeting with new optimism and circulated flyers to twenty-five gay bars soliciting votes for the politician. Hofheinz achieved a narrow, 3,000 vote victory, and gays claimed credit for the election outcome. Hofheinz appointed a new police chief, C. M. Lynn, who promised not to raid the bars frequented by gays as long as nothing illegal was taking place.¹³

Critics, however, saw I/H as a throwback to or continuation of the 1950s homophile movement philosophies. It preached the message of the first predominate homophile group, the Mattachine Society: "What I do reflects on you. What you do reflects on me. What we do reflects on the entire gay community." I/H members called on the bar crowd to practice "enlightened self interest" and continually reminded them of the frequent visits made by plainclothes vice officers. This pressure for respectability toward mainstream society had alienated many in the homophile groups of the earlier decades and deterred potential members during the climate of the 1970s as well. As with GLF, although for different reasons, I/H lacked a broad appeal to recruit large numbers from Houston's homosexual community.¹⁴

The GLF had attracted publicity for the homosexual movement in Houston but fell short in achieving unity for the movement locally. By contrast, I/H began utilizing political power that signaled a shift toward the type of social movement organization that would accomplish lasting results when the community was confronted with the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.

In 1973 the Texas legislature dealt a blow to the gay community when it updated the state penal code Section 21:06 and made homosexual conduct a Class C misdemeanor and, therefore, punishable by a fine of up to \$200. (This remained the law until 2003 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Lawrence v. Texas* that state laws criminalizing private sexual activity between consenting adults on the basis of morality were unconstitutional due to the lack of a justification for state interest in such a matter.) With relationships between same sex partners being

illegal, police harassment of homosexuals and discrimination in hiring practices were acceptable. How, then, could activists go about changing the law? How could reforms be accomplished with most of the community hidden behind the lines?



Leaders of the politically oriented Town Meeting I, from left to right, are: Steve Shiflett, Charles Law, LaDonna Leake, and Ray Hill.

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THE GPC AND SUCCESS

The Gay Political Caucus (GPC) formed in 1975 and proved to be the definitive achievement for the gay and lesbian community in Houston. Its energy and success are attributable not only to the decades-long liberation movement nationwide but also to a few local, long-time activists with the experience, knowledge, and foresight to understand the advantages of organized political activism. The GPC, unlike the more radical groups before it, utilized tactics that encouraged a larger majority of the homosexual community to become involved. The community had size and strength, but individual's business and professional careers maintained priority over any radical style of social activism. This is evidenced, in part, by the fact that the active GPC membership in the early 1980s averaged only about ten percent of the number of people on its mailing list, which rose from 8,022 in 1980 to 15,000 in 1982. Although the gay community wanted to stay informed on social and political issues, discretion appeared to be especially important in the conservative Texas climate.¹⁵

In a 1979 survey performed by the *Advocate*, a periodical addressing gay and lesbian issues, four hundred readers responded from Houston. The *Houston Post* published the results: 95% were registered to vote; 49.3% belonged to a local gay organization; 30% belonged to a national gay organization; 73.9% made a financial donation to a political campaign in the last two years; 86.9% had contributed to a gay cause; 80% knew someone who had experienced repression, discrimination, or police harassment; and 20% had directly experienced the above.¹⁶ *Advocate* editor Robert McQueen called the survey evidence that Houston was, "very political, very visible, successful."¹⁷ This was the community that the GPC pledged to recruit. By the early 1980s,

many political leaders reached a consensus that several election victories were attributable to the GPC's endorsements.

The GPC officially began with a press conference held on June 30, 1975, when "Pokey" Anderson, Ray Hill, Bob Falls, and Jerry Miller announced the formation of a new political organization to represent the gay and lesbian community in Houston. The *Houston Post*, the *Houston Chronicle*, as well as local radio and television stations covered the event. Pokey Anderson, who represented Houston's lesbian community, began her life as an activist in 1973 after attending the first National Women's Political Caucus Convention at Houston's Rice Hotel. Additionally, she was involved at the Montrose Gaze Community Center, named for the near-downtown neighborhood known for its concentration of gay and lesbian businesses and services. Ray Hill, a founder of the Prometheus Society, provided valuable advice for the caucus as a long-time Houston activist and one of the very few who was willing to go public.

Reverend Bob Falls was the leader of Houston's newly founded Metropolitan Community Church of the Resurrection (MCCR). The church had evolved from a small group of Christian gays that began meeting together in the summer of 1973. Jerry Miller represented I/H, which by then was the longest-existing gay organization in Houston.¹⁸

The team became more formidable with the addition of Gary Van Ooteghem, who had been dismissed from his lucrative job as assistant to Harris County Treasurer Hartsell Gray for proposing a regulation protecting the civil rights of homosexuals.



Frances "Sissy" Farenthold addressed Town Meeting 1 on June 25, 1978.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.

Ooteghem filed suit against the city for job discrimination and eventually won. His actions drew much publicity and quickly caught the attention of the GPC founders. At their invitation, he became the caucus's first president in February 1976.¹⁹

A GPC pamphlet produced in October 1978 revealed much about its ideals. Saying that one should join to meet people, work on committees, and assist in the preservation of gay rights, it equally stressed that being "out of the closet" was not a priority. With plenty of people "out front" already, the GPC needed more people, in any capacity, to help sustain an effective gay organization.²⁰ By not seeking militant activists, the caucus sought to represent the over-all community. The members of the GPC were interested in working within the system to bring about change in the ways in which gays and lesbians were treated in the larger society.

The GPC officially incorporated on September 9, 1975. Its first rally, held on October 21st at Cheryhurst Park, was attended by five hundred supporters and seven political candidates. In the beginning, the group labored to establish itself in the community by mailing out surveys and soliciting political candidates to endorse. It had to "chase" candidates, as one spokesperson recalled in 1980, but that changed.²¹ The GPC's success became apparent in the first year when nineteen out of the twenty-eight candidates it endorsed had won. By 1977, its second full year, the GPC was well established, and local candidates sought its endorsement.

The following policy statement reflected the GPC's moderate ideals: "Our approach is that we are reasonable people making legitimate complaints. We dress and speak like the people whose help we are seeking. Confrontation is avoided."²²

Confrontation was not avoided, however, when some three thousand gays and their supporters rallied against Anita Bryant's singing at the Texas Bar Association's annual dinner. Bryant had waged a nation-wide anti-gay campaign beginning with the successful appeal of job discrimination protection for homosexuals in Dade County, Florida. Due to a coast to coast counter attack by gay rights advocates, unity and commitment



Eleanor Tinsley after her 1979 City Council election victory. She had refused to back down despite severe criticism for winning the support of the GPC.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.



Mayor Kathy Whitmire at her inauguration in 1982. Despite criticism, she received the support of the GPC.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.

among homosexual groups increased sharply. They marched peacefully by candlelight through part of downtown Houston and ended with a rally in front of the Houston Public Library.

In 1978 growth continued when Stephen Shiflett became GPC president, bringing his business background to Houston homosexual politics. The caucus endorsed the Town Meeting 1 held at the AstroArena on June 25, 1978. Some 3,500-4,000 people attended, and two-time gubernatorial candidate Frances “Sissy” Farenthold addressed them, echoing a mantra of the civil rights movement: “No one is free unless we all are free.” The participants created a broad agenda of resolutions including considerations for handicapped homosexuals, the inclusion of women in gay organizations, job discrimination, internal discrimination issues, a civilian police review board, legal reform

on 21:06 of the state penal code, discrimination in the military, implementation of single member districts, public awareness, and religious unity.²³

GPC President Shiflett thanked Mayor Jim McConn (1978-1982) for declaring June 19-25 Human Rights Week—as close as movement activists could come in 1978 to a sanctioned Gay Pride Week. The mayor responded by stating that, “I think it (the homosexual community) is becoming a viable political force.” According to the *Houston Chronicle*, Ray Hill attributed the success of the Town Meeting to the fact that the local movement was not radical in scope. He stressed that the methods of “recruiting people, getting them enthusiastic and getting them working” led to far more positive consequences than militant, radical actions that moved too aggressively.²⁴

The GPC strategy worked for the election of Kathy Whitmire as city controller in 1977, and again in 1979, when the Caucus managed to unseat anti-gay councilman Frank Mann. Mann had worked against gay causes since he had taken office in 1960. Eleanor Tinsley won his seat and declared that she firmly supported antidiscrimination for homosexuals in city government and within the police force.²⁵ In 1981, when Kathy Whitmire (1982-1991) won the mayor’s race, the GPC accepted much of the credit. This victory provided proof that the caucus had gained the ability to influence and win a city-wide election.

Newspapers and politicians weighed in with their opinions on the actual strength of the caucus in influencing local politics. The *Houston Post* claimed on June 25, 1978, “Stereotypes remain but city gays gain political clout.” The gays that were seen by Houston’s straight political community to be “little more than limp-wristed perverts, blasphemies to God that the rest of the world would be better off without” were not originally considered powerful or able to influence large numbers of votes. However, a *Post* sampling of local straight politicians in the inner city, especially in Montrose, showed that they paid attention at election time. The same article wrote that State Representative Ron Waters agreed that without gay support, a victory would be difficult if not impossible in the 79th district (Montrose). State Representative Mickey Leland sought and received GPC backing to gain Barbara Jordan’s seat, and he thanked the caucus for his two-to-one lead in the Montrose district. By 1981 the successes of the GPC began to receive praise nationwide.²⁶

On December 12, 2009, Houston became the largest city in the U.S. to elect an openly gay mayor. Annise Parker accepted her victory with a speech alongside her partner of nineteen years and their three adopted children. Even though during the campaign Parker had consistently emphasized her years of experience as the city’s financial comptroller over her sexual orientation, few in Houston will deny the impact of the election for lesbians and gay men throughout the country. Once again the GPC, now known as the Houston GLBT Political Caucus, played an integral part in this victory for the Houston community.²⁷

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