

JUNE 17

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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PORTRAITS of

pride

THE FACES OF LGBTQ ACTIVISM
P. 44



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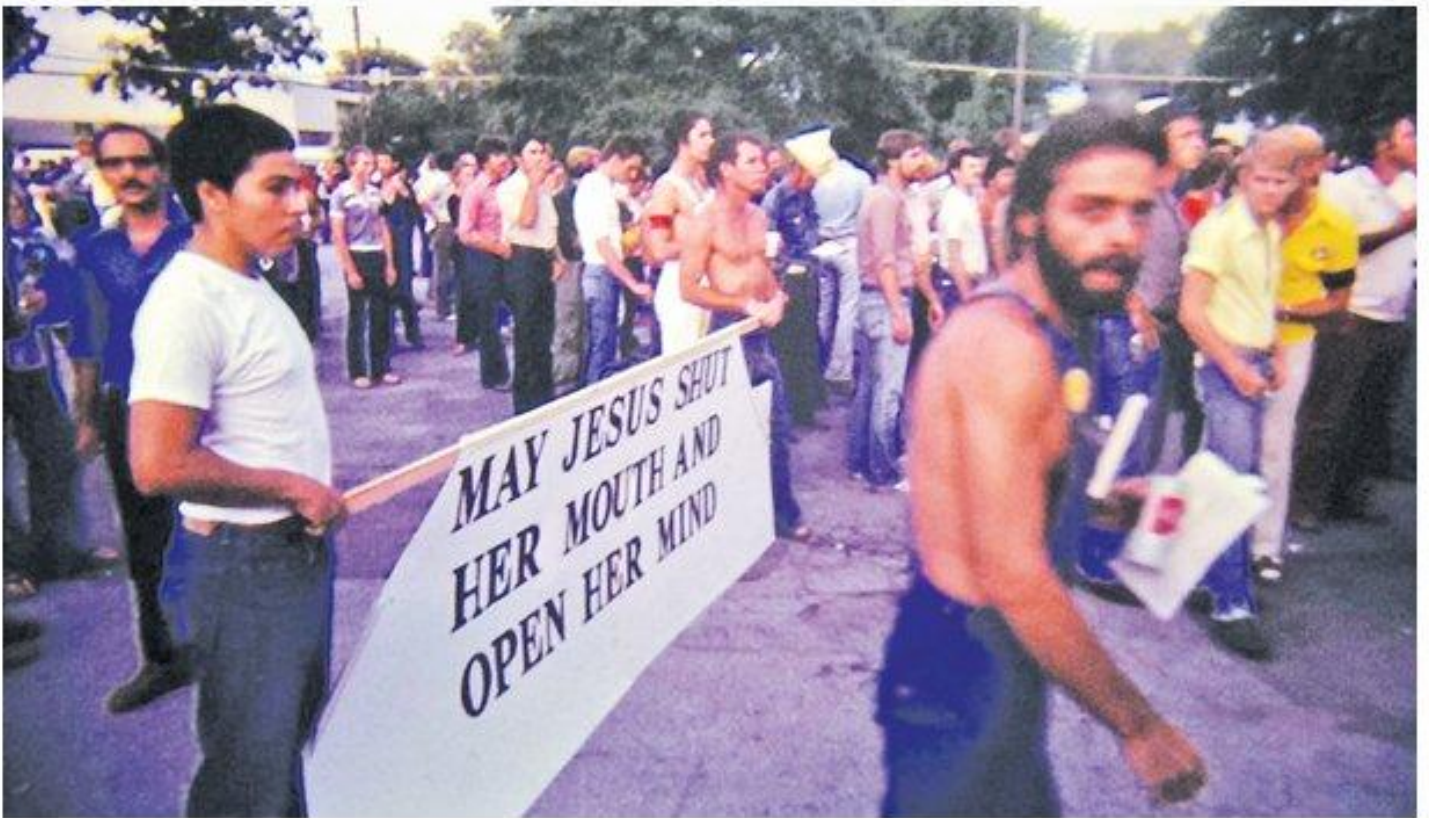
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HOUSTON'S STONEWALL, 40 YEARS LATER

Posted On 01 Jun 2017



As LGBT protesters gathered outside The Depository II bar before the march, some struggled with a sense of foreboding. "We braced for the worst, but it had to be done," recalls transgender activist Phyllis Frye. (Allan Snyder)

The night Anita Bryant came to Texas.

"Before Anita, 'gay community' meant where the bars were. After Anita, 'gay community' meant people."—Activist Ray Hill

By Andrew Edmonson

It was Houston's Stonewall, a watershed moment in Texas LGBT history. It drew thousands to the streets to protest in a deeply homophobic time, focused national media attention on the Bayou City's nascent gay-rights movement, and inspired waves of LGBT activism.

Forty years ago this month—on June 16, 1977—more than 8,000 gay and straight marchers took to the streets of downtown Houston to protest singer and antigay crusader Anita Bryant, who was performing at the Texas State Bar Association's annual convention at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

The protest made front-page news in Houston, and was covered by the *New York Times*, United Press International, NBC News National Radio, and *The Advocate*, among others. "New York and L.A. used to get all the news. This demonstration put Houston, Texas, on the map," recalls Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Churches, the first international denomination for LGBT Christians.



The Houston Chronicle published a front-page story about Bryant on the day of her visit.

“That that many people showed up was just incredible,” says Perry, who was a featured speaker at the march. “I constantly travelled doing rallies, preaching at churches, and talking to organizations. I talked about that march everywhere I went. They would ask me, ‘Is there anything happening for gay rights in Middle America?’ I told the Houston story over and over again.”

Virginia Apuzzo, who served as executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, also spoke at the march. “Anita Bryant and her folks may well have thought Texas would be easy,” Apuzzo says. “But I believe her presence, and the Houston’s community’s emphatic response, amplified the ‘alert’ to the rest of the country that what was coming was far more than Anita Bryant. The Radical Right was virtually pimping our lives to fill their coffers [by promoting] the kind of hate-politics we’ve seen over the years.”

Pioneering Houston activist Ray Hill believes that if it hadn’t been for Bryant’s 1977 visit, Annise Parker would have never become the first openly gay person elected mayor of a major U.S. city in 2009. “I know that’s an enormous leap, but I think that with Anita coming to town and giving us a clear target to organize an opposition to, [it] had an enormous effect on our ability to put together a robust movement that accomplished its goals,” Hill said in a 2013 interview with LGBT historian JD Doyle.

A Climate of Fear

In the 1970s, many LGBT Houstonians lived in fear. Bars were raided regularly, and their patrons were arrested. The names of those arrested were published in newspapers, which led to lost jobs, wrecked careers, and rejection by family. After these forced outings, some even committed suicide.

“It was a terrible time in terms of the relations of the LGBT community—and all minority communities—with the Houston Police Department,” Mayor Parker recalls. “The Anita Bryant protest was around the time of the Joe Campos Torres murder, where he was handcuffed and tossed in the bayou by HPD officers.

For one evening... come out of your closet... you may never go back.

THURSDAY... JUNE 16... 8pm... at
BAGBY and McGOWEN

Depository II parking lot
A PEACEFUL RALLY...
TO SHOW OUR
STRENGTH/UNITY...
BRING A CANDLE...
BE PROMPT...

ALL NATIONAL AND LOCAL
LEADERS ARE EMPHASIZING
THE NECESSITY OF A PEACE-
FUL, NON-VIOLENT RALLY.
ANYTHING TO THE CONTRARY
COULD DO IMMENSE HARM TO
THE GAY MOVEMENT.
THIS RALLY SHOULD BE
ATTENDED BY BOTH GAY AND
NON-GAY FRIENDS.

RSVP 526-9719



LGBT activists had less than a month to organize the protest and used fliers like this one to spread the word.

Houston, he knew he had to go. “The KKK had just visited our [local MCC] church in Houston, and burned a cross on the yard of the church,” he recalls.

“When the Pulse Nightclub shooting happened last year, one of the memories that came back to me was that if you went to a bar or an organizing event in Houston in the 1970s, you looked for the exits of the building, and to see who was standing around near the entrance of the building. You looked for your escape,” Parker says. “Violence was a possibility if you were open and public and out in the community. This was the background noise to our lives. It was such a pervasive feeling.”

When Rev. Perry received the call in Los Angeles to come to

Life was particularly brutal for transgender Houstonians in the 1970s, according to Judge Phyllis Frye, regarded as the grandmother of the trans civil-rights movement nationally. Frye, who moved to Houston in 1974, says the City had a cross-dressing ordinance that made trans people illegal—and the cops would visit gay bars at night to enforce it. “Any drag performer who walked off the stage and down into the audience, the police would arrest them,” she says. “You’d go to the City jail on Riesner Street across from the current municipal courthouse. Even though it was a fine-only ordinance, the police would arrest them, take them to jail, strip them down, parade them back and forth, and really embarrass them.”

Frye was once arrested by a vice-squad captain who threatened that if it happened again, he would throw her in a jail cell with men. “Hispanic people were afraid of the cops. Black people were afraid of the cops. Houston was not a fun place, and everybody was pretty much scared,” Frye says.

‘Homosexuals Are Human Garbage’

Veteran *Houston Post* reporter Jane Ely broke the news of Bryant’s Houston visit in a column with the headline “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.”

The Bar Association had agreed to pay Bryant, a former Miss Oklahoma and second runner-up for Miss America, \$7,000 to perform at the convention. After a successful career as a pop singer in the 1960s, Bryant had become the spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission.

In 1977, she led an effort (entitled Save Our Children) to repeal an ordinance in Dade County, Florida, prohibiting discrimination against gays. Nine days prior to her appearance in Houston, the ordinance was overturned by a vote of 69 percent to 31 percent. She then took her campaign nationwide, successfully repealing nondiscrimination ordinances in St. Paul, Minnesota; Wichita, Kansas; and Eugene, Oregon.

“I will lead such a crusade to stop [homosexuality] as this country has not seen before,” Bryant vowed in 1977. “Homosexuals are human garbage.”

Playwright Robert Whirry wrote in *The Advocate* in 2016 that Bryant was a forebearer to subsequent anti-LGBT movements. “You can trace a blood-red line directly from Anita to the likes of Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority, and the Tea Party in our own day,” Whirry wrote. “Echoes of the movement even resound in Donald Trump’s scapegoating of the menacing ‘other’ in the form of immigrants and potential terrorists.”

Bracing for the Worst

With less than a month to organize the march, Houston’s LGBT community leaders swung into action in the spring of 1977.

Gary Van Ooteghem, founding president of the Houston Gay Political Caucus and chairman of the Texas Gay Political Caucus, along with Hill, who was president of the Houston Human Rights League, began mobilizing people to turn out. They negotiated security arrangements with HPD; solicited national gay leaders such as David Goodstein, publisher of *The Advocate*, to speak; and recruited volunteer security monitors.



As the LGBT protesters marched toward downtown, the size and spirit of the crowd took over. "We, as a people, had come out, and we were not going back into anyone's closet," recalls volunteer Norman Thompson.

Van Ooteghem was intently focused on ensuring that the march would remain peaceful, and not marred by violence.

As hundreds gathered for the step-off at The Depository II bar, at Bagby and McGowen in Midtown, some attendees struggled with a sense of foreboding.

A wave of Hollywood telegrams were sent to Houston in support of the march from legendary TV producer Norman Lear, actress Jane Fonda, actor Rob Reiner (then starring in Lear's hit TV show *All in the Family*), and actor Ed Asner (beloved for his role as Lou Grant on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*). "Any threat to diminish the civil rights of one human being is a threat to everyone, God made us all," Asner wrote. "With that in mind, none of his children must be excluded from America's freedom."

Frye says it was the first time she'd protested in public. "Ray Hill told me about it, and I told my wife about it," she recalls. "She was scared that I might be arrested for cross-dressing. She was afraid that I might not even come home, so she went with me. She was terrified.

"It was suggested that we all meet in the parking lot at that certain time, and it was suggested that you bring an umbrella in case [counter-protesters] decided to throw bottles and rocks," Frye adds. "It was very scary. We were braced for the worst, but it had to be done."

The march would also be the first protest for Parker, then a 21-year-old student at Rice University. "Yes, I had anxiety about participating," Parker says. "There was the fear of being out of the closet and being at a gay event. What did I know? I was a college student without too much to lose.

"A lot of my friends were active in the Gay Political Caucus," Parker adds. "The friends whom I looked up to thought that it was important to be engaged and to protest. I was a foot soldier at that march, because it was important to be there."

The Power of Protest

Many marchers wore black armbands with an inverted pink triangle, the infamous symbol of homosexuality with which Nazis branded gays in concentration camps.

Liz Torres, a straight actress from *All in the Family* and *Phyllis* who would go on to appear for six seasons on *The Gilmore Girls*, had travelled to Houston at her own expense to support the march. "I am here because I had a gay high-school teacher who taught me all the beautiful things in life," she told the crowd. "Without him, I would probably be a ladies' room attendant. It kills me to think that Anita Bryant would deprive a child of that beautiful experience."

Marchers set off down Smith and Louisiana streets toward the plaza in front of the Houston Public Library, where a candlelight vigil would be held to conclude the event. They were greeted by protesters carrying signs declaring “Protect Our Children,” “Read Your Bible,” and “Down with the Queers.” But gradually, as thousands thronged off the sidewalks and into the streets, the mood of the march turned joyous and exuberant.

“There’s a crowd mind that takes over, and you’re carried along by the energy,” Parker says. “There was a lightness to it. As you’re marching along, chanting, holding hands, you feel the power of the crowd. The longer we walked, the more we felt uplifted.”

Apuzzo remembers most vividly the size and spirit of the march. “I don’t recall what any of us said, but I can tell you that the energy of the crowd was the most eloquent message of the night,” she says.

Volunteer Norman Thompson recalls that when the march stopped outside the Hyatt hotel where Bryant was speaking, the sound of the protesters’ chanting “just thundered between the buildings, as if the windows were vibrating.

“There was no doubt about the moment when we could realize that we had a movement,” Thompson says. “We, as a people, had come out, and we were not going back into anyone’s closet!”

When Bryant took the stage inside the Hyatt, 10 of the lawyers in attendance, all wearing black armbands in support of gay rights, stormed out in protest.

“As a lawyer, I have a duty to express my dissatisfaction with her views. They are analogous to those Hitler used to persecute the Jews,” Aglaia D. Mauzy told the *Chronicle*.

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As the marchers filled the nearby plaza of the Houston Public Library and lit their candles, the building began to glow in soft yellow. Marchers sang “We Shall Overcome” and “America the Beautiful.” In response to counter-protesters, they sang “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know” and—in a delicious trolling of their nemesis—“The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Bryant’s signature song.

“What the march did was, it brought together the jocks, those involved in the religious organizations, the street hustlers, and the professionals who wore a suit and tie to work every day,” Parker recalls.

“Because we were all the same in the dark, walking down the street, that was very powerful,” she says. “Everybody was there. Everybody was welcome. And you understood that we needed everybody to get where we wanted to go.”

Participants in the 1977 protest of Anita Bryant will gather for a 40th reunion celebration at 4 p.m. on June 14 at Eagle Houston, 611 Hyde Park Blvd. The reunion will be upstairs in the Phoenix Room, with hors d'oeuvres provided by Hamburger Mary's. Friends are welcome. For more, visit tinyurl.com/anitabryant40.

Andrew Edmonson is a member of the board of directors of The Oral History Project, which is chronicling Houston's response to the AIDS crisis. This article drew significantly on the research done by LGBT historian JD Doyle and the website houstonlgbthistory.org, which he curates.