

Plattsburgh's Closet:

The History of the Gay Rights Movement In Plattsburgh

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The figurative ‘closet’ creates an obstacle for historians, given the evasive, and often invisible, gay community. The term ‘closet’ often refers to the secrecy of one’s sexual identity, although more recently it has been used by other identity based communities. The common phrase “coming out of the closet” or “coming out” generally means publicly stating and accepting one’s own sexual identity, although this definition varies across time and location. It is also important to note that these are modern terms, and it cannot be implied that these ideas have always existed in the long history of the gay community. The obstacle for the historian in this study is to find information on a closeted past, and assess the true impact of the gay communities’ “coming out” in Plattsburgh during post-Stonewall America.

Barry Loveland and Malinda Triller Doran argue that the LGBTQ history documented outside of major metropolitan areas is not covered by most who study gay history, despite the importance of LGBTQ existence in rural communities.¹ Building off of their focus on archiving gay history at the community level, I argue that by exploring the Gay Rights Movement in Plattsburgh, we gain insight into both the political and social history of the Gay Rights Movement as it has manifested in New York and nationally.

This paper is split into five chronological sections. The first section provides a brief backdrop of the American Gay Rights Movement, providing a summarized reflection of the origin of the movement as a national and state phenomenon. I will accomplish this by providing a brief historiography of the movement’s origin, leading up until the end of the 1960’s. The second section focuses on the Gay Rights Movement in Plattsburgh through the 1970’s and 1980’s. In doing this, I mainly utilize primary documents from both the College Archives at SUNY Plattsburgh and from local newspapers. I use the establishment and disappearance of organisations and media coverage

¹ Barry Loveland and Malinda Triller Doran. "Out of the Closet and Into the Archives: A Partnership Model for Community-Based Collection and Preservation of LGBTQ History." *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, 2016: 418.

during this period to understand how the movement began. In the third section I look at the 1990's, and the years between the creation of the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Alliance at SUNY Plattsburgh and the election of Daniel Stewart as the city's mayor. I use activity at the college and the public's response to understand how these ten years transformed the community, and created the possibility of the election of a gay mayor. The fourth section looks specifically at Dan Stewart's election, the media's response, and his terms in office. I look at how Plattsburgh entered into national politics, and how it impacted local gay rights advocacy. I also reciprocally look at how the shifts in local politics altered local attitudes and activity. The final section explores the past ten years, and ties together the seemingly disparate and contradictory elements of gay rights activism in Plattsburgh. From hate group protests to the creation of the North Country Gender Alliance and from disturbing vandalism to the local PRIDE Parade, the past ten years are full of successes and setbacks for the local Gay Rights Movement.

Through these historical episodes, this paper surveys the history of the Gay Rights Movement in Plattsburgh, and to contribute to the discourse on the Gay Rights Movement. I will also show how the study of local gay rights advocacy is imperative to understanding the Gay Rights Movement as a national phenomenon. Therefore, the study of gay activism in Plattsburgh is important to both the study of the national movement, and in understanding Plattsburgh's history.

While the history of gay identity can go back thousands of years, I will focus on its history in the United States, more specifically in New York State. John D'Emilio's and Estelle Freedman's book, *Intimate Matters*, explores the complex history of sexuality in America, looking at sexual meanings, regulation, and politics going back to the 17th century. They argue "that historical forces continually reshape our sexuality, and the ways individuals and groups have acted to alter the contours of sexual history."² They cite sodomy laws, going back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony,

² John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman. *Intimate Matters: a History of Sexuality in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

although they state that sodomy was not the same thing as homosexuality, as the concept of being gay did not exist in British colonial America.³ They date the construction of homosexuality as an identity in the United States back to the 1880's, as physicians began to disagree on this anomaly of "sexual inversion"⁴ In the 1950's the gay subculture began to develop, and public discourse on homosexual desire helped to create a gay identity. They argue that the post-WWII period acted as a brief golden age of homosexuality, before public discourse and fear created the conditions for the Gay Rights Movement.⁵

George Chauncey provides a closer inspection of the gay male community in New York City from 1890 to 1940. While acknowledging D'Emilio, Chauncey furthers D'Emilio's narrative of sexuality in America into his understanding of the gay community in New York by looking at the intersections of sexuality and gender, identifying how the gay male community was split into the binary of "fairies" and "men", which created polarized gendered roles within the gay community there.⁶ While D'Emilio argues that the gay identity in the immediate post-war period was the peak of gay society, and that the lack of a gay identity before World War I meant there were not significant gay communities, Chauncey argues that before the 1930's, there were many public, urban communities of homosexual men (and to a much lesser extent women). He argues that it was not until the 1930's that a powerful backlash to the "pansy craze" developed.⁷ While D'Emilio evaluated the gay community as a development of sexual meanings and sexual politics, Chauncey focuses

³ Ibid., 122.

⁴ Ibid., 226.

⁵ Ibid., 291-294.

⁶ Though gendered roles remain prevalent in gay male culture, the extremity has diminished. George Chauncey. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York: BasicBooks, 1994: 13.

⁷ The Pansy Craze was a sudden appearance of gay culture in Manhattan that was generally accepted by the public through 1930 to 1933. This sharply ended with the end of prohibition. With the reintroduction of alcohol in American society, many believed that it would lead to moral decay, which included acts of sexual deviance and sexual promiscuity. Chauncey, *Gay New York*. 331.

purely on the gay community, and debunks myths surrounding the creation of the concept of “coming out,”⁸ and how the end of prohibition led to the rise of homophobia rather than increased tolerance.

The American Gay Rights Movement is most often cited as officially beginning with the Stonewall Riots on June 28, 1969. Stonewall Inn was a mafia-owned business in Greenwich Village. The gay bar, like most others in New York at this time, experienced constant raids by the NYPD. The raid of the night of the 27th exploded into a mass of 200 people who resisted arrest and pushed the police out of Stonewall Inn. This led to the burning of the building, and eventually a massive riot that included thousands of people, which closed down entire blocks of Manhattan. Rioters from the morning of June 28th through the morning of June 29th made up the largest conglomeration of the gay community up until that point, and gained incredible media attention. Rioters stopped traffic, destroyed police cars, and even went as far as jumping on and moving the cars of anyone who got trapped in the conflict. The majority of rioters were drag queens, also called ‘scream queens’, and homeless gay youth. The riots lasted for six days.⁹

Although this was the first major event to gain national attention and reaction, the movement had been in the workings for over a decade by 1969. In California, there had been other riots of smaller scale, most notably the Compton’s Cafeteria Riots in 1966. While the Mattachine Society in New York City had initiated a legal and political movement throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s, California developed its own movement. The most significant event of the Californian movement was the 1977 election of Harvey Milk, who was the first openly gay elected official in the

⁸ Two quotes Chauncey uses define this succinctly. “‘Coming out’ was an arch play on the language of women’s culture- in this case the expression used to refer to the ritual of a debutante’s being formally introduced to, or ‘coming out’ into, the society of her cultural peers.” and “Gay people in the prewar years, then, did not speak of *coming out of* what we call the ‘gay closet’ but rather of *coming out into* what they called ‘homosexual society’ or the ‘gay world,’ a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor, often, so hidden as ‘closet’ implies. Chauncey, *Gay New York*. 313.

⁹ David Carter. *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*. New York: Griffin, 2011: 137-194.

United States, serving on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. His assassination in 1978 could arguably be considered the most significant moment in the creation of the Gay Rights Movement.

The Gay Rights Movement has suffered many obstacles, but by far one of the most damning has been the struggle in the movement between assimilationist and liberationist ideologies. The 1960's were dominated by assimilationists, who focused the movement on convincing the American public that gay people were the same as straight people. By expressing themselves with traditional gender roles, and arguing that homosexuality is a condition of birth, they hoped to make change through slow, legal steps. This change remained relatively stagnant, and failed to solve the issues the gay community faced. The explosion of events such as the Stonewall Riots changed the movement from assimilationist to liberationist, to the dismay of traditional political actors like the Mattachine Society. Liberationists felt that only radical actions could make radical change. While assimilationists attempted to prove that they could blend in with society, liberationists demanded that they be recognized, and that American society change to accept the gay community the way it is. The Gay Rights Movement became split between these two movements until the AIDS Crisis began, which ultimately united individuals across the community.¹⁰

The AIDS Crisis hit the gay community the hardest, and given that early on the scientific community associated the virus with the gay populace, the issue continued to exacerbate without much resistance. The crisis began early in President Ronald Reagan's administration, and despite its exponential growth and public fear by the end of the 1980's, he refused to acknowledge that it existed, and refused to address the pandemic throughout his term. The enforced and deafening silence of the issue forced the gay community to make themselves heard, compelling those who felt that their sexual identity was a private matter to take political actions in order to survive. One of the most noted aspects in the Gay Rights Movement's fight against AIDS was the creation of the AIDS

¹⁰ Jeff Steen. "Liberation vs. Assimilation: Can the LGBT Community Achieve Both Equality and Cultural Identity?" *OUT FRONT*. August 05, 2013.

Memorial Quilt. The creation of the quilt by the NAMES Project was a response to the need to cope with the effects of AIDS against the gay community, but quickly turned into an egalitarian move to publicize and help fight beside other groups devastated by the AIDS Crisis, such as the black community and women. The Memorial Quilt, which has over 44,000 panels now, represented the fact that the private is inherently political, and that the resistance of older gays in engaging with the publicizing of gay sexuality was problematic and unsustainable.¹¹

Since then, Gay Activism turned to issues of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, marriage equality, housing and job security and bathroom rights, among many others. The Gay Rights Movement in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s slowly transformed into the LGBTQ Movement, which forced the inclusion of issues faced by trans people, a group that was often ignored, overshadowed, and even discriminated against by the Gay Rights Movement. To this day, many of the original rights that the Gay Rights Movement fought for still have not been won.

The difficulty of studying the Gay Rights Movement in Plattsburgh is similar to the troubles the Gay Rights Movement suffers at large, which is that it is an identity based movement. Given this, many individuals who have been a part of this community have kept their sexual identity to themselves, hidden from the public eye. The circumstances surrounding the gay community meant that many remained anonymous and hidden out of fear, bigotry and violence. Plattsburgh is no different, which makes creating an accurate assessment of the gay community, activism, and life in Plattsburgh difficult, if not impossible, throughout much of its history. Despite these obstacles, the gay community does have a historical presence in Plattsburgh, and has remained a continual presence for the past four decades.

In 1973, Ken Henry wrote an article in the SUNY Plattsburgh Campus newspaper, the *Cardinal Points*, that seemingly went unnoticed, about one of his favourite artists, Phil Ochs. Ochs

¹¹ Christopher Capozzola. "A Very American Epidemic: Memory Politics and Identity Politics in the AIDS Memorial Quilt, 1985-1993." *Radical History Review*, 2002: 91-109.

is known for extremely derogatory lyrics in general, but what Henry wrote about one of his songs is telling of the atmosphere in Plattsburgh in the early 1970's:

The funniest song on the album is 'I Kill Therefore I Am' which deals with the American male and his masculinity trip since the days of the cowboy. "I don't like the students now, they don't have no respect. They don't like to work now, I think I'll ring their necks. They call me pig although I'm underpaid. I'll show those faggots that I'm not afraid. I am the masculine American man, I kill therefore I am."¹²

In the same year that Henry published his article, an Ask Ann Landers column in the *Press-Republican* responded to a reader's letter with an article titled "They Only Look Like Dingbats". Zigmond M. Lebensohn, a psychiatrist from Washington D.C., was upset that the Plattsburgh paper used his name as an example of support for the idea that homosexuality should be seen as a mental illness, which he never supported. Her response was "I also believe that they could help themselves if they would eliminate the bizarre parades and demonstrations which make all homosexuals look like far-out kooks and dingbats, which they are not."¹³ While her words might have been read as supportive perhaps at the time, her sentiments continued the opposition to the Gay Liberation Movement, which focused on forcing American society to come to terms with the gay community, not the other way around.

The first landmark for the gay community in Plattsburgh was the creation of the Plattsburgh Gay Students Liberation (PGSL) in 1975, which was a Student Association-sponsored organisation on SUNY Plattsburgh. Plattsburgh was the only two or four-year state college in New York without a Gay Student's Organisation.¹⁴ Although it was officially recognized by the Student Association, it received no funding, for reasons not specified in SA documents. By looking through the club's official documents, a few things about this early organisation stand out. First there was a heavy emphasis on confidentiality; the club reassured its membership in every major document that names

¹² Ken Henry. "On Folk Music." *Cardinal Points* (Plattsburgh), April 3, 1973: 7.

¹³ Landers, Ann. "They Only Look Like Dingbats." *Press-Republican* (Plattsburgh), December 20, 1973: 25.

¹⁴ "Gay Liberation: Hello Plattsburgh We're Here." *Cardinal Points* (Plattsburgh), October 30, 1975: 14, 15.

will never be disclosed, and that attendance would not be taken. Also, they talked about how they refused to allow the *Press-Republican* to attend club meetings, and would not post ads in the city paper.¹⁵ Both of these have helped explain why little public response was found during this time. Cheryl Hogle and Bill Laundry were the club's two co-advisors, and both were officials at SUNY Plattsburgh. With their help, the organisation primarily focused on social gatherings and counseling services.¹⁶ Unfortunately, this organisation existed for only one semester before its activity apparently stopped, as far as all records appear to portray.

In 1983, eight years after the brief existence of PGSL, students came together to form the second major gay organisation in Plattsburgh, the Gay Alliance at Plattsburgh, or G.A.P.. On April 20th, 1983, the Student Association again approved a gay organisation, however, G.A.P. would prove to challenge some of the failures that PGSL experienced. The first change was the publicity; where PGSL fought for secrecy, G.A.P. pushed for visibility. Given this shift, G.A.P. saw a wide range of responses, from both the student body and the city populace. During the April 19th meeting, members discussed feeling uncomfortable when a reporter, James Kinsella, came from the *Press-Republican* in order to write an article about this new club. They unanimously agreed that the club should have a few students speak for the club in order to increase public awareness.¹⁷ Kinsella created a positive report of the organisation. In it, Lori Hiris, the co-chair of G.A.P. and a freshman at SUNY Plattsburgh, stated that the City of Plattsburgh had created a space in which gays must hide their identities. While Kinsella made it seem that the community was beginning to adopt a changing attitude, letters to the editor in the following weeks would prove that the reality was more

¹⁵ This is according to the PGSL Minutes, and may not be reliable given no reputable source. Plattsburgh Gay Students Liberation Meeting Minutes. Student Association Records at SUNY Plattsburgh. 1975.

¹⁶ "Gay Liberation: Hello Plattsburgh We're Here." October 30, 1975: 14, 15. This information is confirmed in the following collection of documents as well. Plattsburgh Gay Students Liberation: Constitutions, Letters, Meeting Minutes, Student Association Forms. Student Association Records at SUNY Plattsburgh. 1975.

¹⁷ Gay Alliance at Plattsburgh: Meeting Minutes 4/19/83. Student Association Records at SUNY Plattsburgh. April 19, 1983.

complicated.¹⁸ One instance is Richard Maynard's letter which personally attacks Rev. Daniel T. Keefe, a Catholic-priest and club advisor for G.A.P., for condoning the sin of homosexuality. Maynard stated he was appalled by Keefe's humanistic and liberal attitude, and that he should be trying to make the world adapt to God's word, rather than trying to adapt the church to a changing world.¹⁹

The backlash shared similarities at the college as well. On April 28th, *Cardinal Points* published a similar Letters to the Editor article submitted by Russell Brancato:

I am thoroughly disgusted with the SA approval of the Gay Alliance Organization. I think I speak for a majority of the student body in saying that this club should not exist... As a tour guide, I felt rather ashamed of Plattsburgh State when I walked past the Gay Alliance booth. It was making my stomach turn. If I had been a prospective student, it would have totally turned me off. Granted there may be some fags/lesbians on this campus, but why advertise? What do they have to be proud of? If I, God forbid, was a member of this organization I would have felt embarrassed to sit behind such a booth.²⁰

The following week's Letters to the Editor responses, made primarily by those affiliated with G.A.P., were far more heartening, and heavily criticized Russell Brancato's statements. G.A.P.'s response was measured, stating the the organisation did not want to publish a rebuttal, as his statements did not merit one, but his invective letter showed the need for more discussion of the goals and purpose of G.A.P..²¹

Despite the optimistic beginnings of G.A.P., events would overshadow this group's hopes and progress, and it would eventually lose official status as a club in 1985, for reasons currently unknown. While many hate crimes were cited at this time, such as petty vandalism and verbal attacks, the murder of Dawn Svocak, on August 16th, 1984, remains arguably one of the worst hate crimes in Plattsburgh's history, and has been severely ignored and forgotten. Dawn Svocak was a 20

¹⁸ James Kinsella. "Gay Alliance forms at Plattsburgh State." *Press-Republican* (Plattsburgh), May 2, 1983: 3.

¹⁹ Richard Maynard. "To the Editor: Make World Adapt to God's Word." *Press-Republican* (Plattsburgh) May 5, 1983: 3, 5.

²⁰ Russell G. Brancato. "Gay Alliance Offensive." *Cardinal Points* (Plattsburgh), April 28, 1983: 3.

²¹ Gay Alliance at Plattsburgh. Student Association Records at SUNY Plattsburgh. 1983-1985.

year old lesbian who had went to SUNY Plattsburgh with a focus on art. She had worked at Blair's, which was the only gay bar in Plattsburgh, and after a late night shift, she was murdered in the alley outside of the bar.²² She was not reported missing for another four days, in part because her friends were afraid of police response, due to bigoted presumptions about gays and the known drug use in Blair's, so they opted to post missing flyers themselves. A month later her body was found by a farmer in Beekmantown, and her case still has not been solved, though it has been reopened in recent years due to improvements in technology.²³

Once again, SUNY Plattsburgh remained without a gay student organisation, while the rest of New York began to swell with activism against the rise of AIDS. The AIDS Institute was created in 1983, staffed by only three people. By 1990, the New York agency had gained a budget of over 50 million dollars, and staffed by over 300 people. New York had the highest rate of AIDS cases than any other state, with over 32,000 cases reported by 1990. In October 1990, the first New York Statewide AIDS Conference was held in Lake George.²⁴ With the creation of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in 1985, the Gay Rights Movement began once again to demand national attention. As the state became embroiled in the issue of AIDS, SUNY Plattsburgh for the first time began to truly accept the importance and need of a gay organisation on campus.

In the fall semester of 1990, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Alliance (LGBA) was formed, advised this time by John Kellermeier. Kellermeier was a professor in the math department, and in 1995 wrote the article "Queer Statistics".²⁵ In 1990, issues of discrimination in Plattsburgh seemed to

²² The alley was named after her in 2014. Joe LoTempio. "City Names Alley to Honor Murder Victim." *Plattsburgh Press-Republican*. August 29, 2014.

²³ Lee Anne Denyer. "Investigators Release New Information in Cold-case Homicide of Dawn Svocak." WPTZ. June 18, 2016.

²⁴ W. Henry Lambright, and O'Gorman, J. Mark. "New York State's Response to AIDS: Evolution of an Advocacy Agency." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: J-PART 2*, no. 2, 1992: 175-98.

²⁵ He helped raise awareness of social issues, such as queer issues, by substituting typical and bland subjects in word problems with statistics of real life issues. In his article he states how although a few students were upset with the change, most of his students did better on exams and quizzes, and approved of the new

only have gotten worse. An editorial posted by the Editor of *Cardinal Points* described a list of hate crimes that created the need for LGBA to be approved by the Student Association. These included homophobic graffiti around campus, the leaving of a phallic ornament outside Blair's, and a man who had been hospitalized the prior weekend by a man who went out with the intention of 'fag bashing'.²⁶ The *Press-Republican* released yet another Letters to the Editor response, in which Mr. and Mrs. Franklin Collins opened their letter with "Sorry Stephen Pope (LGBA's President) and friends at PSUC, we should not be expected to accept your homosexuality." The letter continues, by saying that homosexual tendencies can be controlled in the same way that tendencies to steal and cheat are, and that the students should just accept the fact that the majority of people will never approve of homosexual relationships.²⁷ Despite these challenges, the organisation became deeply involved on campus, and organised numerous events to raise funds and awareness for AIDS. The organisation increased its presence on campus, and the community, throughout the first half of the 1990's. In October, 1991, the club hosted the first Coming Out Day Celebration, which approximately 100 people attended.²⁸ The AIDS Quilt came to Plattsburgh in 1993, and Eric Marcus was invited to campus as a part of the President's Speaker Series. Eric Marcus is the author of *Making History: The Struggle for Gay & Lesbian Rights, 1945-1990*, and spoke about many issues facing the gay community, particularly homophobia in the military and the AIDS crisis.²⁹ In 1994, LGBA sponsored Plattsburgh's First AIDS Awareness Week from March 21-25. In 1995, the LGBA won the

method, because it helped them engage more easily in the word problems. John Kellermeier. "Queer Statistics: Using Lesbian Gay Word Problem Content in Teaching Statistics." *NWSA Journal* 7, no. 1, 1995: 98-108.

²⁶ "The Birth of a Group." *Cardinal Points* (Plattsburgh), April 19, 1990.

²⁷ Franklin Collins. "Majority Won't Approve." *Press-Republican* (Plattsburgh), November 6, 1990: 6.

²⁸ This is the first major event LGBA hosted, based on my research. The main event was a satirical skit called "The Hopra Show", which was a spinoff of The Oprah Show. The skit had four actors play as heterosexual people in a homosexual world, in order to show the typical degradation of homosexuality. Adam Skarbinski. "Celebrating 'Coming Out'." *Cardinal Points* (Plattsburgh), October 17, 1991: 1-2.

²⁹ SUNY Plattsburgh Yearbook. College Archives. 1993: 76.

Outstanding Existing Organization Award given by the Student Association. They also hosted a drag show, led by off campus drag queen Amber Skyy, who performed at BackStreet (previously Blair's) regularly.³⁰

Despite all of this, the organisation was severely underrepresented in the colleges yearbooks. In none of the above events LGBA organised and hosted, did they receive credit. LGBA would find itself in the "Camera Shy Clubs" from 1996-1998, and was not mentioned at all in the 1999 yearbook (even though there is physical evidence of their existence). SUNY Plattsburgh's yearbook lost funding, and stopped producing them for the next nine years.³¹ John Kellermeier would continue to serve as the club's advisor intermittently from 1990 to at least 2003. Bruce Butterfield would serve as an advisor for the club in 1996, and was a student member of the club in 1990. Vivien Zazzau and Lynda Ames were also mentioned as possible advisors from 2002-2004. The organisation would become known as S.O.U.L in 2001, which won Outstanding Service to the Campus and Community Award on April 25, 2002.³²

On Dec. 1, 1998, Patty Bentley, a well-known political activist and faculty member at SUNY Plattsburgh, gave a speech in memory of hate crime victims in America at an event hosted by the Protestant Campus Ministry. Bentley addressed hate crimes against the gay community, looking at national instances, such as Harvey Milk, Charlie Howard, Matthew Shepard, and Allen Schindler, and more local instances, such as Dawn Svochak, Julie Williams and Lollie Winans.³³ In conclusion,

³⁰ All documents from Lesbian Gay Bisexual Alliance: SUNY Plattsburgh AIDS Awareness Week. Posters and Itineraries. Box 3 III-A-32 L-Q 1990-1995. SUNY Plattsburgh College Archives. 1994.

³¹ SUNY Plattsburgh Yearbook. College Archives. 1989-1999.

³² After 1995, the majority of the club's records were either misplaced, unorganized, or lost, although I have managed to bring together what I have found into this narrative. LGBA/S.O.U.L Unmarked Folders. Meeting Minutes, Constitutions, Event Advertisements and Itineraries, Posters, SA Documents. 1996-2004. Student Association Records at SUNY Plattsburgh.

³³ Julie Williams and Lollie Winans were a lesbian couple from Burlington, Vermont. They were both murdered in their tent on the Appalachian trail in Virginia over Memorial Day weekend in 1996.

she urged everyone to speak to their local representatives to urge them to prioritize social justice.³⁴ These words rung loudly while the community fell silent. It would be less than a year after this speech was given that Plattsburgh's gay community would enter the nation's consciousness.

Daniel Stewart was an Air Force Sgt. until 1988, then worked as a tractor-trailer driver for the next five years in Plattsburgh. Stewart was successfully elected as a representative on the City Council in 1993, 1995, and 1997. Crossing between party lines, Stewart left the Democratic Party in 1997 due to conflicts with Clyde Rabideau, the mayor from 1990-2000. In 1998, he declared that he was leaving politics, and was going to move to Montreal to live with his partner, but in June, 1999, he was convinced to run against Rabideau for the mayoral election in 1999. Winning marginally, he became the first openly gay mayor in New York State.³⁵

Although Stewart received a lot of attention for this landmark achievement, he perceived his election differently. While in the 1990's, the LGBA created liberationist activism, Stewart held a bold and defined assimilationist stance. The dichotomy between the college's liberationist sentiments, and Stewart's assimilationist beliefs, created a convoluted movement transitioning into the 21st century. In an interview shortly after his election, he stated that "people see we are just the same as them. We pay the taxes. We wax our car the same way. We walk our dogs. It's very seldom I have a negative attitude toward me based on sexual orientation. And it's because I do not go out and throw this in people's faces."³⁶ This example of assimilationism seems to have been supported by many state actors as well, as he gained the support of Governor George E. Pataki, and national organisations like the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund. Surprisingly, many of these organisations supported Rabideau previously, but moved their support to Stewart despite the fact

³⁴ Protestant Campus Ministry: "Memorial to Hate Crime Victims" Patty Bentley. Transcribed Speech. Dec. 1, 1998. Box 3 III-A-32 L-Q. SUNY Plattsburgh College Archives.

³⁵ Sarah Wildman. "The Long Road to the GOP." *The Advocate* (The National Gay & Lesbian Newsmagazine). July 4, 2000: 43, 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 45.

that he was silent on gay issues during his campaign.³⁷ Stewart also repeatedly argued that sexuality is a private issue, not a public one.³⁸ He went as far to reinforce this that he decided to not bring his partner to his swearing in ceremony, despite the fact that all the other politicians brought their partners before him, which seems to contradict this idea of privacy.³⁹ I argue that this extreme assimilationist ideology created a new era of Plattsburgh's closet. His criticism of publicising one's sexual identity as the cause of public backlash proved to be problematic as the movement evolved.

In 2005, Fred Phelps made his first visit to Plattsburgh. His radical anti-gay group, the Westboro Baptist Church, learned of Stewart's presence in Plattsburgh, and decided to protest his political office, given that he was to host the Mayor's Cup celebration on July 4th, of that year. Despite Stewart's policy of privacy, Phelps exemplified the issues of the private being political. A "stop hate" campaign spread across the city, as its activists put up signs in store windows in solidarity against the protest, despite a lack of a large counter protest.⁴⁰ The Westboro Baptist Church returned again in 2009 to protest the High School's Gay-Straight Alliance, and more specifically, the college's production of "The Laramie Project", which is a play based on the death of Matthew Shepard. Phelps gained his notoriety by protesting the gay student's death in Wyoming in 1998. He held signs and chanted profane hate speech in front of Plattsburgh High School and SUNY Plattsburgh. Plattsburgh formed a counter-protest, with roughly 200 people present. Dan Stewart's words during this protest seemed to acknowledge the beginning of a new wave of liberationism in Plattsburgh. "The first time (Westboro Church) was here it was my fault, because

³⁷ Somini Sengupta. "By the Way, a Mayor-Elect Is Gay." *The New York Times*. November 05, 1999. Accessed September 28, 2017.

³⁸ Matthew Purdy. "Political Life Adapts Itself To Private One." *The New York Times*. November 09, 1999.

³⁹ Wildman, "The Long Road to the GOP." 45.

⁴⁰ Brian Mann. "Radical Anti-Gay Group Targets Plattsburgh Mayor and Local Churches." (NCPR). July 1, 2005.

of the First Amendment argument I brought to the council floor... We cannot turn a blind eye, for anybody who thinks that's a better way, I suggest they be gay for a day."⁴¹

The presence of the Westboro Baptist Church created a discussion of gay issues in Plattsburgh once again, bringing it back to the front of many citizens' minds. While the production of "The Laramie Project" and S.O.U.L.'s⁴² growing involvement would support this trend, the "Fag-Bug Incident" in 2011 would again question the progress of the Gay Rights Movement in Plattsburgh. Erin Davies, who created a documentary in 2009 titled *Fagbug*, came to SUNY Plattsburgh to speak on hate crimes on college campuses, during which time her vehicle was damaged with "Faggets + Dikes Need to Die". The responses were startling.

"Erin informed the remainder of the audience by putting up a photograph she took of her window... It's the first time in four years this has ever happened. It didn't happen on my road trip and I put the car in every vulnerable position you could imagine around the entire country. It hasn't happened driving the car in my everyday life. It hasn't happened at any other campuses I've been to and I've been to almost 100 schools with the car over four years. How does this make you feel?"⁴³

Dan Sturrock also criticises the movement in Plattsburgh.

"I have lived in Plattsburgh, NY for 3 and half years. Being a gay man I have experienced homophobia all [too] often in this town... I wish the place I call home would evolve and realize that homophobia is a severe problem here."⁴⁴

When *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalized gay marriage in the United States, the populace of Plattsburgh seemed to generally support it. A *Press-Republican* article interviewed Dan Stewart, Rev. Sarah White from Mooers United Methodist Church, and Alumni Relations Director Paul Leduc, spoke favourably of the decision. Justin Trombley, a reporter from *Press Republican*, interviewed one

⁴¹ Bartlett, Stephen. "Phelps Protesters Meet Locals Outside PHS." *Press-Republican*. March 06, 2009.

⁴² LGBA changes its name to S.O.U.L. in 2001.

⁴³ Joe Wilson. "Gay Filmmaker Gets Death Threat on SUNY Campus." (*Out In The Silence*) March 10, 2011.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

Plattsburgh resident who opposed it, Dr. John Middleton, who spoke harshly of the implications of the judicial interpretation of the Constitution's limits and his religious doctrine.⁴⁵

In recent years, the gay rights movement in Plattsburgh has seen a new spurt of growth. In October of 2016, Plattsburgh held its first Pride Parade, the first in the Adirondack Region. Organised by Kelly Metzgar, a LGBTQ activist from Saranac Lake, the event was highly successful. Hundreds of students and residents participated in the march, and political representatives, activists, college faculty, and students spoke on the significance of Pride, and of the change that still needed to be made.

I fortunately had the chance to speak at the college on behalf of the student body, and I stated how I was "ashamed of how oppressed groups remain quiet in the face of discrimination against other oppressed groups, citing racism in the LGBTQ community and homophobia among racial minorities," which is where I believe the movement needs the most improvement today.⁴⁶ The ADK Gender Alliance has also been working on other major works in the North Country region of New York. The largest project is the creation of a Pride Center, which would focus on health and information for the LGBTQ community.⁴⁷ SUNY Plattsburgh has also been working on new programs to address LGBTQ issues. The current program is the RADIUS program.

In exploring the history of the gay rights movement in Plattsburgh, this paper critically analyzes the national narrative of gay history through a local lense. While national change is defined in terms of urban and legal progress, local change develops another dimension to the narrative of the movement's impacts. Some examples are how during the liberation movement in the 1970's nationally, the local Plattsburgh Gay Student Liberation organisation dissipated within a year of

⁴⁵ Justin Trombly. "Many Here, But Not All, Favor Gay Marriage [Decision]." (*Plattsburgh Press-Republican*. June 26, 2015.)

⁴⁶ Cara Chapman. "Pride Parade Celebrates Love, Acceptance, Unity." (*Press-Republican*). October 2, 2016.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Izzo. "Loud and Proud: ADK Gender Alliance Lands in P'Burgh." (*Sun Community News & Printing*). September 30, 2016.

existence. The examination of local efforts in activism against AIDS can also help show how national efforts, such as the Memorial Quilt, impacted Plattsburgh at a local level. However, when studying the progression of the movement solely in Plattsburgh, many contradicting events obscure the national gay right's movement's achievements and victories. The vandalism in 2011 stating that "[faggots] and dykes need to die." occurred thirty years after a lesbian from Plattsburgh was murdered, which questions whether public sentiments in Plattsburgh have truly changed. Another question of this change is from the Ask Ann Landers column arguing that homosexuals publicising their sexuality make them look like far-out kooks, to Stewart reinforcing the idea that sexuality should be private after he was elected in 2000. Yet the change from Brancato's question of what fags and lesbians have to be proud of, to Plattsburgh hosting annual Pride Parades shows there have been notable changes. Another such change is from the secrecy needed during the existence of the PGSL, to how today LGBTQ issues are addressed regularly through college programs and campus events. The changes, and lack thereof, put into scrutiny whether Plattsburgh is as progressive as the *New York Times* have applauded, and the Westboro Baptist Church criticized. By understanding the complications of the selective ideas of progress in LGBTQ rights, it is transparent that there are still problems to be addressed. Concurrently, these complications serve to shed light into the troubled history of gay rights in Plattsburgh.

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