



Education Department Resource

Why We Need A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) History Month

Contributed by Kevin Jennings, GLSEN Executive Director

This October educators across the country will celebrate Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) History Month. As the head of the nation's largest organization fighting anti-LGBT bias, I have been frequently asked two questions about this celebration: "Why do we need an LGBT History Month? And why in October?"

The second question is easy to answer. Unlike June (which is LGBT Pride Month), in October, virtually all schools are in session, thus increasing the event's potential impact. Many schools already celebrate National Coming Out Day (October 11), and scheduling our celebration for October will build on that tradition.

The first question is the more philosophical one. I believe that knowing our history is a vital part of our liberation. As the Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey once said, "A people without history is like a tree without roots." When we grow up being taught a history from which we are absent, it is that much more difficult for us to develop a sense of pride in our heritage.

My own experience taught me how important it is to know one's history. I was born in 1963 in rural North Carolina, and realized in grade school that I was gay. I felt absolutely alone. Not once in high school did I ever learn a single thing about homosexuality or LGBT people. I couldn't

imagine a happy life as a gay man. Eventually, at age seventeen I tried to kill myself, like one out of every two LGB teens. I saw nothing in my past, my present, or (it seemed) my future suggesting that things would ever get any better.

I survived this suicide attempt, thanks to the alert actions of a friend, and eventually developed a sense of pride in myself as a gay man. Still, I had little sense of myself as part of a historical tradition. I eventually came to know more LGBT history, "including the contributions of LGBT people in ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, and China, the 19th century gay liberation movements in Germany and England, and the fact that important Americans such as Alexander Hamilton and Eleanor Roosevelt loved members of their own gender. As heartening as all this was, I still didn't seem myself reflected in this history, which seemed very remote (from my own childhood in North Carolina.

In 1993 I was asked to edit the first-ever high school gay and lesbian history text. As I was doing research, I learned of One Magazine, America's first gay magazine, which began publication in 1953. I decided to read some, and came across this letter to the editor in One's October 1954 issue: "I will always remain willing to support, in my small way, any effort to reduce intolerance toward a minority group in the United

States. Intolerance is basically as un-American as Communism. I realize the road ahead of us is long and difficult, but that part of the road already traveled has been pretty tough, too."

These prophetic lines were striking enough, but it was its signature that stopped me dead in my tracks. In bold print letters, it read "Winston-Salem, North Carolina."

I grew up five miles from Winston-Salem.

Two emotions came to me. One was elation. Finally, I had found my past. For the first time, I looked into a historical document and saw someone like me. A second emotion quickly followed. I was angry. How was it that no one had taught me this history? I thought back over my sixteen years of education, in North Carolina public schools and at Harvard University, when I was never taught anything about LGBT history, and I was filled with rage. Denying me that history had nearly cost me my life, for LGBT invisibility had helped create the feelings of isolation that made me try to kill myself.

Maybe if I had known that there were people like me in Winston-Salem before I was born, I might not have spent so many years hating myself. Maybe if someone had taught me this history, I would have made it through school more easily. Maybe if someone had taught this history to my straight classmates, they wouldn't have called me "faggot". Maybe if someone had thought this history was important, my childhood could have been a bit better.

I believe we need an LGBT History Month because there are still too many youth who grow up as ignorant as I was. How many students learn that many American Indian cultures honored individuals who loved members of their own genders? How many know that "gays in the military" is not a new issue, but actually began in 1778, when George Washington signed the first expulsion order for a gay soldier (Lt.

Gotthold Enslin) at Valley Forge? How many know that the profession of social work was begun by a lesbian, Jane Addams? How many know that the 1963 March on Washington, where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous "I Have A Dream" speech, was organized by an openly gay African-American man, Bayard Rustin? These are but a few facts that show that, indeed, LGBT people have been a part of the America right from the start.

LGBT History Month is a project that will only grow if our community supports it. Black History Month, after all, began as "Negro History Day" in 1924, and only attained its present status because African-Americans demanded that their children be taught about their history. We must do the same.

Here are some ideas for recognizing LGBT History Month in your community:

1. Ask your local school what they are doing to recognize this event;
2. Ask your local library or bookstore to do a display of their materials on LGBT history;
3. Have your organization become an endorser of LGBT History Month;
4. Ask your local elected officials to issue a proclamation declaring October LGBT History Month;
5. Buy a book on LGBT history so that publishers will publish more of them;
6. Donate that book to your local school library.

I would like to see a day in the not-so-distant future when every child will grow up knowing of our community's contributions to our nation's development. Children who learn this lesson will learn another important one: LGBT individuals are people, too. When they learn this, homophobia and heterosexism will be on

their way to becoming history. That would

be the best lesson of all.