



UNHEARD VOICES

Stories of LGBT History



Interview Transcript



Between 1952 and 1973, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association. Gay men and women across the country were subjected to a variety of treatments aimed at curing their “condition.”

*During that era, **Dr. Charles Silverstein** was in graduate school training to become a psychologist. Here, he talks about his role in changing the medical community’s ideas about homosexuality.*

Charles Silverstein: None of my closest friends knew that I was gay and I decided to finally come out by participating with an organization called the Gay Activist Alliance. We organized a demonstration against the guys who used to use aversion therapy on gay men. The technique they were using was electrical aversion, where a guy would get aroused seeing a picture of a naked man and they’d shock him.

And so we organized this demonstration consisting of two parts. Some would be people in the street with placards and flyers and the usual stuff. But the other part of it was getting a group of people into the room at the behaviorist convention, where this psychiatrist was talking about his work in aversion therapy.

And so we sat down quietly and after fifteen minutes, we took over and attacked the use of aversion therapy and the people in the audience who were trying to cure homosexuals, the whole, the whole bit.

In the audience was a psychiatrist by the name of Bob Spitzer from the Nomenclature Committee of the American Psychiatric Association. They’re the group that makes the list of mental disorders. And it is to his credit, I must say, that he invited us to make a presentation about the deletion of homosexuality. And the Board of Directors removed homosexuality from the Nomenclature.

It became the single most important success of the gay liberation movement. Gay groups could attack the laws against sodomy in states all over the country.

People in New York say, “You can’t fight City Hall,” and we used to say, “You can’t fight City Hall, but you can piss on the steps.” And I would say that when you see something wrong, you should say something. It’s not just about homosexuality, but about anything.