



UNHEARD VOICES

Stories of LGBT History



Michael Levine and the Stonewall Rebellion

Introduction to the Interview (Running Time: 2:26)

Michael Levine was at a popular gay bar in New York City in June 1969 when it was surrounded by police. At the time, the vice squad routinely raided and emptied gay bars. Patrons usually complied with the police—frightened at being identified publicly.

But this particular Friday night was different because patrons at the Stonewall Inn stood their ground. They clashed—during what became known as the Stonewall Rebellion.

Here, Michael Levine reflects with his friend, Matt Merlin, on what happened that night.

Questions to Discuss with Students Following the Interview

- Why did a “deafening silence” occur at the Stonewall Inn on the night Michael describes? What did this signal to the LGBT patrons at that time and place?
- Why do you think the police targeted the Stonewall Inn? Do you think it was illegal for LGBT people to congregate in a bar at that time?
- On the third night of the rebellion, Michael says, “We stood there on the street and held hands and kissed—something we would never have done three days earlier.” Why wouldn’t he have done this before the Stonewall Rebellion? What changed in that short space of time? Why did Michael feel so proud he had “chills”?
- How did the Stonewall Rebellion change Michael’s relationship with his family? Why do you think he never disclosed his sexual identity to them and why do you think they never asked about his identity?
- What does Michael mean when he says, “I didn’t feel that I was a different person...I felt the world is now more comfortable with me.” How did the Stonewall Rebellion change the lives of individuals? How did it change the world?

Suggested Activities and Assignments for Extended Learning

- Help students to understand the interconnections among various civil rights movements from the 1950s to the 1970s. Assign small groups to each research a different movement (e.g., African American, women, farm/migrant workers, Native American, LGBT). Have groups collect key slogans/anthems from that movement (e.g., “Black is beautiful,” “A Woman Needs a Man Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle,” “Sí, se puede,” “Indians are people not mascots,” “Gay is good”). Create a collage or mural out of the slogans and use them as a vehicle for identifying the key goals and demands of each movement, and discussing how the movements collectively reinforced and influenced one another.
- Assign students to select a key figure in the LGBT rights movement during the era right before, during

or after Stonewall. Have them create a portrait, poem or piece of reflective writing that demonstrates what they have learned about the figure, and share their work with the class. Some important activists from this era include Harry Hay, Frank Kameny, Phyllis Lyon, Dell Martin, Barbara Gittings, Evelyn Hooker, Sylvia Rivera, Rita Mae Brown, Marsha P. Johnson, Adrienne Rich and Harvey Milk.

- Have students read a poem, essay or novel by an influential LGBT writer during the Stonewall era (e.g., Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Edmund White, Audre Lorde, Rita Mae Brown). Assign a different reading to small groups and have each group discuss their reactions to the reading. Then form new groups with students who have each read something different, and have them share the main ideas or highlights to their group members.
- Have students compare gay rights groups before Stonewall (e.g., Mattachine Society, Daughters of Bilitis) with those that came after the uprising (e.g., Gay Liberation Front, Gay Activists Alliance). Create a Venn diagram or another visual that shows how the goals and tactics of the LGBT rights movement evolved to reflect changing times and attitudes.
- Create a class timeline from Stonewall to the present that shows some of the major rights LGBT people have achieved during that period. At the end of the timeline, have students identify rights that are yet to be achieved.
- The Stonewall Rebellion sparked annual Gay Pride marches around the country and throughout the world. Ask for student volunteers who are willing to attend a local pride march (or another LGBT rally or peaceful protest). Have them assume the role of a journalist and write an article that captures what they observed. Alternatively, challenge straight students to wear a visible LGBT symbol (e.g., rainbow rings necklace, pink triangle pin) and to write an essay reflecting on how it felt to participate in that role.
- On the 40th anniversary of Stonewall in 2009, President Obama challenged citizens to “commit to achieving equal justice under the law for LGBT Americans.” Have students create a piece of writing or artwork that depicts what “equal justice under the law” would look like for LGBT people. Discuss the rights that are being sought by LGBT Americans today and what it might take for those rights to be achieved.



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Student Handout



Michael Levine

“I came out in the 1960s, when it was difficult to be gay,” remembers Michael Levine. “As a matter of fact, we didn’t use the word ‘gay’ back then. There were only two words: ‘homosexual’ and ‘queer.’ I hated the word ‘homosexual.’ Everyone knew that only male hairdressers and female gym teachers were ‘homos.’ They weren’t normal people. I stayed away from them because I wanted so much to be normal. I hated the word homosexual, but I was terrified by the word ‘queer.’ If anyone knew you were ‘queer,’ you would get [beat up] on the way home from school, every day. I didn’t want to get beat up, so I avoided them too.”

“That’s how I lived my high school and college years, hiding from the world, and, most importantly, from myself. I had several brief secret affairs with other guys and after each one I felt ashamed and embarrassed and humiliated by the thought of anyone knowing what I was doing. I was, naturally, always moody and depressed and caught in a life I felt I did not understand or want. I felt as though I was not ‘normal.’ But, I knew no other way.”

In the 1950s and ’60s, most lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people lived a shadowy existence. They were commonly regarded as sexual deviants and subversives, and portrayed in the media as child molesters and communists. In 1952 the psychiatric community classified homosexuality as a mental disorder and the FBI kept lists of “known homosexuals,” who were considered security risks.

During this era it was dangerous for LGBT people to be open about their sexual identity. Police often performed sweeps of public parks and beaches where LGBT people congregated. The names of those arrested were commonly printed in newspapers, leading to humiliation, harassment and loss of employment.

Few social establishments welcomed LGBT people. Those that did were mostly bars and often run by organized crime. The Stonewall Inn in New York City—a ratty hole in the wall without running water or fire exits—was one of those bars. It was illegal for members of the same sex to dance together or display affection in the bar. Cross-dressing was also forbidden and women were required to wear at least three articles of “feminine clothing.” Though the owners regularly paid off cops to keep them away, raids and entrapment were common.

Popular among the most marginalized—drag queens, homeless youth, effeminate men and masculine women—the Stonewall was an unlikely site for a revolution. “Every night I went in with my collar up, hiding my face, ashamed to be seen,” recalls Michael Levine. “But, once in, it was there that I could dance with and kiss my boyfriend, and no one cared.” Many of the patrons, craving a social space where they

could be themselves, put up with the routine ID-checks and harassment. But when the police burst into the Stonewall during the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, a different mood was in the air.

“Suddenly,” explains Michael, “a deafening silence occurred. The lights went up, the music went off, and you could hear a pin drop, literally.” Several officers shouted, “We’re taking the place!,” and began lining up the 200 patrons for an ID-check. Many resisted, refusing to show their identification or to go willingly with the police. As the officers forced the customers outside—where the “Public Morals Squad” was waiting with a wagon—a crowd gathered on the street and confronted the cops. Some threw bottles and pelted police officers with coins. Chants of “liberate Christopher Street!” and “we shall overcome!” echoed throughout the neighborhood as a chorus line formed and kicked its way down the block. “They were all Puerto Rican drag queens and Irish cops,” explains Michael. “It was a funny, funny confrontation.”

As the crowd swelled and grew angrier – throwing garbage cans and bricks, and trying to overturn police cars – the cops barricaded themselves into the Stonewall. Before reinforcements could arrive, the mob rammed the door with an uprooted parking meter, lit garbage on fire and threw it into the bar. By the time the violence died down, thirteen arrests were made, four cops were injured and many protesters were hospitalized.

“When we came back [the next] night,” describes Michael, “we stood there on the street and held hands and kissed – something we would never have done three days earlier. It made me feel wonderful. I stood there with chills.” Over the next three days, protesters defied law enforcement by openly displaying affection, declaring “gay power” and antagonizing the police. The owner of the Oscar Wilde Bookshop – the first bookstore devoted to gay and lesbian authors – printed 5,000 fliers, including one that read, “Get the Mafia and the Cops out of Gay Bars.” The leaflets called for a boycott of the Stonewall and other bars run by organized crime, for gays to own their own establishments and for the city to investigate the “intolerable situation.”

The three days of unrest that came to be known as the Stonewall Rebellion were small in scale, yet they triggered massive change. Within months several organizations and newspapers were formed to promote LGBT rights. Whereas the earlier gay rights movement tried to create change by fitting peacefully into mainstream society, new groups adopted more militant tactics inspired by 1960s civil rights activists. The Gay Liberation Front, for example, was the first organization to use the word “gay” in its name and introduced itself with a flier proclaiming: “Do You Think Homosexuals Are Revolting? You Bet Your Sweet A** We Are!” Within two years, there were LGBT rights groups in every major U.S. city as well as in Canada, Australia and Europe.

In 1970, to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion, the first Gay Pride marches took place across the U.S. By 1972 a dozen cities held pride parades, and gay and lesbian people in London, Paris, West Berlin and Stockholm also marched for gay rights.

Thirty years after the rebellion, the U.S. government designated the site of the original Stonewall Inn as a National Historic Landmark and proclaimed: “Let it forever be remembered that here—on this spot—men and women stood proud, they stood fast, so that we may be who we are, we may work where we will, live where we choose and love whom our hearts desire.”

When Michael Levine looks back at his experience with the Stonewall Rebellion, he sums it up this way: “... The lights went up, the police entered and raided the bar, the gays fought back and refused to leave, and gay rights was born. I went in that night with my collar up hiding my face. After the rebellion, I stood in the street with my collar down, holding my face up and holding my boyfriend’s hand, and being proud to be gay. It felt ‘normal.’”