

THE OAK PARK LESBIAN AND GAY ASSOCIATION: STORIES FROM THE HISTORY-MAKING FIRST DECADE



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the Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association.
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INTRODUCTION

Nathan Linsk

Oak Park, Illinois, is a suburban village just west of Chicago. Oak Park has had an array of notable residents, including Frank Lloyd Wright (developer of the Prairie School of Architecture) and Ernest Hemingway, who grew up in Oak Park but left after graduating from the local high school. As of the 2010 United States Census, the village had a population of just over 50,000 residents. The village is known by many for its efforts to promote open housing and racial diversity, having passed one of the first open housing ordinances in the United States in 1968. In 1972 Oak Park established a regional housing center to promote intentional and stable residential integration throughout Oak Park (www.oprhc.org). Near Chicago's loop and medical district, Oak Park is known for family life, community events, and a proportionately high number of religious institutions and child-care facilities.

However, up until the late 1980s, there was no visible presence of gays, lesbians, and even less of bisexuals, trans persons, or other sexual minorities. While there were two gay-oriented bars in nearby Forest Park that served as the only social gathering places, Oak Park had none. Lavender Bouquet, a lesbian social group that met in an Oak Park church basement, had begun in the early 1980's and grew to over 100 women within a few years (see article by Rebekah Levin in this publication). But this group kept a low profile and did not advertise its existence to the general public.

The visibility and presence of the gay and lesbian community changed in the late 1980s, first due to the documentation of a disproportionate number of gay men infected with HIV/AIDS, most of whom reported same sex contact as a risk behavior (see articles by Mel Wilson and Angelika Kuehn). The second reason was the effort by some citizens to advocate for gay and lesbian protections in village policies.

The Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association emerged in the spring of 1989. The early formation as well as some personal reflections are detailed in Chapter 1. Originally dubbed OPLGA, the organization was renamed in 1994 to Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association to reflect participation beyond Oak Park to the larger community. In 2019 the name was modified to OPALGA+ to be more encompassing and inclusive.¹ Throughout this document, the acronym in use at the time being written about is used.

¹ At the time of the formation of the Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association, the terms Lesbian and Gay seemed inclusive. We recognize this has changed in more recent years. In this document the term LGBT+ is used where relevant to be inclusive.

OPLGA initially was established to advocate for inclusion of protections for lesbians and gays in various policies and institutions. The association quickly grew into a more comprehensive community group that encompassed social support and activities, cultural and educational programs, youth services, arts festivals, concerts, and other opportunities for gay, lesbian and those questioning their sexual orientation to come together with friends and allies. As OPALGA+ celebrates our 30 years together in 2019, we are proud of our achievements, both in the earlier years when greater acceptance and protections for lesbian and gay citizens and families were won, as well as more recently as the organization has provided support to others, including youth and like-minded organizations. The group's early work ensured protection of LGBT+ people at all levels of local government, including the schools and the library, conducting a myriad of community events, providing HIV education targeted to youth, conducting a gay and lesbian drop-in center, successfully mounting a community campaign for domestic partnership benefits at the village employee level, and establishing one of the first domestic partnership registries in the state.

As time passes, OPALGA's history is increasingly at risk of being forgotten or distorted. Already some of our initial leaders have left the community, are in declining health and memory, or have passed on. What needs to be preserved can be thought of as the stories of OPALGA—how we came together as a group, why this happened, who was involved both within and outside the organization, and how we were able to accomplish what we did. These events have only been documented in bits and pieces, and are not fully accessible to all who are interested.

As OPALGA+ has now passed its 30th anniversary, some original members and leaders have come together to capture the shared knowledge and lessons learned as the organization began, grew and has become a sustaining community force. Rather than a research or oral history project, this document is for earlier members to share our memories and experiences about how these achievements came about, the community context including opposition to our work, and what it meant personally for us to be involved during OPLGA's first decade. Taking advantage of the shared knowledge of those who have been involved, this publication helps to document this development and the transitions that occurred over time.

We hope that this effort has general interest for OPALGA+ leaders and members as well as both the larger LGBT and wider communities, and may offer insights that may be helpful to others. The articles in this document tell the story of OPALGA from various perspectives including personal recollections by a number of the early leaders and members. For example, see articles in Chapter 1 by Bob Trezevant, Jim Kelly, Ray Johnson and Phil Bellerive. In some instances, the stories overlap, but

rather than consolidating them, the perspectives are presented as written.

OPALGA has served Oak Park and the surrounding area, promoting a sense of community, unique culture, public policies, as well as providing social activities and just an opportunity to have fun together. OPALGA was unique among such organizations in having (and incorporating into its bylaws) leadership that consistently included both gay men and lesbians. Involving lesbians and gay men together was not often a goal of like organizations, and while OPALGA was not always fully successful in achieving gender balance and equity, at both leadership and member levels the group continued to be inclusive of both. Our initial and continuing structure with both male and female co-chairs had significant impact on what we did and how we did it, which differentiated us from the larger activist and social community. In 2019's constructs of gender fluidity, multiple categories across the communities and those who avoid binary conceptualization, this effort may not seem as important as it did in 1989.

We like to think our efforts contributed to increased comfort for all and continued development among gender and sexual minority groups. This publication reflects the interest of early OPALGA members and allies in finding ways to document this history, as well as developing a permanent report for future use. In fact, OPALGA's efforts within the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer communities (the community/populations involved go beyond these categories, but for this discussion we will use the term LGBT+ to encompass a range of sexual orientations and identities) are unique and offer lessons both for future thinking about addressing discrimination, increasing visibility, ensuring rights and creating safety and a sense of community belonging for the LGBT+ context.

PHASES OF OPALGA+

As with other locally emerging community organizations, OPALGA started small and developed in various directions over time. We can observe this through a series of overlapping phases that characterized the group. Some of these include the following:

Start-up

OPLGA began in early 1989, in response to the Village consideration of revision of the Human Rights Ordinance, in an effort to ensure civil rights protections for people with HIV/AIDS and LGBT+ citizens and their families. At this point the group was not established but individuals had responded to requests for community representation, for example at a holocaust memorial ceremony or AIDS awareness events. As the village board election was approaching, several future OPLGA leaders approached candidate slates to ask for support for civil rights protections. As the ordinance neared formal consideration, and we began to solicit testimony to present to the village board, the need for an ongoing organization

became evident. The focus broadened to creating a supportive community for gay and lesbian people to find each other, learn from each other and create community events, for both LGBT+ people and the community at large (see articles in Chapter 1 by Mel Wilson, Nathan Linsk, and Phil Bellerive).

Creation of OPLGA

By April of 1989, the group began holding regular meetings and the organization named itself. The three initial co-founders were Mel Wilson, Nathan Linsk and Bryan Findlay (unfortunately, Findlay died in February 1992 of HIV/AIDS related causes). Fifteen additional people joined forces to form the group, including individuals from Lavender Bouquet, responding to an intentional invitation to include women (see article by Rebekah Levin). OPLGA then established a newsletter (first published in May 1989), monthly meetings with program presentations, and some public presentations. From the outset, members identified several areas of focus: non-discrimination, health care (including HIV/AIDS), social services, education and counseling, protection from violence, and improving quality of life for LGBT+ citizens.

Committee of the Whole

For the first year or two, the group did not have a formal structure, aside from some officers and individuals who agreed to lead specific activities. Meetings were open to all, and decisions were made by all present. Minutes were kept for each of the biweekly meetings, though people's names were not always listed, or were identified only by initials, due to safety concerns. Not all participants were out to their families, friends or neighbors, and others were not out at work. There were no protections based on sexual orientation at the time, and people could lose their jobs, homes and children if identified as lesbian or gay. We established a post office box address. By the end of 1989, the Village Board and District 200 High School had passed civil rights protections, amid great controversies and public hearings. The library, elementary schools, and park district boards were soon to follow (see Chapter 3). Efforts to ensure participation on key community committees began. Connections with many other organizations helped initiate and continued to sustain the organization (see Chapter 2).

Developing Programs and Organizational Structure

At the December 1989 membership meeting, OPLGA formalized membership and a modest dues structure of \$15 per person—"More if you can... Less if you can't." The first OPLGA potluck dinner was conceived by the late Jim Aull and hosted with Jeffrey Smith at Jim's home on April 27, very soon after the organization was launched.

The first set of by-laws developed under Jim Aull's leadership, which were accepted on April 17, 1990. In June 1990, OPLGA established a telephone number with a 24-hour answering machine to provide information and allow for return calls. Up until then all calls came to Mel and Nathan's home number. OPLGA held a planning workshop at a retreat center in southern Wisconsin to begin to develop specific recommendations for future activities (see article by Linsk and Strategic Plan in Appendix) and for members to get to know each other better. That year, OPLGA marched for the first time in the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Pride parade and participated in the community wide "Day in Our Village." The newsletter announced formation of the "Parents Triangle," an ultimately short-lived support group for gay and lesbian parents, as well as the beginnings of a youth group and a gay and lesbian film society. Beacon Unitarian Church resolved to become a "Welcoming Congregation" after a series of discussion groups which OPLGA helped convene (see article by Betsy Davis); other churches in the community also worked with OPLGA to develop statements affirming LGBT support. By the fall of 1990, OPLGA established more formal "Task Groups", identifying chairs or co-chairs for each. These included public policy (Mel Wilson), youth (Rebekah Levin), Outreach (Phil Bellerive and Ethel Cotovsky), Education (Jim Kelly), and Social Activities (Jane Anderson and Tom Earle—soon to be succeeded by Ron Rauch). See the Timeline in the Appendix for detail of these and subsequent milestones.

Two major programs occurred during the early years. The Oak Park Police superintendent approached OPLGA to conduct sensitivity training focused on gay and lesbian citizens in response to the recently amended Oak Park Human Rights and Diversity Ordinance. The organization responded by identifying and developing materials and providing interactive training for all officers.

OPLGA's outreach and education committee conducted a weekend Cultural Arts Festival in Scoville Park, the central park of the community (see Chapter 4 articles by Mary Davis, Nancy Johnson and Pam Freese). An active committee solicited applications from regional artists and a large and exciting event occurred, focusing on the theme of "Building Bridges to Understanding." Seen as a gift to the larger community, a major concert with national level artists was included in the first year; in the following four years an entertainment stage provided music throughout the day. The program allowed a view of OPLGA as going beyond advocacy and social goals to a greater focus on culture and art.

Ongoing OPALGA Programs

A number of programs reflected major themes of OPLGA's interests and became ongoing activities. Chapter 3 reports on the development of advocacy campaigns, while Chapter 4 highlights ongoing programs in other areas, including youth, education, social activities and cultural events.

Human and Civil Rights/Public Policy.

OPLGA's efforts to influence local policies to provide LGBT non-discrimination protections continued throughout the decade (see Chapter 3). The initial advocacy was directed to all levels of government, beginning with the Village Diversity statement and human rights ordinance (see article by Mary Davis), followed by policy advocacy at the high school and elementary districts, library, park district and local service organizations. OPLGA's continuing advocacy efforts focused on domestic partnership, initially for village employees.

Subsequently OPALGA continued to work with the Village Board to pass one of the first domestic partnership registries in Illinois, which led to a contentious referendum (see articles by Alan Amato and Steve Glickman). The association provided an ongoing "speaker's bureau" to educate congregations and other organizations about the issues. These activities created local, state, and national recognition for the organization, intertwined with the village's early history related to housing and racial equity issues.

Social and Networking Activities

From the outset, OPLGA brought people together to meet, socialize, and form friendships (see article by Jane Anderson). These included monthly potlucks and meetings, a variety of cultural and social events, and outings.

Youth

There have been many iterations of the youth programs—from initial educational outreach to schools and community groups, through the existence of the ongoing youth programs. This is important history—many of us were motivated to support the organization because of this focus on youth. Youth focused activities eventually developed into ongoing educational and support programs (see articles by Susan Abbott, Nancy Johnson and Marsha Borders as well recollections by Andy Walensa and Charna Linsk). The youth drop-in center required a specific space, which led to establishing an office, and eventually an OPALGA Center used for a variety of activities. Public HIV prevention funding helped establish the program, helping pay for staff and supplies, but this needed supplementation from other fundraising.

Gala

OPALGA established an annual event to bring the community together, provide a leadership award as well as raise funds for ongoing youth and education programs. (see article by Jim Kelly).

Communications

OPLGA initially established a communication committee, which produced monthly newsletters, calendars, updates, white papers as well

as two literary journals. Of course, as internet, website and email became available, much of the communication eventually became electronic.

Providing External Service and Support

From the beginning, OPLGA was involved in service to the larger community. During the first year OPLGA had begun providing education to educational and social service agencies, conducted a benefit concert to support Community Response (the local HIV/AIDS service organization—see article by Angelika Kuehn), and was providing educational workshops to community groups and churches. Community education included workshops and forums, targeting schools and Sarah's Inn (an organization to help victims of domestic violence) in collaboration with the local health department. OPLGA activities also included supporting LGBT+ volunteers on citizen commissions and non-profit boards and serving in elected office (including Village trustees and an elementary school board member). OPLGA members used their skills honed in developing the organization to serve the larger Oak Park community's needs, such as providing leadership for the Barrie Park rehabilitation from toxic deposits.

The book concludes with an Epilogue by current and recent OPALGA+ co-chairs.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Susan Abbott

Susan Abbott was the OPALGA Youth Programming Director from 2000 to 2009. Susan works as a residential real estate broker and continues to hold her clinical social work license. She has lived in Oak Park for 21 years with her wife Lynn and children Taylor, Grae, and Spencer.

Alan Amato

Alan Amato was an active member of OPALGA since early days, and testified at a number of the hearings related to public policy. He served as co-chair of the Public Policy committee and helped promote domestic partnership, especially during the contentious referendum. Alan also co-owned Pride Agenda bookstore, which for many years served as a specialty LGBT bookstore-resource as well as a site for community involvement. Alan was also actively involved and a board member of the former Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force, a board member of the former Community Response, the Oak Park area AIDS support organization, as well as ACT UP Chicago and a columnist for *Gay Chicago Magazine*.

Jane Anderson

Jane Anderson was a founding member of both OPLGA and Berwyn United Neighborhood Gay and Lesbian Organization (BUNGALO), and was a long-standing co-chair of the Social Committee. She also has been a Board Member and Secretary of OPALGA and past co-chair of BUNGALO. Being a long-time resident of Cicero and Berwyn, with family roots going back over 100 years in the community, she brought an outsider's perspective to the organization when she became the first Board Member from outside Oak Park. She was also involved in organizations in Berwyn, the All Berwyn Committee (ABC) and Keep Berwyn Beautiful.

Phil Bellerive

Phil Bellerive was a founding member of OPLGA in 1989 and served on the Steering Committee (precursor to the Board) until 1991. He then became male Co-Chair, serving until 1993 alongside female Co-Chairs Rebekah Levin and Ethel Cotovsky, during which OPLGA conducted the Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival and participated in the 1993 National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights. He was acting Treasurer in 1996-1997 and Board Member at Large more times than he can remember!

Marsha Borders

Marsha Borders was a founding member of OPLGA and member of the early sister organization Lavender Bouquet. She served as a volunteer for the youth center and supported many other activities of the organization. She moved to Oak Park in 1983 with her two children Adrienne and Oneka. She is a retired academic administrative health professional.

Betsy Davis

Moved by stories of the experiences of gay friends and acquaintances, Betsy Davis has been an activist and member of OPLGA since its beginning. She was surprised to learn in the 1980's about how many other straight people believed that they had never known anyone who was gay and was proud to work for gay rights with those good and wise people who were courageous enough to be themselves in public at a time when that was uncomfortable and even dangerous.

Mary Davis

Mary Davis, a founding member of OPLGA, served as the Co-Founder and Publicity Chairperson of the Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival. Mary was closely involved in the passage of the Oak Park Human Rights Ordinance to include sexual orientation and worked to modify the Oak Park High School's Human Dignity Policy to include sexual orientation. Mary moved to Oak Park in 1987 and now spends her retirement years in both Chicagoland and Tucson. She has chosen to continue her LGBTQ volunteerism by serving on the Steering Committee of Southern Arizona Senior Pride.

Pamela Freese

Pamela Freese joined OPLGA in 1989 and served at times on various committees and as co-chair. Some favorite moments from those times include learning the difference between how public policy works in theory and in practice and monthly potlucks featuring fried chicken. She's blissfully married with two amazing kids and works as an educator.

Steve Glickman

Steve Glickman served as co-chair of OPALGA from 1996 through 1999. As a storyteller, he is active in the Live Lit scene in Chicago. He has told stories on the Moth Radio Hour, at the Laugh Factory, City Winery, Sidetrack/OUTSpoken, and many other venues and shows. He hosts the monthly storytelling open mic "Do Not Submit" in Chicago. By day he is a software engineer. He lives in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago with his partner Mark. For more info on Steve go to: <http://www.steveglickman.net>

Nancy Johnson

Nancy Johnson was one of the founding members of OPLGA and served as co-chair of the youth committee for 2 years. She has been a member of Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) since 1986, and is active in the Oak Park Area Chapter of PFLAG. She is a retired professor of mathematics from Chicago State University. In 1977 she and her husband, Jimmie, moved with their 10-year-old son to Oak Park.

Ray Johnson

Ray Johnson became involved with OPALGA as a member of the “Vote YES” committee for the Domestic Partnership Registry Referendum. His involvement in the referendum led to several roles at OPALGA: Treasurer, Co-Chair, Youth Program Advisor, and Debt Reduction Committee. In 2003, he became involved in public service and was elected as was Oak Park’s first openly gay man to be elected as Village Trustee, serving as Village from 2003 until 2014. He is employed at HSBC Bank as Vice President, Corporate Sustainability, and is currently based in New York City.

Jim Kelly

Jim Kelly and his husband Bruce Broerman started their lives together in 1988. The following year they were invited to be founding members in the effort to establish a lesbian and gay association (OPLGA) in Oak Park. In 1991 he had a significant role in the development and delivery of a sensitivity training program for the Oak Park Police Department. He served as Board Co-Chair from 1993 through 1995. In 1997 Jim initiated the first fundraising committee and took a leadership role in organizing the first OPAL Gala that same year. He served as a board member from 1992 until 1996 and again in 2011 and 2012.

Angelika Kuehn

Angelika Kuehn is one of the founders of Community Response, a regional HIV/AIDS service organization, and was its first executive director. Recently retired from a legal practice that served many members of the LGBTI+ community, she participated actively in Oak Park/ River Forest social service and political organizations and contributed to the advancement of knowledge in her own profession.

Rebekah Levin

Rebekah (Bekah) Levin grew up in Oak Park, attending William Beye Elementary School and Oak Park-River Forest High School, returning to Oak Park in 1982 to attend graduate school at University of Chicago. She is the Director of Evaluation and Learning for the McCormick Foundation and spends much of her time working for justice in Israel/Palestine. Rebekah and her partner of 30 years, Sophie Kaluziak, raised their two children in Oak Park and continue to reside and thrive in the community. Rebekah was the first female-co-chair of OPLGA and provided leadership for many of the organization’s activities.

Charna Linsk

Charna Linsk spent many of her childhood years at OPALGA events and co-founded the Gay-Straight Alliance, A Place for All during her years at Oak Park River Forest High School. She was an active member of Prism Youth Center. She is a human service professional currently living in

Norfolk Virginia, where she and her wife Angel McDonald run a package delivery service.

Nathan Linsk

Nathan Linsk, one of the original co-founders of OPLGA, served as treasurer, secretary, and chaired outreach, education, youth, and membership committees, among others. He is a retired social work professor from University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) who specialized in aging and HIV-related issues. He founded and led the Midwest AIDS Training and Education Center at UIC until his retirement in 2011. Nathan moved to Oak Park in 1985 with his partner/husband Mel Wilson and their two children, Charna and Adam.

Bob Trezevant

Bob Trezevant was a founding member of OPLGA in 1989. He married into an Oak Park family in 1966 and moved to the village in 1977, becoming active in several local cultural groups, as well as singing in the Windy City Gay Chorus. He is a retired elementary school teacher who continues to enjoy community involvement. He especially appreciates sharing OPALGA+ events and travel with his partner since 2007, Jerry Ehernberger.

Andy Walensa

Andy Walensa was a participant turned group facilitator at the OPALGA Youth and Young Adult Groups (1999-2009). He is now a creative consultant, specializing in design, art direction, and branding in the marketing world. He gravitates to complex concepts and progressive thinking. He lives in Chicago with his dog, CeCe and crested gecko, Major.

Mel Wilson

Mel Wilson was the initiator of OPLGA and one of the three co-founders. He served as the first male co-chair, as well as public policy and communications committee chairs during OPALGA's early years. In addition, in 1992 he served as OPLGA Coordinator to develop the initial strategic plan and edited the OPALGA newsletters and literary journals for many years. Mel was an award-winning architect, having designed buildings during his Peace Corps days in the 1960s and for various Chicago firms. He was a teacher for the Art Institute of Chicago and Illinois Institute of Technology and a writer for *Windy City Times*; he also worked for ten years at the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust. Mel, with wife Esther Parada and son Adam, moved to Oak Park in 1977. He came out in the early 1980s and became partners with Nathan Linsk in 1983; soon after he began to advocate for gay and lesbian educational and human rights issues at Oak Park River Forest High School. After working toward inclusion of sexual orientation in Oak Park's human rights ordinance, Mel's public policy and communication skills helped to create OPLGA as one of the most effective LGBT+ community organizations in the state.

His work as a community activist for gay and lesbian rights was extraordinary. Mel received the OPAL Award for outstanding contributions to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered community in 2001, and both Mel and Nathan were recognized in the book *Legendary Locals of Oak Park* in 2013. Their home also served as the launching place for OPLGA and venue to many meetings and social events. In later years, they travelled to Africa extensively where Mel became a mentor and friend to many students, friends, and colleagues. Mel developed both chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cerebral-spinal ataxia, which limited his activities, particularly since 2014, although he continued to serve on the OPALGA board. He died in April 2017, and the OPALGA+ Founders award has since carried his name. More information is available at www.melwilson.net

CHAPTER 1

BEGINNINGS OF OPALGA

Before 1989 or So

Nancy Johnson

There were meetings about forming an Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association in various homes. Among the group were Marsha Borders, Nathan Linsk, Mel Wilson, Bekah Levin, Bryan Finley and others. (I remember Bryan's beautiful bright blue eyes. When I met his mother, I knew where he got them).

This was during the frenzy about AIDS and some ill-thought-out policies were being considered in many places, including the OPRFHS Board. The Board president, an MD, proposed some of these policies. As I recall, the policy called for a medical examination of any student (or employee, I think) who was suspected of having AIDS. Several of us attended a hearing about the policy. I was there with Nathan, and Mel and many others. Additionally, there was a parent of a child who had hemophilia. Because of all the well-informed opposition, the board did not pass the policy.

A few years later, the Oak Park Village Board was considering adding sexual orientation to the protected groups in its human rights policy. Several of us were at the initial meeting and gave testimony at that time. Nathan was there with his 5-year-old daughter, who fell asleep in his arms. Eventually, the Board had a huge public meeting at the high school auditorium for public comment. I prepared a written opinion. When the Board added sexual orientation to the policy, it was a really big deal here in Oak Park!

On October 11, 1987, there was a March on Washington, DC, for Gay and Lesbian rights. A number of people from Oak Park went to DC for the event. It was also the first showing of the Names Project Quilt on the mall. My husband, Jimmie, and I went. I don't recall all the people from Oak Park, except Nathan. When we were walking around, we spotted the Oak Park group with a sign. When we went over, Nathan gave us each a pink felt strip to tie around our arms to show that we were from Oak Park. I still have mine. As it turned out, that was the last we saw of the Oak Park bunch. We joined the parade when the PFLAG group came by, and we carried our PFLAG Chicago's banner. I wore my pink armband during the parade.

Creation of OPLGA

I don't recall exactly when OPLGA was created. But I remember discussions about the importance of making the organization a part of the public life of Oak Park. We were made up of mostly Oak Park residents who felt that our Association should be visible to the rest of Oak Park. So, the first meeting I can recall that wasn't in someone's home, was a meeting one evening at Maze Branch Public Library. It must have been good weather

because I recall I walked there (no car.) It must have been a “getting ourselves organized” sort of meeting since I remember walking with Jim Kelly towards home while we discussed mailing out notices and news of OPLGA. Ever since then, all our meetings have been in public places. On purpose in public places! Mel Wilson had already been active on Oak Park Committees to get “gay-friendly” books in the school rooms and libraries.

At that time, gay or lesbian organizations were usually either all men or all women. OPALGA didn’t want to go down that road which, I think, is one of the reasons it still exists and is thriving moreover. So, it was a conscious choice to have a female co-chair and a male co-chair of the organization and in each of the committees. Another good idea was monthly potlucks! I once said that they were the finest feature of OPALGA. I haven’t been to many potlucks recently, but from what I hear from attendees, they are a solid proof of thriving!

OPLGA’s Inception

Nathan Linsk

As we were leading up to 1989, Mel wanted to do more to address Gay and Lesbian issues in Oak Park. Mel and I had been Board members for the Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force (IGLTF), had been involved in gay fathers and parenting groups and we had been recruited by Angelika Kuehn to be on the founding board of Community Response, the local AIDS Service Organization to serve Oak Park and Austin.

Mel had asked the high school for what they taught about sexuality in their health and family life curriculum, and we had made some suggestions there. He also joined and eventually chaired the Parent Human Relations committee at Oak Park River Forest High School (OPRF). We had rounded up a reader from the Windy City Chorus to read a poem at a Holocaust Day event at the request of Sandra Sokol, then of the Community Relations department of the village (later a huge advocate when she became Village clerk, but that’s another story). The Health Department had involved us in the first AIDS Awareness Month, I guess as representatives of the gay community, such as it was.

Most of the gay and lesbian folks we knew in the Village were people we had met in the Gay and Married Men’s Group or the Horizons Gay Parents Group. There was simply no place where we could find LGBT folks except through the two functioning gay bars adjacent to the town—and there was also a group that met in Forest Park called Review, that Mel had attended for men in heterosexual marriages who were gay.

Community Response was an experience where Mel and I were identified as the gay folks on the board along with Bryan Findlay. Bryan grew up in

Oak Park, but his major locus of activity was in “the city,” where he was active in the Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade each year. He was also openly HIV positive, and a Republican, a co-chair of the Chicago Area Gay Republican Organization (CARGO).

So, it all began with a village election—at that time all eight trustees were elected every 4 years and 1989 was one of those years. Angelika invited Mel, Bryan and me to meet with the Village Management Association (VMA) slate to discuss HIV issues, and we also threw in some Gay and Lesbian thoughts. We met Rima Shultz, then the VMA campaign manager, and I remember giving them 20 bucks to support the campaign. Bryan then decided that we should send out a questionnaire to the candidates. But under what auspices? Community Response was clearly not a gay identified organization, and was being careful to be identified as serving everyone in Oak Park and Austin, of course including gay men, who were most of the people infected.

We somehow agreed to send the questionnaire out under the CARGO’s letterhead, both to the VMA Unite Slate, the Common Sense slate and the one independent candidate (Galen Gockel). The questionnaire addressed a number of issues related to HIV and disability. We knew that the Village was reviewing its Human Rights Ordinance to incorporate disability as required under new federal laws. Working with Angelika Kuehn, we asked the candidates to pledge to include sexual orientation in the policy, and to describe their positions on gay rights, anti-gay violence, gay and lesbian youth, HIV/AIDS, and social services for the gay and lesbian community. Bryan also added a number of questions relating to taxes (no doubt related to his conservative politics views). We sent it off and it clearly created consternation among the candidates. But most did respond, and they indicated support for including disability in the policy and varying support for including HIV issues and sexual orientation.

Now what were we to do with that?

One day I came home from work and Mel was very excited. He had contacted the VMA Unite slate to ask them to send a statement to the two papers in town, the Oak Leaves and the Wednesday Journal, asking them to publicly state their support for adding sexual orientation to the policy. He then called the Common Sense campaign, indicating that the VMA slate was going to do this and asking them to do the same. Common Sense asked us to host a coffee so we could meet with them.

Again, we had no formal auspices to do so. We went ahead anyway. At the time it was just the three of us—Mel, me, and Bryan (with Angelika’s help). We invited the Common Sense candidates to our cramped apartment on Humphrey Avenue on a Thursday night. We had to scamper around to ask all the gay and lesbian people we knew as well as some gay-supportive

folks in the area to join us. These included folks from the Horizon's Parents Group and the Gay and Married Men's Association (GAMMA), the Mennonite Church that was represented on the Community Response Board, and a few others. Bryan's mother baked for us and we had to borrow chairs. We joked that though there was no gay organization in town, we were using smoke and mirrors to look like there was a community that needed to be represented and paid attention to.

I don't really remember what happened at the meeting, the important thing is that it occurred. There were only a few people there and we had a lot of extra baked goods afterwards in our freezer.

As a result of all of this, the VMA made a statement to the papers that they would support adding sexual orientation to the policy, closely followed by the Common Sense folks. Bryan then wrote a press release sent to the Oak Park papers but also city and national press (including *The Advocate*, then a major national GLBT publication). So, we now had public commitments to change the ordinance.

It now appeared to the community that there was a gay organization asking for this. It was time to create a more real organization, informal though it was at first, to represent the gay and lesbian community. The election was scheduled for April 4, 1989. We again called together everyone we could to come to our apartment for a first meeting on Saturday, April 8. With some fear and trepidation, I called Rebekah (Bekah) Levin, whom I had heard was involved in a large group of lesbians, Lavender Bouquet. She readily agreed to join us. About 15 people attended, including Jim Kelly, Bruce Broerman, Phil Bellerive and Ron Rauch, and Bob Trezevant among others. We each discussed what our interests were. I remember saying I wanted to be comfortable holding hands and strolling through Scoville Park with Mel. Other issues related to education, social events, anti-violence, youth issues, health care and AIDS, as well as asking the local video stores to stock gay and lesbian related videos.

We also discussed what to call the organization. We were clear it should be representing both men and women, and after some outlandish suggestions (for example Gays and Lesbians of Oak Park would be abbreviated GLOP!) we agreed on Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association, carefully putting Lesbian first in the name to ensure that this would be a group for both.

OPALGA's First Decade

Mel Wilson

March 3, 1999

On March 17, 1999 the Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association celebrated the organization's 10th anniversary. It's difficult to remember, for us now, what it was like in Oak Park prior to OPLGA's formation, so changed has been the paradigm of gay life in the village. Any description of what it has taken to make these changes could never be described by any single individual. Positive change in the quality of life for gay men and lesbians in Oak Park has been the result of struggles of hundreds of individuals as well as the collective actions of OPLGA and a dozen other organizations and institutions. A hundred stories could be told of how lesbians and gay men came out to become members of our community, and our debt to these men and women is tremendous.

I've been asked to write something about the actual creation of OPALGA, and that story is a story in and of itself. In doing so, I hope that readers will recognize that I can only tell what I personally know and not the equally compelling stories of others.

In March 1989 a myriad of factors (and people) came together to create an organization that seemed almost predestined to emerge at that time, and in Oak Park. The peculiar "culture" of Oak Park, with its tensions of middle-class conservatism and progressive liberalism, together with the momentum of bold initiatives directed at conscious social change in the context of racial integration, presented lesbians and gay men with the best of environments for constructive change.

The converging streams that met in OPLGA, and seemed to burst full bloom onto the local scene, had begun years earlier. OPLGA made a triumphal entry onto the Oak Park stage. It was as if the audience had been waiting, and the players--too long waiting in the wings--were prepared to play.

Up until 1989, Oak Park hardly seemed to have recognized the gay and lesbian movement that was causing so many waves in cities around the country. Although the village harbored a large gay population, none were visible in public life in Oak Park. Gay issues were never a part of the public dialog, never mentioned in local news articles, never included in public policies, never frankly discussed in schools. Gay people were simply absent from all areas of public life. The silence was deafening, but it was a silence that had been taken for granted by gay people until that time.

It's hard for us, today, to remember how fearfully we lived in those days. Activism, "gay pride," open relationships: those were things most gay

people saved for the city or somewhere else...somewhere where no one knew us, and we could be the people we wanted to be. To be openly gay in our own neighborhood, in our own community, was unthinkable. No one could guess the consequences of living openly as a gay man or lesbian in Oak Park. We told ourselves we had our own lives, but they were private. No one had any business knowing what we did in private. And, nobody cared.

Nobody cared as we went about building our private lives--private lives that grew larger as we developed our own gay networks, social circles, clandestine relationships, organizations and alternative media. Nobody noticed or cared as we shared our joys, courted, fell in love, swore commitments, built our homes, nursed our loved ones in sickness, and grieved for all our lost love ones in silence.

By the late 1970s, the force of Stonewall had begun to reach Oak Park's gay residents; and many were starting to take action to assert their presence within their own community institutions. Most significantly, many gay people were beginning to speak out in church. By speaking out against mindless bible-based anti-gay repression, church activists made significant progress from within a handful of Oak Park churches--most notably Euclid Avenue Methodist Church, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, First United Church of Oak Park, Grace Episcopal Church of Oak Park, and Beacon Unitarian Universalist Church. By speaking out in church, establishing supportive church-based groups within congregations, and continuing open dialog, church-based activists built the foundations for progressive change in the community as a whole.

At the same time, Oak Park was home to a number of lesbian and gay social and support organizations. By 1989, Lavender Bouquet, a lesbian social organization, meeting at Good Shepherd, could boast a membership of 200! Many of Oak Park's gay men were members of the West Suburban Gay Association, which held frequent socials in private Oak Park homes. Meanwhile, the 12 & 12 Club on Madison Street was home to one of two Chicago metropolitan area gay 12-step centers.

It took the catastrophe of AIDS to break the pattern of exaggerated privacy that characterized gay life in Oak Park in 1988. AIDS came quietly into Oak Park. By 1988, eight people had been diagnosed with AIDS in Oak Park since the onset of the world pandemic. It was clear to some people in health fields and in the gay community that a vastly larger number of people, particularly gay people, were infected in Oak Park, and that shortly the number of those sick would overwhelm existing resources.

In 1988, an ad hoc group of concerned citizens and members of health and social services came together to form the Oak Park AIDS Network to

communicate the urgency of the crises and to advocate for development of local AIDS action strategies. Upon completion of a preliminary report that year, Angelika Kuehn and her father Heinz Kuehn, Paul Kuehnert (a nurse in the Oak Park Health Department), Bryan Findlay (a PWA or Person Living with AIDS) and Rev. David Meyers established the community-based AIDS support agency Community Response. Assuming leadership of the effort, Angelika Kuehn set out to bring together people in the community with the widest possible range of experience and capabilities to both establish objectives and to work out strategies to support those affected by HIV. By January 1989, Community Response had launched as an AIDS support organization. My partner, Nathan Linsk, and I were quickly recruited as additional board members.

The founding of Community Response coincided with Oak Park village board elections in 1989, and Community Response board members were quickly arranged to meet with the candidates slated by Oak Park's venerable Village Manager Association (VMA). Discussions about developing supportive structures for caring for people with HIV turned into a discussion of support for gay and lesbian citizens of Oak Park, and the fact that Oak Park offered no tangible protection against discrimination against gay people, who would necessarily be "out" if they were to be active participants of volunteer programs serving people affected with HIV. Pushed on the subject by Bryan Findlay, Nathan and me--the gay people on the Community Response board -- all of the candidates promised to support revision of Oak Park's Human Rights Ordinance to include gays and lesbians within those protected by the ordinance.

Community Response's board meetings marked the first time gay people met with other Oak Park leaders to address concerns of gay people within the community as a whole. Sitting in those meetings, we looked at one another and wondered why it took AIDS to bring us together and how we could step away from AIDS to begin to address a whole wide range of lesbian and gay concerns. A battle for civil rights would take more than a social service agency to give it strength. Anticipating the real struggle meaningful social change would require, it was clear to us, that a whole new organization was needed. The election campaign in Oak Park that spring presented a window of opportunity to introduce gay and lesbian issues into the public arena of community life. But we had no local lesbian and gay organization to challenge the status quo and promote meaningful social change.

In initial efforts to raise gay issues in the election campaign, Bryan Findlay, then co-chair of the Chicago Area Republican Organization (CARGO), played a vital role. Using the CARGO, Findlay prepared a questionnaire directed at all candidates, quizzing them on issues relevant to gays and lesbians in Oak Park. Findlay questioned attitudes on gay rights, public education, anti-gay violence, gay and lesbian youth, AIDS,

public harassment and provision of gay/lesbian directed social services. For many candidates, the questionnaire came as a surprise. Gay and lesbian issues were not on the agendas of any of those participating in the election, and none had anticipated the existence of a Republican gay organization in the village.

Findlay's announcement of candidate responses was widely reported in the mainstream and gay press. The CARGO questionnaire put the village of Oak Park on notice that gay and lesbian issues were subjects to be dealt with directly and with the utmost urgency.

The next opportunity to bring gay people together to speak with candidates resulted from an invitation by the Common Sense opposition political party seeking election to the village board. Invited to host a meet-the-candidates coffee in our apartment, Bryan, Nathan, and I called every Oak Park gay person we knew and asked them to bring their friends. We had to put gay issues on the village agenda, and everyone who came knew that an organization was in the making. All of the candidates running in that election knew that an organized force was assembling, and both the VMA and Common Sense parties were anxious to be on the right side. On the day of the Common Sense coffee, local newspapers announced the VMA candidates' support of a gay rights amendment to the Village Human Rights Ordinance. On the night of the coffee, 16 people came together to talk with candidates. The candidates, both progressive challengers to the VMA slate, were quick to support a gay rights amendment and directed action against HIV. Following departure of the candidates, the meeting progressed to the work of forming a new organization.

The following Saturday, OPLGA held its first meeting to develop structure and establish immediate objectives. Those in attendance at the coffee and/or subsequent meeting included, in addition to Bryan, Nathan and me; Joanne Trapani, Phil Bellerive, Ron Rauch, Rebekah Levin, Marsha Borders, Bob Trezevant, Jim Aull, Mary Davis, David Mann, Vivian Larsen, Helen Kalcsits, Nancy Johnson, Betsy Davis and Bruce Broerman.

The Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association was established that night as the first organization devoted to promoting the interests of gay and lesbian citizens of Oak Park. Founding members had reason to believe that a coordinated effort could lead to a marked improvement in the quality of life for gay people in Oak Park.

Within days, requests for public comment and/or participation came pouring in. OPLGA was asked to provide a speaker for the village's Holocaust Memorial service at Village Hall, we were asked to present our goals and objectives at *Wednesday Journal's Loop Luncheon* at the Chicago Bar Association, the Oak Park police chief called to find someone

to speak to gay and lesbian concerns with law enforcement officials. It was as if everyone had been waiting for someone to talk to about gay and lesbian people in Oak Park. At last, the silence was broken.

The Oak Park election brought a clean village board sweep by the VMA candidates. All had pledged support for amendment of the Human Rights Ordinance to include gay people. OPLGA, as an organization, set about immediately to put together our case for the amendment. Mary Davis quickly began efforts to identify and organize people to testify on our behalf at board hearings. I took on the task of producing newsletters to provide communication between our members and the community at large.

On June 7, 1989 the Oak Park village board, following three hours of heated testimony; voted unanimously to amend the Human Rights Ordinance to include sexual orientation among those protected from discrimination in areas of housing, village employment, and public accommodation. Only three other municipalities in Illinois had previously enacted such legislation.

Within a week, the Oak Park and River Forest High School District 200 board introduced a motion to amend the school's Human Dignity Policy to include gay and lesbian students and faculty among those assured the right to dignity and freedom from discrimination.

The high school board's action precipitated a widespread debate that dominated local news for the next six months. School board meetings drew ever-growing numbers of people speaking out until, in October, meetings had to be held in the high school auditorium, which was complete full. Opponents leafleted the village with anti-gay diatribes accusing OPLGA of recruitment of innocent youth. Finally, in December, after six months of wavering board efforts to find consensus, the school board voted unanimously to include gays and lesbians in the dignity policy. Appalled by the wave of acrimony cast by amendment opponents, the board concluded that anti-gay and lesbian discrimination was a reality for gay and lesbian students and faculty in Oak Park. OPRF High School became the first public school in Illinois to include gays and lesbians among those assured freedom from discrimination (see *Windy City Times* article "High School Adopts Gay Rights Policy" by Mel Wilson <https://melwilson.net/mels-writing/>).

In the first years of OPLGA's existence, the organization grew at a rapid rate as we moved to address issues of public policy, provide community educational forums, hold social events, and celebrate being gay in our community. Committed to policies of openness and inclusion, the organization fostered an environment for exploration and development of a concept of gay life markedly different from the prevailing historic paradigm of a privatized gay community. We provided in-service training for the

Oak Park police, we led discussion groups in churches, and we provided sensitivity training to social agency staffs and volunteers. We conducted workshops on gay and lesbian topics, we established a youth drop-in center for gay, lesbian and questioning youth, we sponsored the Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival, Gay Cabarets, and classical and popular concerts. We brought lesbian and gay concerns to Oak Park elections. Within the past four years, we have moved into our own office home, established the reality of gay and lesbian families, passed Oak Park's domestic partnership registry, and defeated a hostile anti-gay public referendum.

The Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association has grown in 10 years to include more than 300 members. We count among Oak Park's most respected organizations. None of us in attendance at OPLGA's birth could have imagined the richness of talent and imagination brought by those who would join this organization.

Let's celebrate the accomplishments of the hundreds of individuals who have made a difference in our community and honor the organization that has made that change possible.

We couldn't have imagined ten years ago where we would be now. Can we imagine where we will be when OPALGA reaches twenty?

Building of a Queer Community in Oak Park

Rebekah Levin

To share stories of what it was like 30 years ago is tricky. Memory is indeed a "capricious seamstress" and at my age, I am more concerned about it rounding all the corners that at one time were far more angular, moderating the emotions that were intense when they were happening, than my concern of shifting the narrative to be something that it wasn't. But I will try.

Coming out wasn't a big deal for me as a white, relatively well-off woman, who had been raised by parents who were far ahead of their time when it came to understanding sexuality (at least in theory and with folks other than their daughter). I had gone to Oberlin College, where queerness was not the norm, but it certainly was far more openly expressed than in any other environment in which I had lived. But returning to Oak Park after college graduation was a bit strange. There was no openly queer presence. Lesbians looking for a queer community not connected to bars relied on "radar," and paid attention to understood (and misunderstood) indirect signs that maybe someone else was also queer.

Lavender Bouquet

One of those indirect signs had to do with hanging out at Val's Halla (the

iconic record store,) watching to see who picked up the current issue of Gay Chicago or Windy City Times from the bottom shelf in the back room of used records, or who was browsing the bin of “Women’s Music”. One day in 1983, a flier showed up at Val’s advertising a potluck meeting at Euclid Avenue Methodist Church, in Oak Park, to discuss “Women’s Herstory “and hosted by Kinheart, a women’s (largely lesbian) center in Evanston. That was enough code for me to know that this was to be a lesbian gathering. I was so excited.

Thirteen women showed up that afternoon. The topic – Women’s Herstory – could as easily have been stated as ‘Our lives now’. All we wanted to do was get to know one another, find out each other’s stories--where we lived, what we did, who (if anyone) knew we were queer, how we had come out (if we had). We exchanged contact information that evening, and in that short two hours, what was to become known as Lavender Bouquet (LB), was born. We met monthly for an open potluck, but we became a tight and active social group immediately. LB gave us a chance to have local family/community and we bonded tightly. Within a year, our numbers had grown to over a hundred women, coming from as far away as Crystal Lake and Lockport. We had a monthly newsletter, but many of the women used PO boxes to receive them, out of fear of losing friends, jobs and kids.

The women in LB were largely not interested in becoming involved in local politics and community activism as out lesbians. Part of this was the risk in being identified as queer, but there also was a reticence to shift our tight social network into less social activities. LB was satisfying a dearth of lesbian welcoming space and we needed and wanted to protect that welcoming environment. Putting time into creating activities that nurtured us as women and lesbians was LB’s priority. But I was frustrated by that and wanted more community engagement.

So, when Nathan and Mel called to see if I was interested in becoming involved with this new community-based, queer organization that was being created to engage more fully and openly, as queer people, with Oak Park, I was ready to jump in head first.

What Joining OPLGA Meant to Me

Jim Kelly

I grew up in a tiny farming community in rural Minnesota. The town functioned mostly by volunteerism. Mom served on our church’s board, participated in the women’s auxiliary, volunteered at the local second hand shop, joined the PTA. My dad was on the Chamber of Commerce, the local community bank board, served on the school board.

Several evenings a week they were attending meetings and events. I didn’t

have then the vocabulary for what I was witnessing, but now I know that they were modeling civic engagement. I moved to Chicago in 1982 because I'd been offered a job with a company based in Oak Park. Knowing nothing about Oak Park and being incredibly attracted to the city, I took an apartment in Uptown, a block from the lake. In 1987 I met Bruce Broerman, and in the Spring of 1988, I moved to Oak Park and into the house where we've lived ever since.



Jim and Bruce at Chicago
Gay Pride Parade, 1980s

Through Bruce I began to meet this wonderful network of gays and lesbians, many of them parents. This was more than a friend's network... it was a community. In my six years in Chicago, I had a friendship network and socialized with them. But it was NOT a community in the same sense as I was experiencing in Oak Park.

In 1989, Mel Wilson and Nathan Linsk invited us to help organize a lesbian and gay organization in Oak Park. During those early organizing meetings and conversations about what our mission statement would include, it became clear to me that we were embarking on an incredibly daunting, ambitious and revolutionary journey to create a village safer and more welcoming to lesbian and gay residents and their children, to dispel myths and ancient prejudices about sexuality, to create spaces for our Lesbian and Gay community to gather and to celebrate, to change restrictive laws and ordinances, and to become a recognized voice in issues of governance in Oak Park and beyond.

I had previously spent 3 1/2 years in the Peace Corps, and almost 6 years working with a non-profit in South America whose mission was to help develop local leadership in marginalized communities. Once OPLGA started, I realized that my sojourn in Chicago was not very meaningful beyond all the pleasures I got for myself, and I had taken a hiatus on being involved. Mom and Dad, in 1989 I got back into civic engagement, big time! You were my role models. I wish I had told you, at 41 years of age, how much I learned from you about taking responsibility for the quality of life in one's community. I am very grateful.

A Personal Journey to OPALGA

Bob Trezevant

Thirty years ago, in the spring of 1989, the first members of OPALGA met to respond to a specific opportunity to influence public policy on gay rights

in Oak Park. We were a diverse group of men and women, each bringing our own background and motivations to the cause. I was an almost 48-year-old bisexual man in a heterosexual marriage, with a son in college, a daughter in high school, and a widowed mother-in-law sharing our two-flat. It was exhilarating to have the opportunity to continue my gay rights activism in a very public local involvement.

Over the previous thirty years since graduating from high school in 1959, I had grown steadily in my self-understanding and political engagement. Having grown up in a conservative Southern Presbyterian church, I went in the next five years from being a pre-ministerial student to being a member of the liberal branch of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker). In that context, I learned about two life-changing perspectives.

One was the Quaker commitment to radical social equality, which often took the form of political action, “speaking truth to power.” For someone who had lived during the height of the civil rights movement in the South and who opposed the American involvement in Viet Nam, I found a constructive path for action.

The other was the Quaker commitment to personal growth, integrity, and empowerment. In 1964, I was fortunate to encounter the booklet *Towards a Quaker view of sex: An essay by a group of Friends*. Published by British Quakers, the authors presented highly progressive views on normalizing same-sex orientations, decriminalizing same-sex behaviors, and liberalizing the ethical strictures imposed by traditional Christian teachings. Again, I found a positive path for self-understanding and the necessity to make the personal political.

Marrying Katherine Gervais in 1966 gave me the best partner I could have in moving forward in social liberation. With her liberal Episcopalian background, Katherine was active as a radical feminist, supporting the National Organization for Woman and taking leadership among Quaker women in the Philadelphia area. Together, we immersed ourselves in women’s liberation, men’s liberation, and gay liberation, along with studying androgyny and gender role stereotyping. By 1975, I had become active in the national organization of Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns.

In 1977, we moved with our children to Oak Park to live in the home where Katherine had grown up. We became active members of the Oak Park Monthly Meeting of Friends (Quaker). As a classicist, Katherine continued her career by teaching Latin at the Elgin Academy. I resumed my career in teaching first grade at Longfellow School, beginning in 1983. Betsy Davis was the mother of one of my students. Two years later, a colleague and I won a freedom-of-speech lawsuit in federal court to assure our tenure in the school district. Knowing I had access to an excellent law-

yer certainly increased my personal courage as a gay rights activist. During years 1983-1985, I increased my gay liberation involvement by attending GAMMA, the Gay and Married Men's Association, which met at the Cenacle, a Catholic retreat and conference in the city. It was there I met Mel Wilson from Oak Park and then Nathan Linsk, who moved to Oak Park to be with Mel.

By the time OPALGA began in 1989, I had already become quite active in the gay rights movement by singing in the Windy City Gay Chorus (WCGC), which I had joined in 1986, having been invited to its Pride concert that June by Mel and Nathan. It was a thrill for me personally to sing with such a talented and well-known group, but it was also a huge step in terms of my coming out, in that I now appeared publicly in a gay setting. In 1987, I arranged through the chorus to have the gay singing duo of Romanofsky & Phillips appear in Oak Park at Grace Episcopal Church. In 1990, I was elected to the board of Windy City Performing Arts, the parent organization of the chorus. I was on the board in 1991 when we founded Unison: Windy City Lesbian and Gay Singers, which made its debut in 1992.

In terms of potential involvement with gay people or allies in Oak Park, I connected with Val Camilletti at Val's Halla record store, where she sold chorus tickets, and with Carole Goodwin and Carol Zientek at the Left Bank Bookstall, the local used book store that related to gays and lesbians. (Carole was well-known because of her 1979 thesis The Oak Park Strategy: Community Control of Racial Change). I would also sell WCGC tickets to our ally Angelika Kuehn, whom I had met after she founded the AIDS care organization Community Response in 1988.

My recounting all this is not to brag but to give a context to the challenges I faced in the coming out process. From the beginning, I did not have the time or inclination to get involved as a board member of OPALGA. I would, however, attend significant public events as a member and would work behind the scenes on specific political efforts. I attended some of the pot-lucks and we attended the early galas, but I felt I already had more than enough gay social connections. After leaving the chorus in 1991, I joined Jim Aull's men's group, which I attended weekly for years. Ultimately, through OPALGA I met Jerry Ehrenberger, my partner since 2007.

For me, the word "out" was itself a challenge. I was dealing with my own identity issues in terms of self-acceptance, as well as handling them in the context of a heterosexual marriage, one that lasted for 38 years until Katherine's death in 2004. I was certainly "out" publicly by performing with the chorus, but I could always note that the chorus did not discriminate in terms of membership. And I could always play on the difference between being a gay activist and a gay rights activist. What I actually

“was” to myself and to my family and friends was simply “private.” Being in the chorus and then OPALGA met my personal need to be among like-minded people and to be politically active for gay rights. The whole scene, both nationally and locally, was exhilarating. Yet, there was a dark side. Most gays and lesbians were subject to any number of unique challenges such as personal, existential pain. Often from an early age, we felt different our own birth families, leading to feelings of anxiety, depression, guilt, and shame. Either staying invisible or coming out created psychological stress. In coming out, some also had to face condemnation due to their family’s religious beliefs and affiliations with the resultant spiritual alienation. We were often isolated as social non-conformists. We were subject to violence and threats of violence. Our lives were not often reflected in the arts or the popular culture. We faced the challenge of being in relationships for which there was no model. Those of us who were married had to resolve the issue within the marriage, which in itself was a very trying process, or we had to go through a divorce. If divorced, we were left to deal with former spouses. If we were parents (and many of us were), we had to handle children who had the challenge of having a gay parent and/or being children of divorced parents. It became clear that in coming out, your entire family was forced to adapt, often in negative ways.

The same was true in our work and social situations. Some of us risked losing our jobs. We often could not count on family and friends for support. As gay people, we had no legal protections. Some of us slid into alcohol abuse. Many of us relied on professional counseling. By 1989, we were well into the AIDS epidemic. I knew people from GAMMA and from the chorus who died, often isolated from their family and supported primarily by the gay community. We were immersed in grief and anger. Those of us who were older had grown up in a culture that considered homosexuality to be immoral, illegal, and insane. We all faced the threats of rejection and ostracism. Our greatest personal risk was the self-condemnation of internalized homophobia. The founding members of OPALGA certainly experienced many of these conditions.

Such was our situation in 1989. But the good news is that a small group of gay and lesbian people, out of our emerging self-respect, set about protecting ourselves and helping others by establishing OPLGA. Significant allies joined the cause. Each of us brought to the table a back story of life experience and motivation for political action. That’s what intrigues me—how and why we all ended up in that place at that time doing what we felt needed to be done.

Recollections

Phil Bellerive

A quick biography: I grew up in Westmont, Illinois in the 1960's and 1970's. At the time, Westmont was a working-class town. It is located in DuPage County. After high school, I attended Rosary College (now Dominican University) for a couple of years. That was my introduction to Oak Park and River Forest.

I moved into the Oak Park area in the Spring of 1983. I came out in 1984 and met my partner in life, Ron Rauch, at a party held by the West Suburban Gay Association in 1985. We moved into my Oak Park apartment in 1986. We bought our first home in 1987.

I had been volunteering at Gay Horizons (now Center on Halsted), staffing their info-line one night a week. As far as LGBT life in Oak Park at the time, it consisted of private social functions and parties, two gay bars in Forest Park, and numerous trips into Chicago for other community activities. I changed jobs in 1987 and began working in the Loop for a large accounting firm. By 1988 the routine of coming home from work on the El, changing out of the pinstripes and taking the El back into Chicago was starting to wear thin. Also, the necessities of home ownership were taking a considerable amount of my time. I stopped volunteering at Horizons. I missed being involved in the LGBT community. Ron said to me, "it would be nice if you could get involved with something here, in Oak Park."

A few months passed. In late March 1989, there was a short article in the Oak Leaves about a gay organization forming in Oak Park. It directed anyone interested to contact the Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which I did. They gave me the phone number of Mel Wilson and Nathan Linsk, whom I did not know at the time. When I contacted them, they told me the forming meeting was to be held on April 8, 1989 on North Humphrey, second floor.

April 8 arrived. As planned, we went to Mel and Nathan's home, which was not far from ours. The weather that day was typical for April in Chicago, cold and rainy one minute, then a few snow pellets, and sunny the next minute.

At the meeting were Mel, Nathan, Jim Aull, Bob Trezevant, Bryan Findley, Rebekah Levin, Joanne Trapani, along with Ron and me. There certainly were others, but their names escape me. We discussed what name to give this new organization (Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association - OPLGA). What's its focus might be, the importance of having both men and women involved and in leadership roles, and the move by the newly elected Village

Board to amend the village's human rights ordinance to include the term "sexual orientation."

We then passed around a plastic bowl and everyone kicked in a few dollars, thereby establishing the new organization's treasury.

We then set about getting to know one another better, had coffee, cookies, and almond coffee cake and agreed to meet again in a few weeks.

Another meeting was held, and we all set about working on various aspects of the human rights ordinance. Bekah Levin and I met with trustee Marc Blessoff. Our goal was to assess the receptiveness of the Village Board to amending the Human Rights ordinance. Marc assured us that it was going to happen. Oak Park was to become the fourth municipality in Illinois to protect the rights of LGBT people.

On the night of the Village Board meeting (June 4, 1989), we arrived at Oak Park Village Hall and found the parking lot quite crowded. While walking up the sidewalk, I pointed out to Ron that an elderly man walking ahead of us was carrying a large book, which I assumed to be a bible. I was correct, unfortunately.

As the meeting was called to order and public testimony began, it was announced that all testimony regarding the amendment to the human rights ordinance would be heard at the start of the meeting, as a large crowd was gathered. During the public testimony, which took up most of the meeting, most of the people initially were vehemently opposed to the ordinance. One man, a local attorney, stated to the board that, "please think of the plethora of diseases that these people will bring into this community." What he and other opponents of the amendment did not seem to realize was that LGBT people were already a part of the Oak Park community.

As the meeting progressed over the next three hours, more and more of the people delivering testimony were in favor of the amendment to the ordinance. It was ultimately passed unanimously.

Over the next several months, the addition of a human dignity policy which included sexual orientation was debated by the board of Oak Park River Forest High School. This was met with fierce opposition as well. One Sunday afternoon, I heard someone depositing something in the mailbox on our front porch. I retrieved the leaflet, which was produced by a group of local evangelical churches, and directed the woman who delivered it to remove this trash from my property immediately. It was propaganda as to why the human dignity statement was a bad idea. I was getting thoroughly sick of their antics!

On the internal front of OPLGA, the Library wanted payment for the use of their facilities. I asked the Park District about using recreation centers for our monthly membership meetings. The gentleman who I spoke to was very cordial and told me that this was exactly what the recreation centers were for, and that there was no charge for community organizations like OPLGA. We tried a few venues for our monthly membership meetings and finally found one at the Stevenson Recreation Center on Lake St.

We began holding a monthly membership meeting, in addition to the board meeting. From time to time, guest speakers would be brought in to give presentations, etc. around a variety of topics.

First Meetings First People

Nathan Linsk

After successfully convincing the Village of Oak Park to include sexual orientation in its Human Rights ordinance, we set about to have our first public meeting or OPLGA. Up until then we met in homes (mostly in our apartment). Now it seemed time to go public and how were we to go about this? Somehow, we decided on two things--to announce a meeting in the local papers (*Wednesday Journal*, *Oak Leaves*) and second to find a public place to meet.

I think Mel wrote up some kind of press note to the papers; by then we had contact with Dan Haley of the *Journal* and the editor of the *Oak Leaves*. A reporter from the *Oak Leaves* covered early meetings who seemed to be connected to our community. Somehow it fell to me to find the place to meet.

It seemed reasonable to approach the Oak Park Library. The churches (at least some of them) would have been more receptive and we had at least one or two friends at Village Hall. Churches seemed to be isolated and had religious overtones, and Village Hall seemed too public, so the library seemed the best choice. After all, there were community meeting rooms there available to community groups. So, one day I screwed up my courage to make a call. I was nervous, yes. I had set up meetings for many groups in many places in the past, but this meant calling and telling them as a gay man that we wanted a meeting place for a group of mostly gay and lesbian folks. Scary then, what may seem routine now.

So, I called the Maze branch, perhaps the main branch seemed too public also. I talked to the librarian and to my surprise she said that they would be happy to host a meeting. I think we scheduled it for a Saturday afternoon. Mel notified the papers, we called those who had been involved to date (there were no emails then, or at least not like today, instead groups

formed phone trees). I think we brought coffee and some kind of snacks and we were on the way.

About a dozen folks attended. We at least discussed forming some kind of work groups or committees, initially we had a public policy committee, an education and outreach committee with some focus on youth and schools, a communication areas, and perhaps a social committee—or at least a focus on these areas as they became clearer in future meetings.

The OPLGA Update newsletter indicates that we first elected officers at a September meeting. We wanted to have both male and female co-chairs, adapting a model from the Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force, where Mel and I had been on the Board. Mel was elected male chair and Bekah the female chair. I became the initial treasurer and I know that there was a vote between Erwin Bach and Helen Kalcsits (see below) for secretary. Helen won that one. It also noted that Jim Aull was working on developing bylaws and that by then there was discussion of achieving non-profit status.

I want to capture, in particular, those that are no longer with us or nearby, some of whom made it to the first meetings. What follows is an incomplete list, but notes some of those who made unique contributions.

*Bryan Findlay**—Bryan really helped launch OPLGA through his advocacy to question the candidates for Oak Park trustees. A life-long Oak Parker, he was chair of the Chicago Area Gay Republican Organization and active in the Chicago Pride Parade and Community Response, as one of the few openly HIV+ figures in the community. Bright-eyed and folksy at times, OPLGA owes much to him (and a Founders award was named for him), though he was not so active after the organization was launched.

Vivian Larsen and Helen Kalcsits. Vivian was a well-known lesbian therapist who had ads in the gay press and lived in Oak Park. She had a holistic approach to-healing our inner self with some focus on substance use and mental health counseling. Helen was a math teacher at Morton High School, and a brave soul, who was known for coaching softball and who later got into a controversy about being out as a teacher. (that's another story). Helen also brought Project Empowerment retreat for Gay and Lesbian educators to Oak Park with OPLGA co-sponsorship

*Erwin Bach**—Erwin contacted Mel and me early on when he heard the organization was forming to write an article for the *Wednesday Journal*. He had been a *Chicago Tribune* theater critic (allegedly before Gene Siskel) and writer for many years and had been involved in starting the Oak Park Camera Club. He wrote for the newsletter, created a film club that went

on for a while within OPALGA, and helped organize the Bach for AIDS concerts OPALGA sponsored to raise funds for Community Response, the local HIV/AIDS Service Organization.

*Carole Goodwin and Carol Zientek**—Carol and Carole were proprietors of Left Bank Bookstall on Oak Park Avenue, which served as a gathering place for cultural events, often including OPALGA members. Carole had written a book on The Oak Park Strategy regarding open housing and anti-race discrimination. Carol Zientek, a former village trustee candidate; very interested in cultural arts, Carol and Carole helped launch the original OPALGA cultural arts festival.

*Ethel Cotovsky**—By the second year Ethel had joined the group. A local therapist, mother, and long-time provocateur, Ethel helped launch OPALGA's outreach committee that created many events including the Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival that was presented in Scoville Park for five years, and Gay Cabarets. Twice an OPALGA co-chair, she dreamed of an OPALGA community center and engaged many to become involved in OPLGA. We could do a whole story on Ethel's activities and personality.

*Judah Graubart**—Judah was a local writer and activist, who came to the early hearings at Village Hall to testify on our behalf, and wrote at least one editorial for the OPALGA newsletter and letters to the editor of local newspapers supporting LGBT rights. A rabbi by training, he continued to provide support and help until the time of his death a few years later.

*Paul Adams**—Paul was a former Mr. Windy City, a handsome Oak Parker, who mostly was connected within Chicago. However, he lived and grew up in Oak Park and participated in early meetings.

Joanne Trapani—Joanne provided active support for OPLGA from the beginning, as an advisor, participant and resource. She participated in police training, and public testimony as well as hosting events at her home on North Hayes Avenue. She worked for Cook County as a human rights advocate, was active in the LGBT community throughout Chicago, and helped launch the organization in public presentations. She served as co-chair of the Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and helped link the two organizations. Joanne later became an Oak Park Village Trustee and President. At that time, she was the highest-ranking openly Lesbian public official in the state.

*Ron Rauch**—Along with his partner Phil Bellerive, Ron was active in OPLGA from the start. A co-chair of the social committee, Ron could always be counted on to be present and foster a sense of both good times and the need for the organization within the community.

*Rob Ward**—Rob was captured by Ethel Cotovsky to provide sound equipment at the first Cultural Arts Festival. A talented musician and artist, he entertained at many events. He served as volunteer director of the PRISM and SPECTRUM youth programs and was a beloved mentor and role model to many youths.



OPLGA Marchers in Gay Pride Parade, early 1990s

*Jim Aull**—Jim served on the OPLGA Board from the start, as well initiating and hosting both the first potlucks and board meetings and drafting the first bylaws. Jim was active in the Youth programs as an advisor and member of the Advisory Board, bringing his long experience in youth service organizations to help create and sustain those programs.

**Deceased*

Early Mailing Parties

Jim Kelly

For many of its early years, before the world wide web and before the mass availability of email, OPLGA's printed communications were mailed to members. At the time, there were many members who were not "out" or were highly selectively "out" and expected privacy in communications.

Every month or so, we'd have a mailing party. Most often it was at Mel and Nathan's. On a large, long table there would be stacks of printed newsletters, pages of printed mailing labels, boxes of security envelopes (the kind you can't see into), and rolls or pages of stamps.

The production began by some people folding the newsletters to fit the envelopes. Others stuffed the newsletters into the envelopes and licked them shut. There were many tongues with paper cuts! As I recall, we eventually got those little water bottles with a sponge for a cap (they worked well, with the occasional over-watering that diluted the glue and the newsletter had to go into a new envelope). Then came placing the addressed mailing labels, and a return address label that listed only the P.O. box number and zip code.

We had obtained a bulk mailing permit from the Post Office. That meant sorting all the envelopes by zip code, and loading them onto trays provided by the Post Office. Then, someone would drive to the loading dock of the main Oak Park Post Office to deliver the trays.

The biggest downside of bulk mailing is that delivery time is much slower. The biggest upside is that it was really cheap, as the organization had limited funds. Mail to outlying zip codes could take many days. This was not the mechanism for broadcasting time-sensitive information, but it was one of only two ways we had to communicate with members. The other was via the monthly membership meetings.

I thought of these events something like the old-time quilting parties. While the hands were busy, there was still time for lots of conversation, storytelling, gossiping, and relationship building. And, of course, there were beverages!

Besides the obvious purpose of communicating with the membership, these events created something equally important: the process and the fun helped build community.

Getting Organized—The May 1990 Retreat

Nathan Linsk

As OPALGA entered its second year, it became clear that we needed more than monthly meetings to further develop the organization. We decided to have a weekend retreat and I was able to arrange a gathering in southern Wisconsin. A friend and colleague had a retreat center on a farm previously turned into a summer camp, near East Troy, which included A-Frame shared housing, bathroom and showers in a separate building, a dining and meeting area in the old barn and some great views of the rolling meadows nearby. In this idyllic but somewhat primitive setting about a dozen OPLGA members assembled and spent two days working on dreams, visions and plans for the future.



*Early OPALGA planning retreat, May 1990.
Top Row, Jane Anderson, Phil Bellerive, Ron Rauch,
Nathan Linsk, Jim Aull, Jeffrey Jon Smith.
Bottom Row: Marsha Borders and friend,
Rebekah Levin, Mel Wilson, Bruce Broerman, Jim Kelly.*

We worked with flipcharts and markers to identify areas of focus, some

goals and objectives, and planned activities. This served as the basis of the OPLGA Strategic Plan (see Appendix). According to the OPLGA Update (Spring, 1990) issues identified included community involvement, youth, public affairs, social events, and organizational development. The weekend also provided a chance for OPLGA leadership to socialize and get to know one another better. Despite a rainy evening the group enjoyed shared food (banana boats!), some team-building efforts and perhaps a plunge in OPALGA's only clothing-optional hot tub experience in an old barn silo. Overall the weekend set the stage for OPLGA's future, including a set of recommendations for future programs and directions.

My Path to Public Service and OPALGA+

Ray Johnson

“Inspiration can come from many and to one....”

“That’s when America soars, when we look out for one another and we take care of each other, when we root for one another’s success, when we strive to do better and to be better than the generation that came before us and try to build something better for generations to come, that’s why we do what we do. That’s the whole point of public service.” – President Barack Obama

The Village of Oak Park and the Oak Park Area Lesbian & Gay Association (OPALGA+) have an extensive history of “looking out for one another and taking care of each other.” It’s that culture, that sense of purpose, that esprit de corps which inspired me, a guy from a small, rural, conservative, farm town in Michigan.

How did this all begin? Well, I was asked to transfer with my company (HSBC Bank USA) from Michigan to Elmhurst, IL, and the “book of suburbs” the company provided listed communities for employees to consider--from Chicago to Carol Stream. My first stop was Carol Stream--because the rent was so affordable.

Driving from a friend’s Rogers Park apartment that Saturday morning to Carol Stream gave me serious pause, even on a Saturday, Carol Stream was a LONG way from Chicago. While we made it to the far west suburb in a reasonable amount of time, I quickly said to my friend, “Please turn back. Let’s have lunch somewhere on the way back to Chicago.” We picked Geppetto’s in Oak Park, and I was quickly hooked not only on the restaurant’s salad bar, but also on the vibe of downtown Oak Park! Beyond that, I didn’t know anything about Oak Park, but almost immediately decided that this was where I wanted to live.

My first touchpoint in the Village was with the nonprofit Oak Park Regional Housing Center, which provided (and still provides today) apartment escorts who help you find a place, while implementing fair-housing concepts that encourage people of color to live in predominately white areas of Oak Park, while also encouraging white renters to live in predominately non-white areas of Oak Park. This approach at integration was one I was not familiar with yet intrigued me. With the help of the Center, I set up my first apartment on Washington Blvd., east of Ridgeland.

Through 1989 to 1993, I was fairly focused on my career and career advancement. Volunteering at the Illinois Masonic Hospital Unit 371 HIV/AIDS ward on Sundays was the extent of my community engagement. Then, the Village of Oak Park and OPLGA began discussing health benefits and the domestic partnership registry for same-sex couples

At that first public hearing at Village Hall, I was transfixed by the talent, commitment and dedication of the members of OPLGA and their allies. I decided I needed to do more locally. Thus, began my engagement with OPLGA.

My involvement was slow and steady at first, but by 1996/1997 things were really heating up. While many of us were pleased that increased funding and research on HIV/AIDS issues were taking place because of President Clinton's election in 1992, his 2nd term in 1996 included his "accomplishments" of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and the "Defense of Marriage Act." Every time we thought we stepped ahead, we had to fight yet again for equality.

Around this time, Domestic Partnership Registries were gaining traction around the country. I threw my support to Joanne Trapani, who won a seat on the Village Board and became the State of Illinois's first elected open lesbian. She was elected in time to help pass an ordinance for the Domestic Partnership Registry in Oak Park--the very first in Illinois! Cheers across the Village!

But – that victory was short lived, as a local, conservative church (Calvary Memorial) led an advisory ballot referendum to ask the Village Board to repeal the Registry. Again, watching the talent and determination of so many OPLGA+ members, their allies, and faith-based institutions come together to support keeping the Registry, I was again inspired to ask--"Am I doing enough?" My answer was a resounding--No!

After this point, I pretty much said yes to almost every civil rights volunteer opportunity which came my way! Not because of me, but because I was inspired to give back through the good-faith and encouragement of so many others.

I canvassed the Village and helped pass the Domestic Partnership Referendum, joined the first OPAL Gala committee, was elected Treasurer and later Co-Chair of OPALGA, helped lead the volunteers for Oak Park's part in the Chicago Gay Games, became a member of the Village of Oak Park Citizen Advisory Commission, and was appointed to the local United Way (UW) Board of Directors, along with an ally from the "Vote YES Domestic Partnership Registry". We worked together and successfully changed the UW policy and ended funding of the Boy Scouts, which at the time was not allowing openly gay Scout Leaders or Scouts to serve. These are just a few examples of the "many inspired one and more" to do more.

All of my OPALGA and local community engagement led to a highlight of my life, which was to become the first openly gay man to serve on the Village of Oak Park Board of Trustees. I was elected for three consecutive terms. Looking back, I reflect very fondly on my time as a public servant. Even when you leave Oak Park, the values of Oak Park never leave you. What did I learn from others involved in OPALGA+ or the Village of Oak Park?

Do more. Be engaged. Think of the many. Tap in. Look for your own blind spots. Ask about the "greater good." Give back until you are exhausted. Be open to the inspiration from others--because in Oak Park, they stand on every block. BE inspired yourself.

While my story is personal and a reflection of my time in Oak Park (1989-2014), there is no doubt that my personal and professional accomplishments were built upon the OPALGA+ foundation, the Village of Oak Park's sense of purpose, and so many of you who helped (and inspired) along the way. THANK YOU!

CHAPTER 2

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Community Response and OPALGA: Two Springs from One Pool

Angelika Kuehn

I am writing my recollections about how two organizations emerged in the Oak Park area in those terrible times of the late 1980's. The first was an initiative that became Community Response, which starting in late 1988 became an active service organization to support people with HIV/AIDS who lived in Chicago's western suburbs and Chicago's Austin neighborhood. My dearest friend had died of AIDS the year before in a Toronto hospital, having suffered mightily from the illnesses that slipped past his ruined immune system. He was 37.

I was shaken by the thought of a promising life cut short but even more so by his aloneness at the end. He was struggling with the voice that told him he was gay against the message from the larger community that told him that if that were true, he was unacceptable. It did not matter that his closest circles were socially influential and wealthy; they could have been powerless and poor. At that time, in that place, the message would have been the same.

On reflection, these concerns motivated me to do the few helpful things I did at the very beginnings of what came to be OPLGA. And these concerns were that the implicit expulsions from family and communities that followed from gay men affirming their sexual identity led to risky sex and aloneness. I saw the process of coming out as crucial to ensuring that gay men have access to the benefits and the virtues of the larger community. I realized it was critical to require the larger community to respond to the specific needs of gay men, needs created not only by the AIDS epidemic, enormous as those were, but also the need to extend civil rights and justice that had been denied for generations.

Nathan Linsk, Mel Wilson and Bryan Findlay all served as initial board members of Community Response. I joined them as they took the first steps in creating a parallel organization, which became the Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association. Initially we were very few, but we undertook to present ourselves as a larger organization, which seemed a bit of "smoke and mirrors" to get attention from the larger Oak Park community. I introduced these three colleagues to the leadership of the Village Managers' Association, which was selecting candidates for the Village Board, as well other community leaders whom I had come to know in doing the legwork to start Community Response. We designed a questionnaire for candidates for local elections asking for their positions on LGBT non-discrimination protections and HIV/AIDS issues. Because this came from an "Association," candidates considered it to be imperative to answer.

In the three decades since those first days, the coming out has happened. And in insufficient but really quite unexpected—from the perspective of that time—measure, the justice has been extended. OPALGA+ can take credit for making many individual lives so much better and for improving the life of the larger community that in many ways has embraced those whom it expelled just 30 years ago.

PFLAG

Nancy Johnson

After our only son, David, came out to us in 1985, we got involved in the Chicago Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) chapter in 1986 or so. It was the only chapter in the Chicago area at the time. I served on the board of the Chicago chapter for several years. We had the PFLAG National Convention in Chicago in 1988. It was during our set up for the convention that I met Curt Hicks who was collecting donations for the Human Rights Campaign Fund for telegrams to send to politicians. Curt and I would later be co-chairs for Prism Youth for OPALGA.

Eventually the Chicago PFLAG Chapter was approached about starting a chapter in Hinsdale. I believe it was the pastor of a church in Hinsdale that was leading the effort. Gerda Muri, another Chicago PFLAG board member, and I went to the first three meetings of the group to help get it started. It grew into a large active chapter. And in a twist of fate, it was the Hinsdale chapter that helped start the PFLAG chapter in Oak Park!

The first meeting was in July 2001. By that time, I had retired, in part to serve as a long-distance caretaker for my ailing parents in Texas. I was glad that there was going to be a PFLAG chapter in Oak Park, since I didn't really have time to go to Chicago for meetings any more. I preferred to be active in Oak Park for Oak Park! My experiences with OPALGA and the philosophies of its founders (specifically Mel Wilson and Nathan Linsk) led me to suggest that we name our new chapter not just PFLAG Oak Park, but PFLAG Oak Park Area!

We tried to be as much in the Oak Park public eye as we could be. We had ads in the OPRFHS newspaper, *Trapeze*. Velna and George Kolodziej often set up a table outside the Farmers Market with literature, a sign, and a donation jar. We brought the photographic display, Love Makes a Family, to Oak Park. We showed it for two weeks in Unity Temple, one week at Oak Park River Forest High School, and one week in College of DuPage. For three years we presented a LGBT Documentary Film Series with the Oak Park Public Library. We invited other organizations, including OPALGA, to cosponsor films with us. We wanted to normalize as much as possible LGBT identity, issues, entertainment in the public community life of Oak Park.

PFLAG and OPALGA

In 2007 OPALGA presented PFLAG Oak Park (Area) with its OPAL Leadership Award. In our acceptance speech, I expressed the hope that our two organizations would continue to find ways in which we can cooperate. On Day in Our Village, we always have our tables side by side, and when PFLAG isn't able to muster any volunteers, OPALGA makes a place for our literature on its table. We have an open invitation to march in the July 4th Oak Park Parade with OPALGA. When we started having bake sales at the Farmers' Market, OPALGA members always stopped by to say hello. OPALGA members started volunteering to bake some things for us to sell. When we realized that we are becoming less able to bake the quantities we needed to sell, OPALGA stepped up and many volunteers brought cookies, soda bread, etc., for us to sell. Likewise, when OPALGA was having trouble getting volunteers for Donut Days, they called on us and continue to ask us to help fill out the work schedule. Of course, it's our PFLAG wish that we continue to be active in the community with OPALGA+.

Beacon Unitarian Church and OPLGA

Betsy Davis

In Oak Park in 1984, Beacon Unitarian Church hired the Rev. Barbara Pescan. She was a completely open lesbian, at the time in a seven-year committed relationship, but the committee that made the decision to hire her did not anticipate that this might be an issue for its congregation; this is a notably liberal denomination in many ways. Unitarian Universalism is Christian in its roots historically, but it had long since broadened its base to include religious perspectives of many traditions; committed to improving life on earth, not an afterlife; and not centered around a theological creed. Oak Park had pioneered racially open housing policies in the 1960's and 70's and was already a notably liberal community.

But upon the announcement of Rev. Pescan's selection, six highly committed members of the congregation resigned. Four of them had actually been founders five years before. Some feared for their jobs if they were to be associated with an organization that might be thought of as gay-friendly; others feared for the safety of their children. The word "homophobia" was unknown to most--maybe all--of us, but the sudden visibility of its strong presence and power was stunning.

The hiring committee and the board made the decision then to soft-pedal Rev. Pescan's identity as a lesbian and asked her not to speak about gay issues from the pulpit. When the local newspaper asked to interview her as the new minister in town, the board instead supplied the paper with a prewritten article, fearing that she might be asked about her family.

Because she was an outstanding preacher, writer and poet, those congregation members who remained were very excited about her hiring, and under her leadership the church flourished for the next four years.

In 1988 the Unitarian Universalist denomination conducted a survey of attitudes among subscribers to its magazine regarding the presence of gay and lesbian members in its congregations, and toward the hiring of gay ministers. The results of the survey were shocking, compiled in the document *Common Vision* (January, 1989). They revealed a stunning depth of fear and loathing on the one hand and of ignorance and curiosity on the other. At Beacon in Oak Park, it was upsetting both to the minister and to me as a congregant; denominationally the survey findings prompted a resolve to act upon the problem.

Previously in 1984 the denomination had passed a resolution of support for ministers who conducted services of union for same-sex couples (there had been ministers who had been rebuked by their Boards for doing that), and over the years there had been a few other small and poorly publicized such resolutions, but the shock of these survey results now prompted some action.

At the national level work began on a program called "The Welcoming Congregation;" whereby congregations were encouraged to make public statements of welcome to gay members and guests and to foster equality in their treatment. At Beacon Church in Oak Park, Rev. Pescan in October of 1987, after four years of silence, preached a sermon titled "It's not a Lifestyle, it's my Life." In the spring of 1988, I wrote an article for the church entitled "Gay People in the Church: a Heterosexual Beaconite Describes her Perspective," based upon questions I had been asked by members of the congregation. The questions included discomfort with same sex sexual behavior, worries about children, and concerns about the numbers of gay people in the church and its possible reputation as a gay church. The questions came from well meaning, liberal, kind, ordinary Oak Park area citizens who had had little or no experience with gay people and their struggles. Both the sermon and the article were disturbing to many, even those who supported gay rights in a general way.

In the spring of 1988, Rev. Pescan announced that she and her partner were moving on, and Beacon prepared for a new chapter. In response, some members proposed that since the congregation would probably no longer have a gay minister that we approach those people who were previously active in the church but had resigned due to the above events four years earlier to return; some were horrified by that suggestion. In June of 1989 a group of about ten people formed who supported asking them to re-join, but only with the understanding that the congregation was determined not to move backwards, and that we were determined to remain a safe place for

people to be themselves. The new “Welcoming Congregation” program and curriculum of the Unitarian Universalist Association seemed like a good way to do this, so we sent for their materials and prepared to follow it.

But the new minister was not supportive. She was an “extension minister”—hired for the purpose of helping our group grow in numbers—and was outspoken in her belief that gaining a reputation as a gay-supportive church would discourage new members. Over the fall of 1989 positions hardened; there then were 12 people firmly committed to our declaring ourselves a welcoming congregation, with the rest of the small congregation either opposed or skeptical.

This occurred during OPLGA’s first year, and the intersection of the two organizations was fortuitous for each. About five people, including me, became members of both groups. In the winter of 1990, despite the new minister’s qualms, and the lack of interest or opposition by many members, Beacon held a series of three workshops; two of them were led by OPLGA’s founders Nathan Linsk and Mel Wilson. The remaining workshop was based upon materials supplied by the Unitarian Universalist denomination and by Nathan and Mel. In addition, a group of five people from both groups presented a Sunday service at Beacon and again at Third Unitarian Church called “The Woman in Me.” Besides this concrete aid from OPLGA, behind the scenes the new organization provided invaluable advice and support to the church groups’ efforts. Informative explanations were also distributed. Other all-congregation discussions were held; I remember all of them as contentious. In retrospect, I think the resistance to what seemed to us a simple request was primarily the heritage of a root cause of homophobia in the United States: the belief of many people that homosexuality was rare and an aberration. If one believes this, then the cause becomes personalized: if you don’t like any of the few LGBT+ people that you do know, then the cause has no merit.

In June 1990, after discussions, writings, arguments, and lots of passion on both sides, a vote was taken at Beacon’s Annual Meeting, and the motion passed to become a Welcoming Congregation, with the agreement to follow the 10 stipulations of the program. The only stipulation that I felt was new and important for us to observe was to include in all of our publicity the following statement:

Beacon Unitarian Church is a part of the Welcoming Congregation process of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and as such we seek to be inclusive and expressive of the life experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual persons.

By the fall, indeed, this statement was included in all of our publications, including our weekly order of service. And it was the minister herself who insisted that it be included in our ad for the local newspaper about a ser-

mon series that she presented in November. There was no debate in the publicity committee about this, and the statement was included without any second thoughts.

At one of the early meetings of OPLGA, Mel Wilson talked to the group about the fact that there were too many straight people who truly believed that they had never met anyone who was LGBT+ and that the only counter action to this would be large numbers of LGBT+ people coming out. I believe that his talk that day got to the heart of the reasons for the existence of persistent homophobia, at least in the United States.

Beacon was portraying in miniature the trends of thinking in the culture at large. It took time and considerable courage on the part of brave people, both LGBT+ and others, who were able to be true to themselves and clear in their own minds about what had to be done. Thanks to those who were courageous enough to be true to themselves and out in the open, despite the huge personal costs, huge strides were made in the understanding of hard but simple truths.

I am proud to have walked beside them during those significant times.

Sin, Sin, Sin

Phil Bellerive

OPLGA first had a booth at Day in Our Village in 1991. The first Cultural Arts Festival, Building Bridges to Understanding was a few weeks away at that point.

A letter to the editor appeared in the *Wednesday Journal* a week or two before Day in our Village written by a woman named Ruth McNutt, the secretary of the Oak Park Council of Churches (renamed Community of Congregations shortly thereafter). McNutt had criticized the festival as “a festival of sin, sin, sin” solely because it was sponsored by an LGBT organization.

Day in Our Village, that year, was set up in several parks around Oak Park with a bus shuttling people between sites. OPLGA was assigned a booth in Fox Park. Ethel Cotovsky, I, and others arrived at Fox Park to set up our display. Our booth was located between Third Unitarian Church in Chicago (with many Oak Parkers in the congregation), and that of the Council of Churches. Unknown to us, McNutt was staffing the Council of Churches booth but hadn’t yet arrived. Third Unitarian was offering cold lemonade to the other exhibitors because it was a hot day, which was greatly appreciated.

As we chatted with Third Unitarian people (some of whom Ethel knew), McNutt arrived looked at our booth, and said something to the effect of “this noise again.”

There had apparently been some blowback in the Council of Churches to her letter.

Ethel took charge and walked over, and with hand out stretched, and a big smile on her face introduced herself to Ruth McNutt and offered her some lemonade. To my surprise all was civil and quiet that morning. The rest of the day went without a hitch.

Note: See appendix for Wednesday Journal articles reflecting the controversies surrounding LGBT issues for religious institution focusing on a dialog between Rev. Jay Deacon of Unity Temple and Rev. Pritchard of Calvary Church.

BUNGALO and OPALGA

Jane Anderson

The origins of the Berwyn United Neighborhood Gay and Lesbian Organization (BUNGALO) started with an article published in the Berwyn Life in December 1994 announcing recommendations put forth to the Berwyn City Council by the newly formed Human Relations Task Force, which included a non-discrimination clause for sexual orientation. I knew from past experiences with OPALGA, if the ordinance were to pass including sexual orientation, we would need the gay and lesbian citizens of Berwyn to attend the hearing and be prepared to testify before city council. The problem was we only had a few days to pull this off.

Being on the board of OPALGA, I had access to the membership list and was able to identify members or individuals who resided in Berwyn who had attended OPALGA events. The membership list was considered highly sensitive information. I contacted then co-chairs Pam Freese and Jim Kelly for their blessings to use the list. With my social committee co-chair, Don Butt, who was also a Berwyn resident, we then proceeded to cold call from the phone list, always identifying ourselves as OPALGA board members. We got leads from other OPALGA leaders. Phil Bellerive put out a call through his employer's sanctioned gay and lesbian affinity group, which connected us to Ted Korbos. Carole Goodwin and Tom Fitzsimmons attended the hearings at city hall. Ultimately, when the vote was called the Human Relations Ordinance passed, however omitting sexual orientation.

As it turned out, the failure to include sexual orientation in the ordinance spurred the formation of BUNGALO. Alan Amato, who was chair of OPALGA's Public Policy committee, graciously guided us in our development. Our motto, "We too are Berwyn" encouraged us to be visible and viable in the community and to start participating in various organizations in the city. These organizations included the Berwyn Historical Society, Berwyn Home-owners Association, and the All Berwyn Committee; later we had mem-

bers on the Community Relations Commission Library Board and Berwyn Development Corp. Ted Korbos, in the vein of Mel Wilson, provided excellent political information with the canvassing of local and statewide elections. Although not directly involved, OPALGA and numerous individuals from the organization were instrumental in providing support in our formation, much needed encouragement, and help in locating people in Berwyn. Over the years, OPALGA and BUNGALO collaborated on joint social, outreach, educational and Pride activities.

Although disbanded several years ago, BUNGALO still keeps a Facebook presence and hosts several social events throughout the year, most recently, the Pride Picnic in Proksa Park in 2019. One of our first causes was to purchase 10 bricks for the Pathway to Knowledge at the Berwyn Public Library. Come see if you can find them.

IGLTF and Pride Agenda

Alan Amato

In the “early days” OPALGA shared an office in Oak Park with the first Illinois LGBT rights organization--Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force. I was proud to be on the board of IGLTF before becoming a board member of OPALGA. The boards were diverse, including well-recognized active Oak Parkers. Many events, actions, and educational workshops were organized to further outreach not only in Oak Park but the State of Illinois as a whole. During the same period a few of us “brainstormed” ways to continue outreach in the Oak Park area. The result was the opening of the Pride Agenda Bookstore. Jim Wolfe, John Puffer and I were the co-owners. Pride Agenda was not only the first exclusively LGBT bookstore in the Chicago area outside of the city. It was also an information center, as well as way for the media to contact the LGBT+ community, and as a meeting place for many LGBT events. When OPALGA’s PRISM Youth Network was established, the Pride Agenda became the routine “pre-meeting” space for our neighborhood gay and lesbian youth to gather and socialize.

CHAPTER 3

ADVOCACY EFFORTS

AND SUCCESSES

Amending the Human Rights Ordinance to Include Sexual Orientation

Mary Davis

June 5th, 1989 was quite a dramatic day in the history of Oak Park's Village Hall and OPLGA. Vitriol, accusations, heroism, courage, compassion, hate-filled speech, bigotry, and just about every human emotion were on display in bright lights. Hollywood dramas and soap operas really couldn't begin to create the drama that would be on center stage that evening.

The occasion? The Oak Park Village Board of Trustees decided to change its ordinance relating to Human Rights. The Board knew its ordinance was not in compliance for more ordinary reasons, such as disabilities issues and the like. Mel Wilson, Angelika Kuehn, and others decided to piggy-back on the fact that they knew the board would change this ordinance. Why not broaden the classes of people who were entitled to protection in discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodation? Why not include regardless of "sexual orientation" in the new language?

As a backdrop, OPLGA had just been formed in March 1989. I attended OPLGA's second meeting and found out that we would need to move quickly if we had any hope in getting these changes passed. Being a former Evangelical Christian myself, I felt uniquely qualified to battle of group of people I had keen insights into. Having been recently rejected from all my evangelical friends once I came out to them, I also felt the rawness of being ostracized and wanted to work so that others might feel protected in important areas of their life.

I knew that even though this amendment had nothing to do with religion, hard-right religious people would come out of the woodwork to fight the amendment. I knew that on some levels, we would have to fight religion with religion. I networked with everyone I knew to find people "of the cloth" who would make a stance for equality for ALL people. Once I started asking questions, it was amazing how quickly the answers came. And I was shocked that even in 1989, we found so many supporters who also happened to lead churches.

"Try Rev. Jack Finney of the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church." I barely got the question out of my mouth and he responded with an "Absolutely! See you there." I moved on. I wanted to find someone of the Catholic faith, and while I couldn't find a priest, I did find Brother Joseph Kilekevce, who volunteered for the AIDS Pastoral Care Network of Chicago. Again, without hesitation, he said he would show up on June 5th. In his speech, he wholeheartedly supported the amendment changes and talked about compassion and humility.

I connected with more Oak Parkers in one week than in my previous two years living in the village. One person referred me to the next, and the next would then give me more names. The Reverend Greg Dell of Euclid Avenue Methodist Church also quickly stepped up to the plate to support us. Many OPLGA future members and allies spoke that night. Those members/allies included: Judah Graubart, Shelly Brown (a therapist), Vivian Larsen (a therapist), Mel Wilson, Bryan Findlay, Rev. Jack Finney, Jim Aull, Marsha Borders, Carole Goodwin, Brother Kilekevice, Ethel Cotovsky, Phil Bellerive, Rev. Greg Dell, Galen Gockel, Nancy Johnson, Paul Adams, William May, Joanne Trapani, Esther Parada, and Carole Smith. Nathan Linsk wrote a letter of support and that was read to the audience.

While fundamentalist churches, such as Calvary Memorial Church, brought people in busloads, those willing to speak did not outnumber our supporters. In total, 39 people spoke. Twenty people were in favor of the amendment change. Nineteen speakers were against it. Three people wrote letters to the board; two of the letters were against the amendment and one was for it. The opponents outnumbered us by one.

Since Calvary Memorial Church members showed up early, they were the first to speak. This brought a dark energy into the room; the first 13 out of 14 speakers were against changing the amendment. Some of the comments were hateful and brutal and at the end of 13th speaker, I was beginning to lose hope.

Our opponents came at us from many different angles. Many comments referred to “weakening the fabric of society” or “redefining the family structure.” Some stated that changing the amendment would have “monstrous legal ramifications.” Others urged to put the vote to a referendum. Of course, others got more personal. Some speakers stated that homosexuality was “morally wrong.” One woman warned that the Board was not considering “the high medical costs incurred by AIDS patients and the high increase in insurance premiums as a result of having employees diagnosed with AIDS.”

A pastor directly quoted from the Bible, stating that “homosexuality destroyed civilizations.” Others argued that the term “sexual orientation” was not clear. Several argued that we were already a protected class of citizens. Like a finely crafted mosaic, the multi-faceted points went on and on. Another pastor stated that the amendment did not exclude religious organizations and “would take away their God-given right to set moral standards for their hired staff and members.”

Then, all of a sudden, the tide turned. A woman named Shelley Brown, looking quite nervous stated that through her practice as a therapist, she realized that the basic humanity of all of us was the same. She stated that

we were all equally lovable and admirable and that our community had to spend much time and effort fighting for what the rest of the population took for granted. She asked the Board to take a stand and end separation and suppression. Her speech reached into hearts and I had to physically contain myself from hugging her, given the robustness of her speech!

Then it was our turn. For the rest of the evening, our supporters spoke about 95% of the time. Mel Wilson spoke eloquently and commandingly: "This legislation is long overdue." He noted that the Constitution set forth that all men were created equal. He stated that it was painful for our community to have to tell the rest of the world that they wished to be included in society. Bryan Findlay stated that the price of freedom was eternal vigilance. He refuted the notion that the amendment be put to a referendum by stating that the rights of a minority should not be put to a referendum and should not be subject to approval by a majority.

Rev. Jack Finney, stating that he spoke on behalf of his church, mentioned that its members worked on behalf of fair housing for African Americans and now the congregation wanted to work for fair housing and employment for our community.

Appealing to Oak Park's record of standing for Fair Housing in the past when many other suburbs looked the other way, Carole Goodwin stated that a previous Board had passed the Fair Housing Ordinance, putting Oak Park on the map as an example of successful integration. She stated that Oak Park did the right thing then and she hoped that this Board would also do the right thing.

Esther Parada, Mel Wilson's former wife, spoke with emotion and eloquence. She stated that the evening's discussion had often been framed in terms of family values with the implication that open support for our community was destructive of the family. She stated that in fact, the opposite was true, as family related to love, honesty, and commitment. She stated that our community might live in secrecy unless we could live in a society which respected and protected our legal rights.

Most of us were emotionally exhausted after that evening, but everyone's efforts changed history. The Board amended the Human Rights Ordinance to include "sexual orientation" as a protected class. One of our long-standing couples, Jeffrey Smith and Jim Aull, met for the first time that night. Seeds of understanding had been planted. OPLGA galvanized further around this event. What an important event for Oak Park, and OPLGA and for other communities that would follow suit!

Kudos and many thanks to all who contributed their time and effort!

Working With/For Youth

Rebekah Levin

In the 1980's, queers and queer culture were far more hidden, unlike today, when most people are aware of being exposed to LGBTQ+ people and culture, if not in person, then via television, video or films. Many of the ideas as to what and who we were as gays and lesbians (there was almost no awareness of bisexuals or transsexuals, and the notion of gender queerness didn't even exist at that time) were based on pure conjecture and fear. And as Master Yoda in a *Star Wars* movie so eloquently stated, "Fear leads to anger; anger leads to hate..."

The prospect of queers gaining visibility and acceptance within the Village engendered quite a backlash when we worked to include gays and lesbians as protected classes within in Oak Park's 1989 revised Human Rights Ordinance. But the hateful vitriol spiked when we next moved to have lesbian and gay students and faculty at Oak Park and River Forest High School protected from discrimination, and organized again to get this codified within the school's Human Dignity policy. Those who had lost the fight to exclude gays and lesbians from the Village's Human Rights Ordinance doubled down in their efforts to prevent another public policy loss. There were a fair number of public meetings at the high school about the policy, and there was a core group of supporters and detractors that attended all of the meetings.

A good number of the opponents were members of fundamentalist churches in the area, including a husband and wife who were quite interesting to me. When the husband spoke out against the proposed policy changes (the wife did not usually speak publicly), it was not with the same level of hysteria and hatred that we heard from others. From their perspective, gays and lesbians were engaged in immoral acts, and elevating their needs to be treated as deserving of equal respect and protections (in terms of sexual orientation) did not make sense to them; he argued it risked sending the message that being queer was ok.

But as this discussion, debate and public hearings took place over the following months, this couple and I started to acknowledge one another as we would come in to the same meeting room or auditorium. One time, I decided to go sit next to them and talk. I remember very little about the conversation, but I do recall that after that conversation, the tone of the husband changed, and I felt that he knew that he was talking about me, not just the amorphous gays and lesbians.

Once OPRF's Amended Human Dignity Policy passed in June of 1989, the real work of making the policy have impact on life at the high school began. I started attending the OPRF board meetings as a representative of OPLGA,

to serve as a queer resource for the board, if any issues came up for which they wanted feedback or insight from a queer perspective. At first, there was uncertainty as to why I was there. We had no specific agenda item that we were advocating and rarely was there something that we needed from them. More than anything, we wanted to normalize a queer presence and see how we could integrate addressing the needs of gay students, families and faculty into the high school's modus vivendi. On occasion, they would ask for input during the meetings; other times, during the board meeting break or before it began, they would come over and schmooze, asking if there were any issues that we thought needed to be addressed. The High School passed a revised human dignity policy adding sexual orientation to the list of protected groups on December 13, 1989.

The following year, OPLGA was asked to come speak with OPRF's deans, counselors, and department chairs about how to better meet the needs of its queer students and faculty. This was more challenging for me than speaking at previous public hearings or at the high school's board meetings. Many of these staff and faculty had been working at the high school for years, going back to the 70's when I was a student there. It was one thing to speak to people with whom I had little to no relationship, who were primarily board members whose names I knew and who may have known me just through the organizing we had been doing in the village. It was quite a different thing to sit at the end of the large OPRF board room table with many of the people whom I had revered as my teachers and support staff, and with whom I felt quite close, but with whom had never talked about anything so intimate as my sexuality.

I wore a dress for that meeting – something I didn't often do. Pink and white stripes. Big bow. I wanted them to know that I was still the Becky Levin, whom they had taught and supported, valued and liked--maybe even admired. I didn't want to lose my relationships with them at that meeting, which I knew was possible. I was quite nervous and don't recall much of the questioning or conversation. I do recall that they asked what it was like to have been a queer student at the school, and was there anything they could they have done to be more supportive. I didn't have the courage and wherewithal at the time to tell them that I didn't come into my sexual self until after high school; I believe I said something about the importance of proactively creating a safe space, putting something up in their classroom or making some sort of comment that would let students know that they could talk with them. There is one thing, however, that I do remember quite vividly from that meeting--that was looking up and catching the eye of my chemistry teacher, who was sitting half-way down that long table, who gave me a subtle smile and a wink when I came up to the table to speak, letting me know that he had my back.

I also remember Richard Garrin, my friend and the former director of vocal music at OPRF, also coming to speak with the deans, counselors, and department chairs. Richard was the director of the Windy City Gay Chorus, an outstanding gay men's choir that performed in Chicago. But he used a different last name for his queer and professional activities than for his work as a teacher in the straight world. Being out as a gay teacher would have been a highly risky endeavor at that time, and the anonymity provided by a different name was important for him. While there were some faculty and staff who knew that he was queer, many did not, it took a lot of courage to come to that meeting to speak out as a gay man, and a gay teacher.

Over the next two years, Curt Hicks and I had the chance to do in-service workshops for faculty and staff on working with queer families and students. Curt had developed a general outline for these presentations that tailored to the setting and audience. Other than one high school workshop, where one of the teachers in attendance was an advocate for Exodus International (an organization that purported to convert homosexuals back to heterosexuality via therapy), most of the teachers and staff simply had a lot of questions that they wanted us to address. Over time, our presentations focused increasingly on the questions and challenges that faculty and staff wanted help negotiating.

When the elementary/middle school district similarly amended their non-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation, we received regular requests to meet with their teachers as well, to help them understand queerness, queer families, and queer students, and how they as teachers can best support our community. These professional development sessions were extraordinarily inspiring and reassuring for me as a queer woman, and in particular, as a parent of two kids in the public schools. These teachers and their leaders were committed to making our schools and classrooms welcoming and effective institutions for everyone, including us.

Another Take on the 1990 Meeting with the High School Deans

Betsy Davis

OPLGA members Mel Wilson, Bekah Levin (alumna), along with myself and Richard Garrin (previous teacher) met with all of the Oak Park River Forest (OPRF) High School deans. The meeting started by each of us introducing ourselves. including Bekah and Richard giving eloquent presentations about their experiences at the school. I remember one of the deans asking specifically about "how do we tell which students are gay?" We did not directly respond, but instead talked about how to make the school more welcoming and comfortable for gay students. Our input about how to make the school more welcoming and comfortable for lesbian and gay students seemed high-

ly unsatisfactory to the school representatives and I saw almost universal disengagement around the room.

I felt that the deans were pretty clear by the end that they were really not interested in understanding what it was like to be gay at OPRF High School—we assumed that was why we had been invited to the meeting. Instead they were very interested in our helping them to identify how to “tell” who the gay kids were so that they could keep them from self-harm or killing themselves. I found that very depressing, and left with more understanding of just how difficult this task was.

Oak Park’s LGBT Community’s Historic Victory

Alan Amato

In 1994, after OPLGA had advocated for domestic partnership, the Oak Park Village Board enacted a Domestic Partnership Ordinance providing for equal benefits to lesbian and gay families of village employees; however, it failed to establish the domestic partnership registry, which we had requested. Although this success was a major victory, this legislation led to a continued community-wide effort of coalition building and intense organizing to obtain the registry, both by the LGBT community and our allies throughout the Village.

In 1997, the Oak Park Village Board finally passed the domestic partnership registry, the first in Illinois. Shortly after the registry was enacted, a group successfully petitioned to have the Registry placed on the ballot for a special non-binding referendum to be approved or opposed by Oak Park’s voters. This referendum was primarily spearheaded by members of Calvary Memorial Church, whose pastor and many members were vehemently opposed to any rights or acceptance of the ever-growing Oak Park LGBT community. In response, OPALGA established the VOTE YES OAK PARK campaign. The battle began.

A community-wide effort with scores of volunteers spread across Oak Park in each precinct to knock on doors, deliver printed material, meet with neighbors and social, political, religious and civic organizations to deliver a YES vote on Election Day. Various Oak Park political “factions” joined our coalition. Of particular importance was the need to collaborate with the community’s houses of worship to counter the “religious right.” Several pastors and clergy of Oak Park’s “mainstream” denominations including a local Rabbi and members of the local Catholic parishes signed a joint statement urging its members and parishioners to Vote YES.

The days leading up to Election Day, March 17, 1997, volunteers were at each of the local “El” stops and business districts distributing pamphlets to Vote YES. Phone banks were organized in homes across the area to contact

registered voters to Vote YES. Both local Oak Park newspapers editorialized their support and city-wide media, print and television, traveled to Oak Park to interview (including Telemundo, who interviewed our Latino Spanish speaking supporters). A full-page ad was placed in the local newspapers, which included hundreds of signatures of diverse Oak Park supporters: young, old, black, white and brown, straight and gay.

On Election Day, as the polls closed, our supporters gathered at Unity Temple. Volunteers were assigned to each precinct to tabulate the vote and contact special phone lines at Unity Temple with the vote totals. As each precinct volunteer reported to Unity Temple, the total vote was displayed to the gathering and excited crowd.

It soon became clear our efforts were successful. All precincts from South, Central and North Oak Park carried the YES vote. Oak Park became one of the first municipalities in the United States to defeat by referendum the efforts to roll back LGBT rights. The memorable banner headline in Oak Park's *Wednesday Journal* newspaper declared "Big Gay Day". With a smile, I continue to remember the telephone call I received from the then chair of Oak Park's Community Relations Commission: "If we had lost, would the headline be "Big Bigots' Day"?

Our community could not have possibly been successful without a coalition: a coalition of ALL Oak Park. Also, it brings to my mind the many people who led, organized and worked tirelessly for our success.

The Vote YES Campaign

Steve Glickman

I was involved with OPALGA throughout the 1990s and served as co-chair from 1996 to 1999. It was an exciting time for the organization. After years of advocating for the recognition of lesbian and gay couples and families, in 1993 the village board approved domestic partnership benefits for village employees. In 1997 the village board created a domestic partnership registry for same-sex couples, making Oak Park the 12th city in the United States to offer a domestic partnership registry (before Chicago and even New York City). Outside the country only Denmark and the Netherlands had similar recognitions. Oak Park was on the cutting edge of LGBT civil rights!

Keep in mind that back in the 1990s mainstream politics was hostile to the notion of gay marriage. President Clinton had signed into law the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, which banned the federal government from recognizing same-sex unions, and many states (including Illinois) had followed suit. The registry ordinance in Oak Park recognized our relationships but could not offer the financial and legal benefits of actual marriage; nevertheless, it was an important first step towards marriage equality.

On the day the registry opened for business, Phil Bellerive, former OPALGA co-chair, and his partner Ron Rauch, became the first gay couple to sign up at village hall. A *Chicago Tribune* reporter was on hand to capture the reactions of newly registered couples. Phil told the reporter, “It really is like getting married!” Two other OPALGA couples who registered that same day were Betsy Ritzman-Stith and Cheryl Haugh, and Aimee Gelnaw and Margie Brickley. They all gave interviews with the *Chicago Tribune* (*Chicago Tribune* archives: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1997-10-28-9710280149-story.html>)

Then, in December 1997 we faced a new challenge. The religious right in Oak Park, spearheaded by Calvary Memorial Church on Lake Street, had managed to gather enough signatures to put our newly minted registry to a public referendum on the upcoming March 17th ballot. While the referendum would be advisory-only and would not overturn the registry ordinance, a NO vote would undermine OPALGA and the Oak Park village board as being too far to the left and out of touch with mainstream Oak Parkers. At the December OPALGA board meeting, we decided to challenge the petition, since we suspected that many of the 3000+ signatures were fraudulent or duplicates. We had heard reports of people standing on street corners in downtown Oak Park collecting signatures in support of “environmental regulations,” and we suspected that many members of Calvary Memorial Church who were not Oak Park residents had signed the petition.

I personally organized a few dozen volunteers in December 1997 to review all 3000+ signatures on the petition. We met at the OPALGA office for many hours, eating pizza and donuts and pouring over dozens of pages of chicken-scratch penmanship, cross-referencing each signature with the Oak Park phone book. It was tedious work, but in the end we found around 800 fraudulent signatures and felt confident that we could get the referendum thrown off the ballot.

On a brutally cold day in early January, I went to village hall to submit our challenge to the petition. I gave the Clerk’s Office all the pages of evidence we’d found of fraudulent signatures. I remember filling out a cursory form asking for the name of the challenger and I wrote “OPALGA,” thinking nothing of it.

Two weeks later, I was back at village hall attending a village board meeting where they were deciding whether or not to allow the referendum on the March ballot. The village lawyer advised the board that OPALGA’s challenge should be thrown out on a legal technicality, since the challenger had to be a person, i.e. a registered voter, not an organization.

In other words, if I had written "Steve Glickman" instead of "OPALGA" on the form, our challenge would have been accepted. I was stunned. I protested, but the village board voted to allow the referendum to move forward. (*Chicago Tribune* archives: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1998-01-20-9801200293-story.html>)

A friend and lawyer who was also at the board meeting, David Spagat, asked me why I hadn't sought his help. After all, we were attempting a legal maneuver and I was no lawyer. I shrugged and said, "I messed up." I felt terrible. I felt like I had wasted everyone's time over the holidays and had failed the organization and the LGBT community in Oak Park. We were now looking at waging a campaign to win the popular vote for the registry, a daunting task. For the first time I felt like I was in over my head and that perhaps I wasn't qualified to lead OPALGA.

And then a wonderful thing happened: The Oak Park community rallied to support the registry in what became known as the Vote YES campaign. While OPALGA members got the ball rolling, within weeks other community groups and straight allies joined our cause. The League of Women

Voters, the National Organization for Women, and most importantly the Village Manager's Association (which was the local political party) came out publicly in favor of the registry. A few progressive churches in town also publicly supported the registry. These organizations donated space, money, and volunteers to the Vote YES campaign. We wrote letters to the editor, sponsored educational events, canvassed our neighborhoods, and organized phone banks. I was humbled by how many friends and allies we had in Oak Park who chose to walk with us on this journey.

On the day of the election, we had no idea how the vote would turn out, but we thought it would be close. Many people volunteered to get out the vote.

Front Page, Wednesday Journal, March 18, 1998

By ANN KLEIBERG

On Friday morning the Flairs will leave for Derry at the Thomas Creek Colony and the three Flair children both over 18 will return to the man's Blue Egg. And Flair will (28-2) play three an-impressive 70-hole with a 70-6 win over Rich Gossel in the Diamond County tournament last year.

ANSWER: C. 1000 kg/m³ approximates the weight

True to form, France was pained by the world (Candy Madsen's) 38 points, the a team's lowest total in as many other French contests.

—Chris Williams scored his 22 points in the first three quarters, while Quanice Williams added 11. He did assist Robert Smith, who pulled Green 15 rebounds. Michael Shaeffer had six assists. Ben Pritchard had 10.

you can just search." Williams said.

Flannery will begin their home game against Proto at 7:15 p.m. against Notre Dame, which won the Northeastern championship.

Each Council stated that, during 22-23
partly in the second parent, Ross Williams
and Colman about the Fibers role of their
Adhesive division, and Fibers' role in
present began as chairman after the

"I don't know where you are."

Thomash put together a 20-3 run during the final session of the five half and the opening session of the sixth quarter, with 10 points in the former.

Ruth Crossan, considered back, within two points of 50-40, with 4.22 left to the round. Ian Finsenck, went on another 40.0 run to increase Army's lead to 50-30.

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In the evening, the campaign volunteers assembled at Unity Temple on Lake Street to tally up the votes for each precinct as the polls closed. The initial precincts had a wide margin of NO votes which made everyone nervous. But then it started to turn. After the last precinct was accounted for, the final vote count was 51% in favor of the registry and 49% opposed. We had won! The partying began and continued well into the night at the Nutbush (a local gay bar which is long gone).

The next morning, the front page of the *Wednesday Journal* (See picture above) ran the headline, “BIG GAY DAY!” in all caps, with an extra-large photo of Alan Amato, the OPALGA public policy chair along with Lynn Clark, another OPALGA board member, speaking at Unity Temple (*Wednesday Journal* archives:

<https://www.oakpark.com/News/Articles/4-8-2008/A-gay-old-time-as-Journal-is-honored-by-OPALGA/>.

The Vote YES campaign received widespread media coverage. I spoke with the *Chicago Tribune* and was interviewed on WGN TV and WBEZ radio. Newsweek magazine and The Advocate ran articles about our historic victory. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) recognized OPALGA’s achievement at its annual gala in Chicago and gave us an entire table free-of-charge as honored guests. It was the first and perhaps the only time the popular vote had affirmed a domestic partnership registry anywhere in the country. Writing this essay, more than twenty years later, and reflecting back on that cold day in January when I went to Village Hall without a clue or a lawyer to help me out: I think it was one of the best mistakes I’ve ever made.

CHAPTER 4

OPALGA PROGRAMS

YOUTH AND EDUCATION

Starting the Youth Drop-In Center

Nancy Johnson

Bekah Levin and others established a youth drop-in center that I became involved with when Bekah asked me to be “Kate.” Kate was the name she used to respond to calls on the youth help or info line. She told me that she chose the name because “Kate” sounded like a warm motherly person whom one could call for help. I was Kate for several years. During that time, Bekah stepped down from female co-chair of the Youth Committee, and I was elected in her place. I didn’t realize at the time that I had become a member of the board and was supposed to go to meetings! Curt Hicks was the male co-chair. (I had met Curt back in the late 1980s when he was fund raising for the Human Rights Campaign Fund, now HRC.) We decided on the name PRISM for the youth group since the name “Rainbow Youth” was already taken! Eventually, Susan Abbott was hired to direct the youth program. SPECTRUM, a program for young adults was developed later, and the Association had its own meeting space, so no more meeting in churches, library, or Park District buildings.

Youth Drop-In Center: A Personal Story

Marsha Borders

It seems like just yesterday that OPLGA envisioned the idea of serving youth by creating a safe space for them to hang out. We were aware of places on the northside of Chicago



Photo by Andy Walensa

that served homeless young people, including those in the gay and lesbian community. However, there was no such place in the western suburbs that offered a safe space for bisexual, lesbian, gay, or questioning youth with access to good public transportation. We thought that Oak Park might be a perfect location for a youth drop-in center. While the Village of Oak Park provided a number of services for youth through programs offered by the Township, none of the programs targeted gay and questioning youth. OPLGA launched the youth drop-in center in 1991. Curt Hicks, an active member of OPLGA, was instrumental in helping us to secure grant funding through the Cook County Department of Public Health for a youth center.

Curt and Rebekah Levin oversaw the program and Curt agreed to serve as the administrative liaison from CCDPH to OPALGA. Initially the in-kind contribution of space from the Park District of Oak Park allowed for a permanent safe environment. We had initially contacted Chicago's Horizons youth program, but received only a little help. We did engage Youth Outlook (described in Susan Abbott's article), which was conducting LGBT youth programs in the far western suburbs. Nancy Mullen, their director, provided materials to help establish the center and assisted and co-led volunteer advisor training for us. Interested members of OPLGA as well as others from the community signed on as volunteers to staff the center on a weekly basis. As a condition of grant funding, CCDPH required all volunteers to attend a mandatory training regarding deportment, expectations, and legal considerations when working with under-age youth. Regular reporting of financial expenses, attendance, and activities were also required.

Generally, small numbers of teens visited the drop-in center, but I feel confident that each teen was well served because they had a safe space and caring LGBT or LGBT-supportive adults with whom they could share concerns and thoughts. We were not counselors but often gave suggestions on how to navigate difficult home and life situations. The youth were very



Photo by Andy Walensa

grateful to find us; they came as frequently as needed to get what we had to offer. There were times when they just hung out, played games and interacted with other young people. The youth drop-in center continued for several years.

Some 30 years after serving as a volunteer drop-in staffer, I was approached by a cashier at one of the leading grocery stores as I checked out. She said, "I remember you; you were one of the volunteers at the youth drop-in center." I answered, "yes I did volunteer there." We spoke for a short time, briefly catching up on the past 30 years or so. Each time we have occasion to see each other in passing we momentarily check in. I am always warmly acknowledged by this individual which makes me feel like I actually gave something that made a small difference in someone's life.

Working for OPALGA with PRISM and SPECTRUM

Susan Abbott

When I moved to Oak Park with my wife and two kids in 1998, I was immediately drawn to OPALGA's ad looking for volunteers. I was working as a hospital social worker with HIV+ children and their families and loved the idea of connecting in our new community on this level with people. I completed the training led by Nancy Mullens of Youth Outlook and OPALGA members Betsy Ritzman and Nathan Linsk. During the training, someone mentioned that they were looking to hire a licensed professional part-time to oversee this grant-funded program for youth. I was looking to work closer to home since my son was so young; the match was made in December 1999 and lasted 13 years. PCC Community Wellness Center on the north side of Oak Park began hosting the program after this, but the intended spirit of the program remained consistent throughout the years. More specifically, it remained a safe space where LGBTQ youth could come together in a non-judgmental, supportive atmosphere. Additionally, it also remained a space to offer a foundation for youth to develop into well-adjusted and functioning LGBTQ adults.

James/Janis¹

Our center rules included not opening the group until two adults were present for the safety of everyone. I was never happier we had that rule than when James would attend.

He seemed to appear out of nowhere one week. He had a slight build for a 14-year-old boy, but his angry demeanor and body language made me



Photo by Andy Walensa

feel like he could take on the room with one hand tied behind his back. Week after week he arrived alone, sat alone, and did not participate. Some of the veteran group members tried their best with open-ended questions that resulted in terse, one-word answers. We kept our eyes on him. Was he coming because he was homophobic and wanted to hurt the group? Was he hungry and just needed the food? Was he getting anything out of this group? Week after week everyone became accustomed to James's quiet, angry presence. I started to think he would be missed if he weren't scowling in the corner.

¹ Name of this person is fictitious to ensure confidentiality.

Then one day everything changed. James marched in with a duffel bag and immediately entered an adjacent room and shut the door. This is it, I thought. He's taking us all out. We knocked on the door and asked him to please come out, but he told us all to wait. We waited, I'm sure I was feeling more nervous than the others. Slowly, the door opened and out came someone we had never met before, Janis. She was fabulous. She stood tall, smiled widely, laughed easily, and quickly melted into a light-hearted discussion with the group. Of course, kids can question each other much more easily than adults can. The kids asked why Janis took so long to join us and she simply said she needed to make sure it was safe. It made me realize, especially for kids almost 20 years ago, that they all needed to feel safe. They needed to keep on their armor, pass as straight, watch how they walk and talk at home, at school, at work, on the street and they even needed to test the waters with us. Janis was our first openly transgender student who honored us by coming out and being herself and she helped pave the way for our other trans and non-binary students who followed her.

Remembrances of Youth Programs in OPALGA

Charna Linsk

It was a privilege to be raised by parents who knew there was a need for a space like OPALGA and that then created PRISM and SPECTRUM. It was actually part of the reason I knew that A Place for All (the Gay/Straight Alliance I helped found at Oak Park River Forest High School) needed to exist. I'm really glad I knew when I moved in with Dad and Mel that coming out with "y'all's support" would be easier than coming out in Texas, where I lived with my mother and stepfather during my elementary school years. As I have gotten older, I have realized that I am a combination of a lot of different adults that were around when I was growing up and becoming me.

Andy Walensa

Congrats OPALGA+ on the 30th Anniversary! It is amazing to think about the organization's dedication to the push for equal rights in the Chicagoland area and LGBTQ community as a whole. I am lucky enough to say that I was directly nurtured by OPALGA's efforts.

I first came to the OPALGA youth group program in Oak Park when I was 15, not knowing much about the community, its struggles or who I was. I had recently come out and my friend Virgil mentioned there was more to Queer life than just watching the movie In and Out. I was intrigued. It was right after Ellen did the big reveal. Internet communities were nothing like they are today. I was scared but excited as he dragged me to the groups. Above all else, I was looking for peers to connect with who were going through similar situations as mine. OPALGA gave me this the first time I attended. I was introduced to a group of kids like me. Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, and allies who had the courage to be proud of who they were at a

young age. I soon looked forward to weeks packed with LGBTQ Jeopardy, Queer Cinema, sexual health education trivia, and of course expressing our feelings with glitter and pipe cleaners. When we didn't have an activity, there was always something to talk about, something someone wanted to discuss and felt good to be there for one another.

On top of all that support, we were able to express our experiences through creative projects. The groups collaborated to execute two murals featuring diverse LGBTQ community scenes. Led by Robin Lee, these murals involved everyone with a paint brush and became the backdrops of our space. We also were given the opportunity take a class at a local stained-glass gallery, Two Fish, where we created a piece representing our rainbow family tree, which proudly hung in the window for years.

My relationship with OPALGA evolved from being a PRISM member to a peer counselor and facilitator of the youth and young adult groups. Working closely with Susan Abbott and volunteers, we expanded the programing and outreach activities. I fully enjoyed being involved in the development of a curriculum that spread the knowledge I had learned about community, gender identity, sexuality, and whatever else was trending in culture to the next rounds of participants. It was valued safe space of chosen family.

One additional program I am proud of was the inclusion of OUTspoken, the creative collective that met in quarterly sessions and supported one another in coming up with original art. We played around with all mediums, including spoken-word, improv, collage, and even fashion out of garbage (for example). There were OUTspoken performance and gallery nights where we took the stage and shared our Queer reality. Our biggest achievements were The OUTspoken Zines. Honoring the underground GLBTQ publication format, the zines were filled with visuals and highly personal pieces on a focused topic serving as a time capsule for the talent of our team.

I think sometimes about who or where I would be if I would never have gone to the OPALGA groups. The people I met there became my closest friends, roommates, partners and huge parts of my life. OPALGA's support was key in me reaching for my college dreams and career future. It provided the perfect stimulus for me to develop my leadership skills and drive to be a positive representation in the LGBTQ community.

Time has passed, the groups disbanded, people have moved on and some friends are not here anymore, but I have fond memories of who we were at that time and what it all meant. It was a specific time when there was a level of acceptance but conversation was just starting. We were the young, proud, and scrappy advocates of late 1990s/2000s Queer culture in Chicago and I am grateful to have been part of something amazing with those brave, cool kids. Thank you, OPALGA+, for making this all happen.

THE OAK PARK CULTURAL ARTS FESTIVAL

The First Festival

Mary Davis

On June 22, 1991, OPALGA took on its largest undertaking since its inception. The first Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival was a jam-packed, complex, and multi-faceted event that took place over two days. It was extremely ambitious for such a young organization, but there were many hard-working visionaries who reveled in the work. Sponsored by OPALGA and The Left Bank Culture Club (an extension of the Left Bank Bookstall), it was mind-blowing in its diversity and breadth of talent.

Storytellers, poets, musicians, dramatists, puppeteers, jugglers, painters, photographers, sculptors, and craftspeople of all varieties were eager to become a part of "Building Bridges to Understanding" (the theme of the festival). We also created a "Kid's Corner" for performers and craftspeople of special interest to children. We created an auction for those in the mood to take home some fabulous gifts, many of the artists donated their wares, and we included a few food booths by local vendors. And to extend ourselves just a little further, we worked in coordination with the Oak Park Library (next door to Scoville Park) and created a Gay/ Lesbian book section. The library promised to have supportive and staff members on board for the weekend.

Just two years prior, the Village of Oak Park had amended its Human Rights Ordinance to include gays and lesbians among protected classes. Emboldened by this progress, many OPLGA members wanted to reach out and show the community our gratitude. We also wanted to show that we were much more than our sexual orientation. So that June day, the art celebration took place in Scoville Park, the Central Square of the Village, where many community events are held, and concluded with a concert given by Cris Williamson, Tret Fure, and the Windy City Slickers on Sunday, June 23rd.



Cultural Festival flyer created by Jennie Bartoline.

It was the Summer Solstice weekend. For many of us, the meaning of the event being aligned with the Solstice did not go unnoticed. The Solstice is about fire, passion, will and drive. It took all of that and more to bring this event to fruition. It also took courage, boldness and creativity and probably 20 other adjectives that elude me right now. Yet, somehow, we had no problems mustering all of that and more.

Some of the specific performers included: the Ridgeland Brass (a promotional group for the Oak Park Symphony), The Artemis Singers (a 15-member lesbian-feminist chorus), writers Amoke Omeley and Karen Lee Osborne, The Michael Colin Reed Chamber Dance Company, “because” (a techno pop-rock band), storyteller Michael Leonard, vocalist Inez Davis, dramatists Tekki Lomnicki and Nancy Shelton. Please believe me when I say this is the short list. The actual list included many more entertainers and craftspeople who lined the sidewalks of Scoville Park, selling their wares and putting on a show on an absolutely perfect, sunny day in June.

Many have asked: how in the world did this all get started? I crafted a small piece of the plan after attending the annual conference of the International Gay and Lesbian Organization (ILGA) in Vienna, Austria in 1989 and again in Stockholm, Sweden in 1990. There, I met John Clark, a member of the ILGA Secretariat, who spent much of his youth growing up in Oak Park. When I learned that John would be traveling through Chicago on his way to Mexico, I envisioned a celebration that would both welcome home a native son who had done so much for our community and hopefully raise urgently needed funds for ILGA’s battle against world-wide discrimination. John gratefully attended the Festival and served as honorary guest.

Once the seed was planted, the rest blossomed thanks to the enormous enthusiasm and dedication of countless volunteers who worked with tireless passion on something they believed in so dearly. Writing this essay in September 2019, I really don’t know how we pulled it off and I wonder if many small and young organizations could create such an enormous event in this day and age.

Almost every time we asked someone to help, we were greeted with yesses. The community was ready for us. Intersecting that reality was the fact that we were ready to get out there and shine. Multiplying both of those realities created exponential amounts of passion and our staff list looked as if we had been doing this for years.

Those on the front lines included Jane Anderson (Grounds Manager), Pat Davis, Mary Davis and Jennie Bartoline (Publicity), Phil Bellerive (Banners), Ethel Cotovsky (Crafts Festival), Jill Findley (Auction), Carole Goodwin (Performers and Readers), Nathan Linsk and Harry Miller (Children’s Corner), Colleen Reardon (Concert House Manager), and Carol Zientek (Concert

Producer). While this list may seem like there were distinct responsibilities, many of us played multiple roles and stepped in when someone was drowning, which happened a lot.

The OPALGA newsletter called this event “a demonstration of the most intense outpouring of volunteer energy of OPALGA’s short two-year history.” I don’t think any of us who worked on the committee would disagree with this assessment. Many of us worked laboriously into the night and on weekends. Some of us even squeezed in time during the normal working hours to pull it off. When it was over, I believe most of us felt elated--elated with the joy that we could share so much with a community who began to embrace us. The mutual embrace felt so good and many of us chose to live in Oak Park for decades because of that embrace. To add to our joy, we made a profit about \$3,500. A concert producer told us that making a profit in your first year was unheard of in the concert business. We paid all our bills, gave much to ILGA and kept a small seed fund to finance Cultural Arts Festivals for the future. The annual event continued through 1995.

The event bonded many friendships for years to come. It bonded many individuals to Oak Park. And I believe it helped to bond Oak Park to OPALGA. It also yielded recognition by the greater Chicago LGBT community, a first for OPALGA. In short, it was an enormous blessing and I think the memories for those of us who participated will be emblazoned in our hearts forever.

The Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival Remembrance

Nancy Johnson

OPALGA was participating in Day in Our Village held in Scoville Park, was participating in the donut sale at the Oak Park Farmers Market, marching in the Fourth of July Parade, activities that other Oak Park organizations were participating in. Our existence in Oak Park was being normalized. Gays, lesbians, and their allies were becoming visible in the community. By 1994, OPALGA decided to have our own public event:

Pam Freese had been organizing Day In Our Village, so she also took an organizing role for TOPCAF as well. In 1995 my son David was living with us in Oak Park, so that year he volunteered for the organizing committee. I recall that one evening the committee was meeting in someone’s home. I got a phone call from David. He wanted to know if I’d bring him a copy of the Windy City Times, since they wanted to look up some information for advertising TOPCAF. No one in the group had a copy. So I brought a copy to them. I suggested they should ponder the irony of the straight person being the only one who had a copy of the gay paper!

Building Bridges to Understanding: A Personal Reflection

Pamela Freese

It strikes me now how young I was! In 1989 when I joined OPLGA, I was 22 and just back in Oak Park from college. I was newly out to myself and, increasingly, to others. The first OPLGA event I attended was one of the monthly potluck dinners. Both nervous and excited, I was pleasantly surprised to meet many wonderful people, all who welcomed me. These individuals (I'm looking at you, Mel, Nathan, Bekah, Ethel, Mary, Jane and Phil, to name just a few) were smart, kind, confident, and fun. They inspired me to get more involved. I reveled in the many talented, interesting, and unapologetically LGBTQ+ people OPLGA attracted. Collectively and individually they showed me that my life, like theirs, could be full of fun, work, fulfilling or sometimes tedious work that paid the bills, and families. Children even! We rallied around pursuing possibilities and fighting barriers. And, yes, building bridges.

It is amazing what people with shared purpose and a long to-do list can accomplish. OPLGA's leadership had visions of how OPLGA could – indeed would-- make life better and safer for LGBTQ+ people. To me, the issues OPLGA was wrestling with were ones I shared in my personal journey. I, too, wanted to claim my space and identity, and wondered when the next public policy would block my desire to be true to my identity. At that time, it felt complicated. I was being passed up for promotions at work. My parents were worried for me. I wondered if I even could marry. So, I wondered how "out" to be. Spending time with OPLGA members felt wonderful and lessened my worries. After all, there was advocacy work to do, and fun to be had.

Still several years away from successfully advocating for the passage of a domestic partnership registry within the village, OPLGA meetings were busy and fun. The list of organizational goals helped the group establish a presence and voice in local public policy debates involving, among other initiatives, non-discrimination policies, recognition of domestic partnerships, and public servant sensitivity trainings. Programs for questioning youth were also in their infancy. The energy of the group to celebrate the fullness of the LGBTQ+ experience – not just civil rights advocacy, but also the creative, joyful, colorful and expressive side of members' lives—was palpable even to a young member like me. Two years into my joining OPLGA, the idea was hatched to host a cultural arts festival to celebrate diverse communities, and as a strategic effort to raise awareness of OPLGA, its advocacy and its real desire to bring communities together. To build bridges over the barriers. I played a small role in the festival planning. Drawing on previous experience coordinating another village-wide festival, I helped the Cultural Arts

Festival team plan to use Oak Park's central and most prominent park, Scoville. We contacted vendors to sell all manner of LGBT+ items, including tee-shirts and rainbow necklaces. We called for artists to apply for booth space and come share their wares. We reached out to advocacy groups in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs so that attendees would be aware of the many resources available to the LGBT+ community. We planned for a children's section that would host games and an area full of art supplies and craft materials. We dreamed of success as we worked through a thousand details. As the momentum built, our meetings ran late into the evenings.

The vision of the event was emboldening to me. It was so public. So "out"! Every conversation or connection I had under the guise of discussing the organization and/or Festival felt brazen, rebellious, as I struggled with coming out. Like the coming out process in general, each conversation about the Festival and its objective was easier than the last. Later on, it dawned on me that the Festival was a sort of coming out for OPLGA as well. This young organization was marching right into a spotlight that it created for itself. It would then leverage this community integration as members carefully and passionately pressed for policy changes.

On a beautiful June weekend in 1991, all that work came to fruition in the first Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival. I don't remember how many people attended, or too many specific details of that weekend. I do remember the beautiful posters, the many booths, the rainbow necklace a vendor gave me (that I still have), and the tired smiles of my friends as the program wrapped up. I also felt deep joy and gratitude. Joy that so many were joining in this celebration, and gratitude toward the individuals whom I now counted as friends who had the vision that OPALGA could and should help individuals and our community writ large "Build Bridges to Understanding."

As I reflect on the Cultural Arts Festivals and the work of OPALGA more generally, I feel deep admiration and gratitude. My life continues to be blessed by the efforts of those committed individuals who helped organize the Cultural Arts Festivals which brought OPLGA and all LGBT+ people into a celebratory spotlight. We were able to register as a Domestic Partner at the Village Hall in 1997 just months after we won a hard-fought referendum that created the registry--the only legal option for gay and lesbian couples to be recognized in Illinois. It paved the way for the legalization of gay marriage. Twenty-four years after that first Festival, I walked with my spouse and our two children through Scoville Park from the church to our wedding reception followed by hundreds of guests. We as a community have come a long way, and I remain grateful that OPALGA is now celebrating 30 years of progress, and still Building Bridges for so many.

Creating the Social Committee and Activities

Jane Anderson

The social committee's mission was to attract new members, help retain our current membership base, and allow for members to get to know one another in a relaxed atmosphere. Upon its establishment, the social committee took over the monthly potlucks which was one of the first ongoing activities established by the board. One of the goals of the Social Committee was to establish gender parity and reflect our gay/lesbian community at large. The potlucks were almost exclusively attended by men in the first year unless hosted by a woman. We observed that when a woman hosted a few women would attend, but by the third month, none of the women returned. Ron Rauch and I experimented with the frequency of women hosting until we were able to maintain a consistent base with the gender diversity we were looking for. After we had added the "A" (area) to OPALGA, we made sure we also had potlucks not only in Oak Park, but Berwyn, Forest Park, River Forest and in other cities where our members might be from, such as Westchester and Elmhurst. Ron's warm welcoming nature and hugs to all played a large part in our success. Whether gay, lesbian, questioning or straight, we strove to be welcoming to all.

We planned quarterly activities, keeping to the philosophy of low cost or no cost events, so as not to discourage members from participating if money was an issue. Some of our activities were camping trips, dances, bowling parties, post-parade picnic, and later, a singles potluck.

One of the most humbling experiences Ron and I had was the number of people who approached us saying this was their first exposure to the LGBT community and how much this outlet impacted their lives, or from people moving in from out of town not knowing anyone in the area and how it provided for a sense of community, social network, and an opportunity to get involved.

Organizations in the city were perplexed how OPALGA (and later BUNGALO) was able to be a working organization/social group that was able to bring together men and women. I believe the reasons we had success in gender parity included the following: (1) we were neighbors who ran into one another outside OPALGA on a regular basis (2) we always kept gender parity a priority in everything we did, and (3) most of us cared about improving OPALGA's geographical community in the broader sense, beyond just OPALGA.

The First GALA--June 13, 1997

Jim Kelly

In June 1996, the OPALGA board created a fundraising committee and appointed Board Co-Chair Helen Bishop and me to lead the effort. Although we had surpassed 300 members, dues were insufficient to fund our expanding youth programs, the office and part-time coordinator, and the anticipated expenses associated with ramping up the campaign to convince the Village Board of Trustees to create a Domestic Partnership Ordinance (which was already gaining steam, controversy and opposition).

Later that year, I got a referral to Ms. Snow Timms, an Oak Parker with fundraising expertise. She donated her time to meet with us, assess our need, and make suggestions. Helen and I both had some grant-writing experience, and we expected Snow would endorse that strategy and suggest sources. She didn't. She explained: Grants are usually short term. Grants don't directly engage members or create an esprit de corps. Grants aren't visible. "You need to start having an annual fundraising event, and many non-profits did that as benefit banquets" she explained.

Helen and I looked at each other and nodded affirmation in a casual, "why not?" kind of way. We took the idea to the OPALGA board. They approved and authorized us to begin planning. Our fate was sealed.

"How hard can this be?" we asked ourselves. It didn't take us long to realize how unprepared we were to undertake this monumental task, starting with finding a venue. The only game in town was the Mar-Lac House Banquets, a lovely and spacious two-level facility boasting a grand staircase to the second level. To our knowledge, it had never hosted a lesbian and gay event. Although OPALGA had already been in existence for eight years and had considerable visibility, we had no idea if the owner, Louis Fabbri, had any awareness of us, or how he felt about homosexuals. If he declined, we'd have to find a venue outside of Oak Park.

I made an appointment with Lou, expressing my interest in having an event there (with no mention of OPAGLA). With great trepidation, I kept the appointment. When I explained who we were, Lou looked at me and said, "What date are you looking at?" Whew!!! That hurdle is behind us. We chose June 13, 1997. While reporting this at the next OPALGA board meeting, one of the board members remarked that scheduling our very first attempt at a fundraiser on a Friday the 13th might be inauspicious. Planning began in February 1997. With help from many OPALGA members, we compiled a list of components that were common to benefit events. The more the list grew, the more panicked I became. Theme, invitations, ticket sales, menu, silent auction, table captains, awards and selection of recipients, entertainment, seating chart, speakers, program book (ad sales,

content, printing), floral arrangements, registration, audio-visual equipment, Masters of Ceremony. This enormous effort went forward without anyone, ever, asking out loud, “Suppose no one wants to come?” (But the question WAS the elephant in the room.) A lot was riding on the success of this first attempt!

Many enthusiastic volunteers (some of them with actual qualifications for planning events) stepped forward and took assignments. There were tense moments, setbacks, surprises and accomplishments. Slowly, the accomplishments gained incredible momentum, and we were ready when the big day arrived. I will never, ever, forget standing in the lobby of the Mar-Lac watching 250 attendees dressed to the nines arriving in spectacularly high spirits. We had created the largest public gathering to date of Lesbians, Gays, their family members, elected officials, and other allies in the Oak Park area.

OPALGA Board Co-Chair Helen Bishop wrote that because of the event, “We can support programs for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth and young adults, continue publishing the newsletter, organize community events, and put some real muscle behind the push for a domestic partnership registry in Oak Park.”

OPALGA Board Co-Chair Steve Glickman worked tirelessly to make the event a success. Afterward, he reflected, “For me the first Gala was a milestone in the maturation of OPALGA. I was amazed at the number of people who volunteered to pull it off, and the amount of money we raised. I think we engaged a whole new group of volunteers who were good at this sort of thing, and who were not active prior. It gave me a renewed sense of the importance of OPALGA and what we were doing.”

A few fun facts concerning this first Gala:

- Because of our acronym, we decided the event would be called the OPAL Gala.
- We raised \$12,000!
- Ticket sales were primarily managed by 20 table captains, who invited their friends and relatives. Tickets were also on sale at the Pride Agenda book store.
- Tickets were priced at \$75, which included an open bar.
We deliberately chose to keep the Gala financially accessible to the largest possible audience, and that decision has governed the ticket pricing ever since. A guest from Chicago at the Gala said, “Where else can you attend a gay black-tie event for under \$100? This is fabulous!”
- The Gala was from 7 PM to midnight, and there were lots of people still there at the bewitching hour.

- We bought boxes and boxes of Avery kits for printing invitations, and reply cards. A computer savvy OPALGA member offered to mock up the text and graphics we wanted for the invitation and the reply card so that they would fit on the Avery stock. Then he offered to print them all on his color inkjet printer (still somewhat of a novelty in 1997). He and I spent many hours and used a shocking number of color ink cartridges, but we got the job done.
- We presented the very first OPAL Awards (Oak Park Area Leadership Award) to Joanne Trapani and Rev. Jay Deacon. Joanne was a long-time civil rights activist, an Oak Park resident and a long-time OPALGA member. Three months before the Gala, she became the first open lesbian to win elected office in the State of Illinois. She was elected to the Oak Park Board of Trustees. Rev. Jay Deacon was the Pastor of the Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist congregation. An openly gay man, Jay was very instrumental in convincing other local congregations to become proactive for lesbian and gay rights within their denominations and in society. He wrote eloquently about, and lobbied openly for a Domestic Partnership Registry in Oak Park. (see appendix for articles about dialog between Rev. Deacon and Rev. Pritchard of Calvary Church).
- The Host Committee members were Gerri Albright, Jill Allread, Alan Amato, Helen Bishop, Paul Cochran, Kathy Drury, Pamela Freese, Steve Glickman, Ray Johnson, Jim Kelly, Valerie Klans, Rebekah Levin, Hal Powell, Tom Schuver, Pat Spagat, Matt Splant, and Don Woolf
- The Corporate Sponsors were Subaru and CitiBank. The success of this Gala institutionalized it as an annual event, and we think it's become the most entertaining fundraiser in the Village of Oak Park!

EPILOGUE

Roger Wilson, Alisa Ray, and Colette Lueck

We have served as OPALGA Board Members and Board Co-Chairs: Colette Lueck (co-chair: 2014 – 2018), Alisa Ray (co-chair: 2019 – 2020) and Roger Wilson (co-chair: 2017 – 2019). We want to thank those who brought OPLGA (as it was first known) into existence and who set up a framework that has endured for these 30 years, as of this writing. In 1994, we became OPALGA, adding “Area” to acknowledge the many members who lived in surrounding communities. In 2019 we added the + to the end of our name and became OPALGA+. We did this at the recommendation of our members who wanted our storied name realizing that just (L)esbian and (G)ay was not representative enough of the inclusion we wanted to display and honor. Thus, the legacy established in 1989 has not only continued but has grown in area and inclusion to become OPALGA+. When people marvel at the rapid expansion of protections for persons who are LGBTQ, it is because of the brave souls who insisted on being known for who they are, including the founders of OPLGA.

The world for queer folks has changed a lot in these 30 years. The need to meet in more or less secret places like gay and lesbian bars is no longer necessary. We can eat, drink, and travel where we want and with whom we want. We can be out in the open without fear, in most cases, of any reprisals. And, most important to many, we can marry whom we wish.

The social aspects of OPLGA that started way back--the monthly potlucks and the annual Gala--continue today as a way to bring folks together and to provide support to ourselves and the communities we represent. In today's world of social media, we have been able to stretch out and reach folks who might never have heard of us, and we are able to connect with them in ways we never could before.

Programs developed long ago like the youth drop-in center no longer exist but have been replaced by our support and interaction with school-based Gay Straight Alliances. Recognizing that today's youth still struggle with issues like coming out, bullying, and family, we reach out with our scholarship program to provide aid to LGBTQ+ students and students of LGBTQ+ families so a college education is more possible than it would be without financial assistance. And these young people also benefit from knowing that the OPALGA+ community recognizes their aspirations and supports them. Our history is built on service to the community. The scholarship program, begun in 2014, is a great example of continuing that commitment. Volunteering on a regular basis at the Greater Chicago Food Depository is another. OPALGA+ is also very evident at Oak Park's Day In Our Village, the River Forest Memorial Day parade and the Oak Park July Fourth parade. These activities provide color, fun and encouragement to folks who may be doubt-

ing if the future is a safe and caring place for them. There is strength in seeing these PROUD folks from all walks of village life out of the closet and in the community.

May we pass on to those who come after us the same sense of PRIDE and action that the founders and early members have given to us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was developed by a committee of early OPALGA leaders who felt that the early history of the organization needed documenting, including personal stories and memories about the first decade of activities. This group consists of Jane Anderson, Phil Bellerive, Bruce Broerman, Betsy Davis, Mary Davis, Jim Kelly, Rebekah Levin, Nathan Linsk, and Bob Trezevant. These early OPLGA members met over the summer of 2019 to discuss memories and how to record these to share with the current OPALGA+ membership and the larger community. We express our appreciation to all the authors of the articles, for sharing their recollections about the activities of the group, as well as their own personal memories. Nathan Linsk convened the group and took primary responsibility for editing the content of this publication. Steven Berman conducted content and copy editing. We thank Tom Javorcic for his help in design, production and web-posting of this publication, and Betsy Davis, Mary Davis, Rebekah Levin, Bruce Broerman, and Jim Kelly for assistance in final review and developing the appendices.

We express appreciation to the current board of OPALGA+, especially current co-chairs Roger Wilson and Alisa Ray and immediate past co-chair Colette Lueck for their support and input. We also extend our sincere thanks to the Oak Park River Forest Museum, which houses the organizational archives. In late 2019, the Museum presented an exhibit of OPALGA's history and memorabilia to observe the organization's 30-year anniversary.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

OPALGA History Timeline

First Ten Years of the Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association and Pride in Our Community

The original version of this timeline was prepared in 2014 by Mel Wilson and others as part of a display for the 25th anniversary of OPALGA+. The lengthy scroll display included a year-by-year listing of OPALGA+ events and achievements, augmented by related clippings, publications, and photographs. That display is now in the OPALGA+ archives at the Oak Park River Forest Museum. It was updated to 2019 and used by the museum staff to prepare the narrative texts for the museum's exhibit *Proud Oak Parkers: OPALGA+ at 30*. The following portion of the timeline includes the first decade of OPALGA+ from 1989 to 2000. It has been edited and corrected to convey a summary of the OPALGA+ story in the early years of its activities.

1989

- OPLGA (Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association) co-founder Bryan Findlay stuns Village Board candidates with questionnaire on gay and lesbian issues.
- OPLGA formed at LGBT meeting called to advocate for LGBT rights in Village elections.
- Portions of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt displayed at Village Hall.
- OPLGA invited to participate in Holocaust Memorial observances at Village Hall.
- Oak Park's newly elected village trustees amend village Human Rights ordinance to include gays and lesbians among protected classes.
- Village holds community wide AIDS forum at Village Hall.
- Oak Park-River Forest High School amends Human Dignity Policy to include lesbians and gays among students and faculty protected from discrimination.
- OPLGA members appointed to two Village commissions and Police Advisory Committee.
- Oak Park AIDS Network, chaired by OPLGA co-founder Nathan Linsk, begins development of an AIDS Strategic Plan.
- Jim Aull hosts first of OPALGA's monthly potlucks.

1990

- Monthly membership programs begin.
- OPLGA establishes a 24-hour information line.
- OPLGA provides in-service training program on gay/lesbian issues for all Oak Park police officers.
- Youth group initiated by Oak Park youth. Group receives immediate endorsement of Oak Park Health Department.
- LGBT film club started.
- OPLGA joins International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA). Mary Davis represents OPLGA at ILGA's annual conference in Vienna, Austria.
- OPLGA, with assistance of the Equity Institute, hosts teachers' empowerment workshop at Village Hall.
- Oak Park AIDS Strategic Plan announced by inter-governmental task force.
- OPLGA makes presentation to OPRF High school deans and counselors.
- Men's Awareness Group formed and begins weekly meetings.

1991

- OPLGA provides in-service gay/lesbian training for all Oak Park police.
- OPLGA holds first Candidates' Forum, queries candidates for village parks and library boards.
- OPLGA participates in annual Day in Our Village festival with information table in Scoville Park.
- OPLGA opens Youth Drop-in Center with start-up grant from First United Church of Oak Park.
- OPLGA Sponsors First Annual Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival in Scoville Park and Cris Williamson /Tret Fury concert at Arts Center. The theme of both events is Building Bridges to Understanding. Special guest, Oak Park-born John Clark, co-chair of ILGA, attends event.
- OPLGA queries school board candidates in fall elections.

1992

- OPLGA coordinator Mel Wilson hired through grant from Chicago Resource Center. Organization's Strategic Plan consolidated from a series of board planning retreats.
- OPLGA sponsored "Bach for AIDS" concert at Unity Temple. Raised \$3,000 for Community Response. Performers were Jeffrey Cohan, David Schrader, and Mary Springfels.
- OPLGA provides in-service lesbian and gay sensitivity training for Oak Park police, Sarah's Inn and Community Response volunteers.

- OPLGA sponsors Second Annual Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival in Scoville Park with featured performances by Ann Reed.
- Lesbian and Gay Pride Week proclaimed by Village President John Philbin
- “Beyond Our Wildest Dreams” award presented to OPLGA by Community Response.
- OPLGA hosts Family Values Forum “Families in Exile” at Village Hall. Forum initiates drive for recognition of domestic partnerships.

1993

- OPLGA sponsors first Gay Cabaret at Oak Park Arts Center.
- OPLGA hosts candidates’ forum for Village Trustee candidates, candidates pledge support for enactment of village Domestic Partnership Ordinance to provide equal employment benefits for lesbian and gay employees.
- OPLGA joins 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Equal Rights with marching contingent.
- Oak Park’s elementary school District 97 moves to include gays and lesbians in District’s non-discrimination policy.
- OPLGA hosts Third Annual Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival in Scoville Park, with performances feature Her Face.
- Lesbian and Gay Pride Week proclaimed in Oak Park by Village President Larry Christmas.
- OPLGA publishes first literary journal *Seven-Oh-Eight*.
- Pride Agenda Bookstore opens in Oak Park: the first exclusively lesbigay bookstore in the Chicago suburbs.
- OPLGA’s youth drop-in center serves 10-15 youth each week.

1994

- To more correctly reflect the organization’s wide spread membership, OPLGA changes name to Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association (OPALGA) to include surrounding communities.
- Family Service and Mental Health Center of Oak Park and River Forest announces outreach program directed toward lesbians and gays.
- OPALGA’s youth program, Prism, and Pride Youth of Evanston host public panel.
- OPALGA demands recognition of lesbian and gay families, announces drive for Domestic Partnership Ordinance providing equity in employment benefits and establishment of Domestic Partnership Registry.
- Family discussion on gay youth at Oak Park Village Hall. Prism serves youth from 35 Chicagoland communities in 1994.
- OPALGA hosts public forum on Domestic Partnership at Unity Temple.

- Village Board adopts Domestic Partnership Ordinance providing equal benefits to families of lesbian and gay village employees. Domestic Partnership Registry Ordinance fails in split vote of Board.
- OPALGA hosts Fourth Annual Cultural Arts Festival in Scoville Park.
- Lesbian and Gay Pride Week declared by Oak Park President Larry Christmas.
- Oak Park Police Department names Sgt. Geoff Sjostrum liaison to gay community.
- Twenty-five Oak Park merchants offer discounts to OPALGA members.
- Metropolitan Community Church of the Incarnation established and finds home at Pilgrim Congregational Church.
- OPALGA and Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLADD) /Chicago host forum “Exposing the Radical Right” at Unity Temple.
- OPALGA lends support in establishment of Pathfinders, a program offering resources for youth exploring sexual minority issues at Harriet Tubman Place in Chicago’s Austin community.

1995

- OPALGA receives non-profit status as a 501©3 organization from IRS permitting members to make tax-free donations to OPALGA.
- OPALGA sponsors Gay Cabaret II at 19th Century Women’s Club in Oak Park.
- Berwyn United Neighborhood Gay and Lesbian Organization (BUNGALO) formed by a group of Berwyn residents determined to be recognized in their own town.
- OPALGA hosts candidates’ forum for Village Trustee candidates at Main Library.
- OPALGA sponsors second “Bach for AIDS” concert with Jeffrey Cohen and David Schrader at Unity Temple.
- OPALGA sponsors Fifth Annual Cultural Arts Festival in Scoville Park.
- Lesbian and Gay Pride Week declared by Village president Larry Christmas.
- OPALGA and Harriet Tubman Place co-sponsor Festival of African American Foods.
- Lesbian and gay parents group, Parents and Children Acting Together, (PACT), formed.
- Singles group formed with monthly activities planned.
- OPALGA and Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force establish office at 1145 Westgate in Oak Park.
- OPALGA amends by-laws and aims for re-structuring of the organization’s board.
- OPALGA membership passes 300!

1996

- OPALGA and BUNGALO jointly plan activities for Pride Month in Oak Park and Berwyn.
- May board elections implement restructuring aimed at streamlining operations.
- Lesbian, gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride Week declared by Oak Park president Larry Christmas.
- OPALGA hosts Family Roundtable at Oak Park Main Library to discuss lesbian and gay families in the context of the Oak Park community.

1997

- OPALGA continues a tradition as members go camping in Wisconsin.
- Oak Park Village passes first Domestic Partnership Registry in Illinois. Registry opens October 27 at Village Hall with Phil Bellerive and Ron Rauch as first registered partners.
- OPALGA continues tradition of participation in Day in Our Village celebration in Scoville Park.
- OPALGA sponsors First OPAL Gala at Mar Lac Banquet House in Oak Park.

1998

- Partnership Registry challenged with public referendum to abolish it.
- Organization hires part-time office manager.
- OPALGA forms alliance with churches, community groups and major political parties to defeat Domestic Partnership referendum by narrow margin (the first time, anywhere, for Domestic Partnership recognition to win support in an open election).
- OPALGA represented with marchers, float, and banners in Chicago Pride Parade
- Village activists and leaders come together in Vision 2000 meetings and workshops. Village Diversity Statement expanded to include wider definitions of welcome groups.
- OPALGA hosts Second Annual OPAL Gala benefit dinner/dance celebration.

1999

- Third Annual OPAL Gala celebrates 10-year anniversary. Gala draws 380 attendees and receives sponsorship from American Airlines, Subaru, and Oak Park-based Tan Travel and Travel Trends.

2000

- OPALGA founding member Joanne Trapani elected Oak Park Village Trustee becoming the highest ranking openly lesbian elected official in Illinois.
- Prism youth drop-in center reorganizes and resumes operation under direction of second hired employee, Susan Abbott, LCSW. Rob Ward continues role as oversight of volunteers in Spectrum young adult program.
- Anti-hate vigil with NAACP, Tri-Village Pads housing agency, and Community of Congregations.
- Lesbian and gay history slide show at Oak Park Library.
- Participation in the Oak Park Township Youth Action Council and Substance Abuse Program focused on needs of local area youth.
- Buzz Café Coffee House Soirees with readings and performances coordinated by OPALGA's Cultural Arts team of volunteers.
- Formation of a task force with Oak Park Community Relations Commission to assess needs of LGBTQ residents.
- Participation with League of Women Voters in public forum on long-term diversity in Oak Park.

APPENDIX II

OPALGA 1992 Strategic Plan

OPLGA Strategic Plan

Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association
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November 14, 1992

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Introduction/History

Community background

Oak Park is the nearest western suburb of Chicago, located at the perimeter of the Chicago Transit System. The population of 53,000 residents is largely "middle class," with a median household income of \$34,000. Approximately half of the residents are renters.

Oak Park is one of the oldest suburbs of Chicago, with most of its housing stock having been built between 1885 and 1920. In the years since its founding, Oak Park has witnessed many transitions in both population and character, most notably its transition in the past 25 years from a racially homogenous white population to one that is 74.8 percent white, 18 percent African-American and 7.2 percent other racial/ethnic (Hispanic and Asian). The 1970 census showed there to be only 132 Black residents of Oak Park. In recent years - since 1970 - the village has become nationally recognized as a model in addressing diversity as village residents sought to find ways to integrate African-Americans and other ethnic groups. In what has come to be called "the Oak Park Strategy," the village has made a concerted effort to encourage citizen participation in all aspects of village life including government, schools, social service agencies and religious institutions as a means of encouraging residents to cope with the village's increasingly multicultural population. Meanwhile, the celebration of "diversity" has come to be held by residents to be the "foundation stone" of community values.

This public recognition of diversity as both a positive value and fact of life has served to attract a disproportionate number of gay men and lesbians as residents of the village. While there are no reliable statistics on the numbers of lesbian and gay citizens in Oak Park. Many community leaders have been quick to say that they believe them to total significantly more than the national average (10 percent according to Kinsey). All of these factors provide astonishingly fertile ground for the growth and recognition of the Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association.

Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association

History of OPLGA

The Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association was established in March 1989 with the purpose of promoting the interests of gay and lesbian citizens of Oak Park. Oak Parkers had long been leaders in various Chicago, regional and national gay and lesbian organizations. To date, OPLGA is the only Chicago suburban gay and lesbian organization to broadly address the needs of the lesbian and gay community in the public arena. Other support organizations in the western suburban area include Lavender Bouquet (Oak Park), West Suburban Gay Association (Glen Ellyn), Fox Valley Gay Association (Elgin), Holy Covenant MCC (Hinsdale) and CAMEO (Forest Park). While these organizations have provided active networking and social functions for their members (many of whom are also members of OPLGA), they have not sought to actively promote equal opportunities for involvement of gay men and lesbians in full community life. OPLGA cooperates with other lesbian and gay organizations through sharing of information.

Gender parity OPLGA promotes participation of both men and women in all areas of the organization and is structured to achieve gender parity in leadership roles. The organization also seeks to include equal racial representation, but to date has attracted few African-American members. This discrepancy in racial representation and village demographics is not unique to OPLGA and, unfortunately, pervades most governmental and institutional activities in the village of Oak Park.

Collaborating organizations Other organizations with whom OPLGA has collaborated in coalitions (or are familiar with our work) include: NAACP-Oak Park, West Suburban Chapter-NOW, Community Response, Inc., Gray Pride, Horizons Community Services, Kinheart Women's Center, Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-Flag), West Suburban 12 + 12 Center (recovery from substance abuse), Oak Park and River Forest Family Service and Mental Health Center, Village of Oak Park, Oak Park Park District, School District 200, Oak Park Township, Oak Park Library, Oak Park Committee on AIDS and the Midwest AIDS Training and Education Center, among others.

Organizational vision

Original vision From the beginning, OPLGA has had a vision of open participation and empowerment of gay men and lesbians uniquely different from that held by other gay and lesbian organizations. Some of the differences noted by others - widespread, aggressively affirmative participation in the full spectrum of community life - may be attributed to the fact that OPLGA is based within the confines of the relatively small community of Oak Park. Although the membership is drawn from a larger area, the focus of the organization on a discrete set of public institutions has facilitated the organization's major achievements without promoting a "ghettoization" of Oak Park's lesbian and gay citizens.

Small town values Oak Park is a "small town" suburb. As such, it is noted throughout the Chicago area as a community in which individuals feel themselves to be empowered in claiming "ownership" of local government and institutions. In Oak Park, it is not expected that principal actors in public affairs be professionalized, or that they necessarily act as "the most informed." The widely held belief of Oak Park residents that leadership belongs in the hands of those with the most personal integrity rather than in the hands of professionals (i.e., outsiders) offers unique opportunities for OPLGA as a volunteer organization that finds its own empowerment precisely in the claim of personal integrity.

While the small town (home rule) aspects of Oak Park give OPLGA the opportunity to act, the educated sophistication of Oak Park residents provides the organization further opportunities for access and understanding. Oak Park is uniquely situated in a position to be aware of major social changes in the world at large while maintaining a sense of individual empowerment that significantly reduces external threats. For the most part, Oak Park residents are willing to allow themselves to change their own social perspectives and values in relation to a perceived greater common good - as long as they anticipate no personal threat.

OPLGA as "test case" All of the above allows OPLGA to develop and present a "test case" of lesbian and gay open participation and empowerment more fully expanded than can be imagined in more fragmented inner cities or more isolated small towns. OPLGA has the opportunity to develop models for community interaction that may be used by other cities and towns, who will be able to present the benefits derived from such positive inter-

action in Oak Park as historic precedents for their own achievements. No community wants to be the one go "go first." Oak Park is capable of doing so.

Member talents

Additionally, activists in OPLGA represent an incredible range of experience and skills that could be directed toward development of models for other communities. Many of them do so in their professional lives and have significant backgrounds in community leadership and advocacy.

Cultural enrichment

In the end, all of the above will count for nothing if OPLGA does not enrich and strengthen the lives of its members and the community at large. A long-range vision of OPLGA - and what it will mean when lesbians and gays have become visible and truly active participants in community life - must include discovery and development of those unique qualities we share as gays and lesbians and that we bring as individuals to our community. Gay and lesbian history has not been written. The concept of "gay community" has not been defined. We have only the vaguest notions of what could be meant by "lesbian and gay art." We have no architecture. We have never, as a community, built a building. We have a long way to go.

Lesbian and gay residents of Oak Park

Whole community

Lesbians and gays in Oak Park have a long tradition of discretely closeted behavior that separated their "private" lives and "public personas." It is impossible to say just how much reliance on the maintenance of this privacy has restricted gays and lesbians from avenues of community empowerment. It is true that, historically, increased public leadership/involvement has led individuals to more markedly privatize their sexual orientation. In other words, gay and lesbian village leaders, teachers, and other professionals have been deeply closeted as homosexuals.

Community profile

A community profile of lesbians and gays in Oak Park (in comparison with Chicago averages) might indicate Oak Park gays and lesbians to be:

- More closeted in local community life.
- Above average in income and education.
- More likely to be in a committed relationship.
- More likely to be heterosexually married.
- More likely to have children.
- More likely to be older.
- More likely to be homeowners.

OPLGA membership profile

OPLGA began as a political action organization directed toward passage of amendments to the Village's Human Rights Ordinance to include protections for gays and lesbians against discrimination in areas of employment, housing and public accommodations. As a result, the organization early on acquired the public image of a politically active organization. This characterization has greatly influenced the kind of people who have subsequently joined the organization. A profile of actively involved members of OPLGA (in comparison with the larger Oak Park community) indicates members may be:

- Above average in education.
- Below village averages in income.
- Likely to be in a committed relationship.
- Likely to be older (30 - 50 years old).
- Likely to be professionally involved in social/therapy or public service fields.

Social activities Social activities of gays and lesbians in Oak Park are most often directed toward the Chicago gay community on the North Side. Few social opportunities exist for lesbians and gays in Oak Park outside of the institutions of school and church. **Where do gays and lesbians meet in Oak Park?** (in addition to OPLGA?) Some answers may be:

- Church gay/lesbian identity groups (Integrity, Affirmation, etc.)
- Social organizations (Lavender Bouquet, Chicago 35, WSGA, etc.)
- Private homes (potlucks, brunches, etc.)
- Identified rendezvous points (cafes, coffeehouses, etc.)
- Arts-identified organizations,
- Forest Park, Franklin Park and Chicago gay bars.
- Within other social action or voluntary activities (Community Response, "Day in our Village", etc.)

Need for "safe" environment

Most lesbians and gays in Oak Park remain deeply closeted. OPLGA has drawn very few active members from these gay-identified social centers. Either these people are particularly resistant to participation in a publicly gay-identified local organization, or they are "turned off" at the idea of community-wide participation. Reasons for this may be the need for control of their social environment in order to support the separation of identities. OPLGA events, which are often held in public places and highly publicized outside the lesbian/gay community, may be perceived as "risky" by those anxious to protect a "secret" identity. If so, OPLGA will not attract these people until the organization can be demonstrated to provide a "safe" environment.

Organizational structure

Board of Directors

The Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association operates under the direction of a member-elected Board of Directors consisting of four officers (two co-chairs, secretary and treasurer), committee co-chairs and three at-large members.

Duties of the Board of Directors include, but are not limited to, representing the organization as a legal entity, carrying on the day-to-day business of the organization, fiscal oversight, and representing the organization to the public. The Board of Directors also participates in the nomination of officers, establishes and ensures compliance with organizational policies and procedures, and otherwise ensures the well-being and continuity of the organization.

Board emphasis has tended to be directed toward member and public access rather than board control. As the group's activities have expanded, a more active board has been necessary, and monthly membership meetings have become programmatic with the board and committees assuming planning and policy roles.

Staff members

OPLGA is a membership, volunteer-run organization. At present, the organization has a one-quarter-time paid staff Coordinator supported by a start-up grant from the Chicago Resource Center. This position is seen as necessary at this time in order to establish organizational status, develop procedures, organize and up-date the OPLGA files and archives, provide day-to-day liaison with village governmental and institutional bodies and agencies, and provide support for volunteers interacting with the Oak Park community as a whole. Additionally, the Coordinator will discover and develop fundraising opportunities for the organization and assist officers and the board in preparation of funding requests.

This position has been filled internally by an OPLGA co-founder and former co-chair. The Coordinator reports to, and receives direction from, the Board of Directors.

Committees

Education Committee

Volunteers provide education and training to community groups and staff of community agencies, including cultural awareness/sensitivity training. The focus of this ongoing educational effort is to "put a face" on gay and lesbian issues and lifestyles, combat homophobia, and break down popular negative stereotypes of lesbians and gays, thereby building foundations for positive changes in policy and service standards and procedures incorporating lesbians and gays on an equitable basis.

Membership Committee

Volunteers work to ensure membership recruitment, development and support.

Cultural Arts Festival Committee

The Cultural Arts Festival Committee is responsible for planning and implementing the annual Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival, including contracting of artists, community relations, media, advertising, monitoring, etc. The theme and objective of the Cultural Arts Festival is "Building Bridges to Understanding" indicating the objective to involve the entire community in this celebration opening Lesbian and Gay Pride Week in Oak Park.

Public Policy Committee

Volunteers work with government and institutional officials and staff in development and monitoring of public legislation and operational policies to provide equal opportunities and support for lesbian and gay citizens of Oak Park. Committee members organize and provide testimony to assist in decision making by public boards. Some volunteers have individually served as active members of village commissions and committees, including: the Oak Park Committee on AIDS, the Oak Park Community Relations Commission, the Oak Park Youth Network, the Oak Park and River Forest High School Parents' Human Relations Advisory Committee and the Cook County State's Attorney's Task Force on Gay and Lesbian Issues.

Youth Committee

OPLGA Youth Drop-In Center: Facilitators operate and staff the OPLGA Youth Drop-In Center for adolescents 14 - 20 years old concerned about issues of personal growth, socialization, sexuality and sexual orientation.

Education: Committee members participate in educational planning and policy review with local and regional public and private schools and act as resource persons for governmental, recreational and educational agencies serving the youth of Oak Park and the Chicago metropolitan area.

Communications Committee

Volunteers maintain communication within the OPLGA membership and share information with other lesbian and gay groups in the Chicago metropolitan area. The committee produces a quarterly **OPLGA/Indigo** (newsletter) and monthly **OPLGA Bulletin/Calendar** for distribution to approximately 300 members, interested individuals and organizations. Members develop, produce and distribute special reports, brochures, resource directories, etc. and monitor the media and maintain communications with media workers.

Social/Activities Committee

Volunteers work to develop and coordinate social activities for the OPLGA membership, including potlucks, game nights, theater evenings, dances, discussion groups,

picnics, etc. An objective of these social activities - in addition to having fun - is provision of opportunities for networking and sharing of information. Social activities also provide opportunities for closeted lesbians and gay men to share experiences and concerns with openly active OPLGA members.

Fundraising activities: While no committee is assigned to this function, various events (dances, garage sales, cultural programs, etc.) have contributed to OPLGA funding. Each committee develops grant proposals as needed.

Volunteers

OPLGA currently relies upon a cadre of about 25 active volunteers and another 25 occasional volunteers for the complete development and implementation of all programs.

Volunteers participate in OPLGA through either the standing committees or the Board. Within each committee, task force groups participate on individual projects (see revised definitions of "task force" and "committee" contained in revised bylaws). Many volunteers work throughout the organization in various committees and are actively involved in many areas at the same time. Most volunteers, however, limit their involvement to their own particular interest areas. Volunteer oversight and coordination is provided by committee co-chairs and the board.

OPLGA accomplishments

(See Appendix B)

Projects and programs (Strategic Plan)

Education Committee

Education/Training

Homophobia education: Develop education programs for church groups, parents groups, social agencies, schools, etc. dealing with issues of homophobia and lesbian and gay life.

Speakers bureau: Identify and train OPLGA volunteers in the area of public speaking on issues of homophobia. Develop and coordinate resources in coordination with Communications Committee.

Sensitivity training: Continue sensitivity training directed toward staff and volunteers of local agencies. Develop resources (police/justice system, violence, substance abuse, health, AIDS, mental health, etc.) and materials in conjunction with Communications Committee.

On-going training

OPLGA is involved in training on a continuing basis with several Oak Park institutions and service agencies, including:

Oak Park Police Department: For two years, OPLGA volunteers have conducted gay/lesbian sensitivity training for all Oak Park police officers as part of regularly scheduled in-service training. Oak Park is the only police department in the state of Illinois to provide such training to veteran police officers (two hours of gay/lesbian sensitivity training is provided to cadets by Horizons and IGLTF at the Chicago Police Academy).

Community Response volunteers: OPLGA provides gay/lesbian sensitivity training to volunteers in the local AIDS support organization Community Response. **Sarah's Inn:** OPLGA has provided gay/lesbian sensitivity training to volunteers in the local domestic violence service agency Sarah's Inn (which serves women victims only).

Family Services and Mental Health Center of Oak Park and River Forest: OPLGA has presented gay/lesbian sensitivity training to 25 staff members of Family Services.

Filmore Center: OPLGA's Youth Committee conducted a presentation on the subject of teen suicide for staff at the Filmore Center (mental health counseling) in Oak Park.

Religious organizations

Church groups: OPLGA has been an invited participant in church discussion groups focused on issues of homosexuality and AIDS at both Beacon Unitarian Church and First United Church of Oak Park. Additionally, OPLGA has conducted Sunday services focused on gay and lesbian experiences at both Beacon and Third Unitarian (Austin neighborhood of Chicago) churches.

"Building Bridges" project

(See Proposed Projects and Programs, page 15.)

Membership Committee

Membership

Membership development: Develop membership recruitment and strategies to reach out to the larger gay and lesbian community. Advertise and make special presentations on OPLGA to other groups and in public forums.

Membership support: Welcome new members. Research member needs, survey interests and special abilities. Develop programs responding to interests and needs.

Networking

Networking with other gay and lesbian organizations: Participate in MetroForum, IGLTF, NGLTF, AGLO and other gay and lesbian networking organizations. Develop joint projects. Share information and resources.

Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival Committee

In June 1991 and 1992, OPLGA sponsored the first and second annual Oak Park Cultural Arts Festivals in recognition of Lesbian and Gay Pride Week in Oak Park. The festival has attracted approximately 3,000 participants each year. The first festival was co-sponsored by the Loft Bank Culture Club and was followed by a concert by Chris Williamson and Tret Fure (noted performers of women's music) in the Oak Park Art Center on the second evening of the festival. The 1991 festival was attended by John Clarke, the Co-Secretary General of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (a former resident of Oak Park).

The second Cultural Arts Festival featured workshops and performances by Ann Reed, a nationally recognized lesbian folksinger, and a variety of local performers and visual artists.

The theme of OPLGA's annual Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival, "Building Bridges to Understanding," indicates OPLGA's objective that the festival provide a vehicle to bring together all residents of the village. Participation in the festival is open to all, including gays, lesbians, bisexuals and heterosexuals. The festival includes display

and sale of artworks by artists, informational displays by organizations (including the Oak Park Library, OPLGA, the Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Community Response and others) and continuous performances by entertainers on stage in Scoville Park. Future festivals will also include public educational activities.

Youth Committee and Drop-In Center

Adolescents' lives are focused on the development and maturation of psychological and social processes. Their main task is to become autonomous and independent individuals who are no longer dependent on others for the management of their internal and external affairs. To develop this healthy sense of autonomy requires the development of a healthy sense of self.

The OPLGA Youth Committee operates in two major areas: operation of the OPLGA Youth Drop-In Center and educational outreach to schools, youth organizations and individuals (including school psychologists, counselors and social workers) concerned with issues of gays and lesbians in educational settings.

Youth Drop-In Center

The Oak Park Lesbian and Gay Association Youth Drop-In Center exists as a supportive environment to help youth aged 14 through 20 deal with their questions and issues about sexuality and personal growth. The Center is designed to help youth to become more comfortable with who they are, whether they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual. Issues addressed by the Center include the following: isolation, alienation, integration of values, harassment and violence, suicide, runaways, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. If their needs and problems are to be addressed, these adolescents need a non-threatening, non-erotic environment where they can obtain accurate information and can interact and identify with peers. The OPLGA Youth Drop-In Center provides this supportive environment.

The Center began its operations in June 1991 and is open one evening per week. The Center is currently housed in a space provided by the Oak Park Park District, and it is OPLGA's intention to keep the Center open throughout the entire year. Knowledge of the Center's existence has begun to spread primarily by word of mouth, although OPLGA advertises the existence and availability of the Center in the two local community papers, the Chicago lesbian/gay community press, and the local public high school newspaper.

Attendance at the Center has ranged between two and eight youths per week, including both males and females, African-Americans, Hispanics and Whites. We have also received a number of referrals from Family Service and Mental Health Center of Oak Park and River Forest. In addition, Horizons, a social service center for gays and lesbians in Chicago, has referred Oak Park and River Forest youths who have called them for help to our Center. Information about the Drop-in Center and our telephone line are now being given out by Contact Chicago which may lead to further referrals. Youth have come from as far away as Crete, Elgin and Des Plaines, although the majority are from the Oak Park area. It is OPLGA's expectation that once knowledge about the Center's existence spreads, OPLGA will serve between ten and twenty youths per week.

Schools

Oak Park and River Forest High School: OPLGA has provided gay/lesbian sensitivity training to faculty, counselors and administrators at OPRF high school. Additionally, OPLGA has presented lecture/discussions on gays and lesbians to approximately 800 students in sociology and psychology courses. These presentations

are under consideration for incorporation into the regular curriculum of the high school..

Other high schools: Public speaking presentations by committee members have been made in other high schools in the Chicago metropolitan area (See Appendix B). Indications are that, as the OPLGA Youth Drop-In Center gains increased recognition throughout the metropolitan area, there will be ever-increasing demand for presentations to educators and youth. Presentations need to be prepared, resource materials organized and individuals trained to present information and training programs. This work will require increased coordination with the Education and Outreach and Communications Committees.

Public Policy Committee

Although OPLGA is not a political organization and neither recommends nor endorses candidates in elections, the organization is committed to the encouragement of understanding between gays, lesbians and elected public officials and professionals serving the community as a whole. To that end, the Public Policy Committee:

Election surveys

Conducts research and develops, distributes, analyses and communicates results of candidate questionnaires. Candidate Forums are conducted when appropriate.

Public policy changes

Committee members conduct on-going research on public policies, procedures, laws and regulations and communicate recommendations when appropriate - for example:

Civil rights protections: Currently lesbians and gays are not protected from discrimination in employment within the private sector of Oak Park. Efforts must be made to initiate modification of the Village Human Rights Code to provide protections in employment for gays and lesbians. Note: Village ordinances do not protect any minority groups in the private sector and need extensive modification in coalition with other groups.

Domestic partnership rights/benefits: Initiate inclusion of gay and lesbian partnerships in benefit programs of the Village, Parks, Schools and Library.

AIDS and public health: Members participate in the Oak Park Health Department's AIDS Committee and other responsible bodies in development of policies dealing with public health issues, including AIDS, drug/substance abuse, violence, etc.

Needs and Resources Survey

Information about available services and perceived needs for programs is vital. A two-part survey will be developed and implemented by the committee to determine needs for discrimination-related programs and social services and resources for gay men and lesbians in Oak Park. (See, Proposed projects and programs, page 13.)

Communications Committee

Newsletter and Calendar

OPLGA publishes a quarterly newsletter OPLGA Update containing news and articles of interest to lesbians and gays. The newsletter is distributed to approximately 300 people, including many village officials and support agencies. A monthly OPLGA Bulletin/Calendar keeps members informed of latest news and coming events.

Public relations	Committee members maintain contact with print and broadcast media and produce press releases, public service announcements, etc. Members coordinate inquiries to appropriate respondents upon request by journalists. Guidelines for press releases, public service announcements, etc. for committee chairs and task force groups are being developed.
Special reports	In 1990, OPLGA produced a special report "Police, Gays and Lesbians" to accompany the organization's in-service police training program. Future special reports are planned for: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Homophobia 101: This is the basic "Building Bridges" document to include information on gays and lesbians which will <u>frame</u> sensitivity training programs.• Training Manuals: Development of training manuals, guides for facilitators, etc. for use with specific sensitivity training programs, i.e., police, violence, social service and counseling, education, history, arts, films, etc. are planned.• Media workers guide: (mainstream press and broadcast media) This guide will be modeled after a report produced by the gay and lesbian community of Portland, Oregon, containing background historical information and guidelines for articles/broadcasts relating to gay men and lesbians.• Parents', teachers' and counselors' guide: In coordination with the Youth Committee, a guide will be developed by the Communications Committee. The guide will present descriptions of the issues facing lesbian and gay youth and possibilities for solutions. The guide will include and/or supplement other resource materials from P-Flag, Equity Institute, Project 10, Hetrick-Martin Institute, etc. Materials to be available to members of school parents groups (P.T.O., Parents' Human Relations Committee, Youth Network, Education Committee of village Community Relations Commission, School Board members, etc.)• AIDS in Oak Park: Description of status of the epidemic in Oak Park, resources and support organizations, prevention strategies, etc. directed toward the lesbian/gay community with a special emphasis on gay males.• Bibliographies: Produce (perhaps in conjunction with the Oak Park Library staff) bibliographies directed toward specific interest groups: parents of lesbians and gays, gay and lesbian youth, gay men and women.• Election reports: Produce issue-oriented election reports on candidates in local and state elections based on research, questionnaires, public forums, etc.
Video documentary	Possibilities for creation of video documentaries need to be developed utilizing equipment available within the group or available to "independent producers" of local Cablevision. Training is required, as well as editing equipment. Classes in video documentary production and editing are available (free of charge) from Cablevision as a part of their contract with the Village of Oak Park.
Cultural publications	As a part of OPLGA's enrichment program, publication of a periodical containing creative writing of members, cultural essays, poetry, reviews, etc. is possible and financially feasible as a self-paying project.

Board Activities

The board of directors is responsible for overall coordination of OPLGA activities, long-range and short-term planning, budgeting and fundraising, oversight of committee activities, public relations, policy development, communication and overall leadership of the organization.

Outreach Board members are responsible for networking with community groups, businesses, public officials, etc. and providing liaison and coordination with other lesbian and gay organizations throughout the Chicago metropolitan area. Specific outreach efforts include:

Organizational networking: Board members are responsible for networking with other gay and lesbian organizations, including: IGLTF, NGLTF, AGLO, WSGA, etc. They will develop special/joint projects, as well as share information and resources

Religious organizations: OPLGA has been an invited participant in church discussion groups focused on issues of homosexuality and AIDS at both Beacon Unitarian Church and First United Church of Oak Park. Additionally, OPLGA has conducted Sunday services focused on gay and lesbian experiences at both Beacon and Third Unitarian (Austin neighborhood of Chicago) churches.

"Building Bridges Project": See Proposed Projects and Programs, page 15.

Space It is OPLGA's intention to acquire office space for OPLGA facilitating access to organizational files, archives and resources for all board members. Other objects of creating such a space (which could be considered a "lesbian and gay community center) include promotion of:

- Community visibility and identity
- Communication
- Public/member access to resources

Activities that may be conducted in the new OPLGA "Community Center" could include:

- Office activities
- Meetings
- Social functions
- Drop-In Center activities
- Community bulletin board

Information Phone Line Board members are responsible for monitoring the organization's Info-Line, which functions as a medium of open communication between OPLGA and the community at large. Functions of the Info-Line include:

- Information about OPLGA events
- Referrals and problem solving

Leadership Development The board of directors is responsible for continual promotion of activities leading to leadership development both for current board members and member-volunteers. Ultimately, leadership development is the single-most important activity ensuring the continued survival of the organization.

Strategic Planning OPLGA board members are responsible for periodic evaluation of organizational objectives and activities and development of long-range strategic plans. Each year, the

organization conducts a leadership retreat for the purpose of conducting this evaluation and planning.

Budgeting Each year, the board of directors is responsible for development of an annual budget for the next fiscal year based on an evaluation of organizational activities and proposals from individual committees. The board is also responsible for monitoring expenditures throughout the year in order to maintain fiscal accountability of the organization.

Fundraising Fundraising is a primary responsibility of the entire board of directors, who are ultimately responsible for the development, coordination, and leadership of the organization. While specific fundraising strategies and projects may be pursued by individual committees operating under the board, it is the responsibility of the board to ensure the success of the organization's operations. Ultimately, it is the OPLGA board of directors who are jointly responsible for the integrity and financial well-being of the organization (See Fundraising, page 16).

Proposed projects and programs

From 1991 Chicago Resource Center grant application

OPLGA requested (and did not receive) funding for these special projects focusing on equal access to the full range of community services and activities on an equitable basis as well as achievement of greater understanding of gays and lesbians by the community at large.

Needs and Resources Survey

OPLGA is not a service organization, but is critically involved in assuring that gays and lesbians have access to programs tailored to the needs of gay and lesbian residents of the community. To do so, information about available services and perceived needs for programs is vital. To this end, a two-part survey will be developed and implemented to determine the needs for discrimination-related programs and social services and resources for gay men and lesbians in the Oak Park community.

Community Needs Assessment

A brief Community Needs Assessment will be conducted by assembling focus groups of gays and lesbians to discuss perceived needs for services and programs. The following topics will be addressed in these discussions: educational needs, service needs (including substance abuse, psycho-social counseling, health care, etc.), perception of discrimination-related abuse (including violence against gays and lesbians), spiritual socialization and needs of youth. Three or four such group meetings will be convened to assess perceived needs. Each will consist of 7 - 12 respondents, composed of gay and lesbian citizens representing a variety of races, ages and degree of openness/outness.

Findings from this assessment will be summarized in a report to be available to all interested parties. The major immediate value of the survey will be to determine program priorities for OPLGA. However, the patterns of indicated needs should be of interest to gays, lesbians and community leaders both locally and nationally.

Community Resource Survey

A Community Resource Survey will be completed listing approximately 100 social and educational institutions, village offices, media outlets, and religious communities in Oak Park. A preliminary mailing introducing the survey will be sent to each. This

will be followed by a brief telephone interview with the directors of each. Questionnaires will be developed for this purpose using existing needs assessment instruments (i.e., Chicago Gay and Lesbian Social Services Survey). The findings will be compiled to determine a catalogue of available services for gays and lesbians in the community.

Building Bridges to Understanding

Organizing for Lesbian and Gay Quality of Life in the Suburbs

"Building Bridges to Understanding" is a three-part educational program to inform community leaders and institutions about gay and lesbian rights, combat homophobia, improve public services and educate gay men and lesbians about their rights and opportunities for community-wide participation. Major components of the program include:

Diversity Leadership Forum

A planning and coordinating forum will bring together individuals in leadership and participatory roles throughout the community to share ideas, learn about techniques to achieve gay and lesbian rights, and plan ways to increase community effectiveness. This program will assemble leaders in gay/lesbian organizations with leaders and active participants in organizations serving other minority populations and other disenfranchised groups. An initial two-day forum will be followed by monthly meetings occurring thereafter. (Program funds are required to pay for expenses of bringing in resource people, printing of educational materials and some administrative costs of the forum.)

Educational materials

The second major program component is the development of educational materials to be used in on-going teaching programs. Often these presentations are made to people whose ignorance of lesbian and gay issues make a critical difference to the current realities and future of lesbian and gay citizens. OPLGA will identify and assemble source materials developed and distributed by other institutions and organizations, including The Equity Institute, Project 10, the New York City Police, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Anti-Defamation League, The Campaign to End Homophobia, etc. Existing materials include reports, studies, anti-homophobia curricula, videos and lesbian/gay supportive literature.

It may be possible that the Oak Park Library can assist OPLGA in accumulation of these materials, in which case, they would be readily available to the wider community.

Reports

OPLGA will also write, edit, produce and distribute specific OPLGA/Reports directed to the lesbian and gay community and others pertaining to specific lesbian and gay issues, including Gay Youth and the Right to Education, Hate Crime and Domestic Violence, and AIDS in the context of the lesbian and gay community of Oak Park. Working in collaboration with the Oak Park Library, OPLGA will develop bibliographies identifying books and other publications of value to both lesbian and gay citizens and community persons interested in related topics.

Video

OPLGA will record and edit a training video, Building Bridges to Understanding, providing basic information about gay and lesbian people and their rights while reviewing the history and envisioning the future of gays and lesbians within the context of Oak Park and the world as a whole. Specifically, the video will address:

- Who are gays and lesbians in this suburban community?
- What are differences in their lives and the lives of non-gay people?
- How many are there?
- Impacts of discrimination and homophobia on gay/lesbian lives.
- Anti-gay violence.
- Gay and lesbian youth talking about personal identity and families.
- Lesbians and gays talking about families, commitments/significant others, personal networks and the value of "community" in their lives.

The video and resource materials will be developed with volunteer labor, using information culled from local and national efforts. Funds are requested for production and distribution to schools, village offices, churches, and social agencies in the community. Additional copies will be made available to other individuals and organizations at cost upon request.

Additional activities and groups

OPLGA Film Club

For the past two years, the OPLGA Film Club has operated as an OPLGA-supported group of gay men (despite efforts of members, no lesbians have become active in this group) renting videos of interest to gays and lesbians for private showings in members' homes. Leaders of the club encourage women to become involved and/or offer suggestions of possible films of interest to women.

Mens' Awareness Group

For the past two years, a Men's Awareness Group meets weekly in eight-week sessions. The group discusses topics of interest to gay, bisexual and straight men and participates in various activities.

Women's Group

A Women's Group meets to discuss topics of interest to group members, who may be lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual. Frequency of meetings is determined by group members.

Fundraising

Until earlier this year, OPLGA has operated as a membership organization with funds generated through dues and occasional fundraising events. This level of income has proved to be adequate for organizational events and communications serving our membership in a networking and social capacity. In the past year, OPLGA has moved to operate in a wider arena of community involvement through provision of resource materials, sensitivity training programs, lesbian and gay oriented forums and sponsorship of village-wide cultural events. The organization has begun to provide direct services to lesbian and gay adolescents through operation of a weekly Youth Drop-In Center providing resource materials, referrals, guidance and opportunities for youth concerned about issues of social isolation and identity questions relating to sexual orientation.

In many ways, the organization has been overwhelmed by the success of its community outreach efforts. OPLGA continuously receives requests from governmental bodies, social service agencies, educational institutions and religious groups and individuals for more resource materials, more training, sponsorship of programs, AIDS education, anti-discrimination advocacy, etc. than we have, to date, been able to fulfill.

A major task of the Coordinator is to develop strategies for funding in support of programs to move the organization to the next stages of our operational capacity. Ultimately, fundraising is the responsibility of all board members.

It is the belief of OPLGA's board of directors that the overwhelming success of our organization in combating homophobia, initiating policy and legal reform, improving public and institutional services and introducing lesbian and gay citizens of Oak Park to full and open participation in community life must be met with development of the organization to respond to urgent needs of our lesbian and gay community. Never before have gays and lesbians been granted the opportunities to participate so fully in the arena of community life.

Opportunities for increased funding to meet organization and program needs include:

Increased membership	To date, OPLGA has never conducted a membership drive to reach the larger lesbian and gay community (estimated at more than 6,000 in Oak Park), nor has OPLGA actively solicited members from the much larger lesbian and gay community of the Chicago metropolitan area. Membership in OPLGA has come from individual networking by founders and members and exposure (and sometimes promotion) of the organization by mainstream media.
Foundation grants	OPLGA should explore foundation resources and develop proposals both independently and together with other community organizations.
Public grants	Grants have been received, and will be available in the future, from Village and Township governmental bodies in support of specific service and educational programs. Programs most likely to receive support include:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• AIDS education aimed at prevention directed to the gay male population.• Youth Drop-In Center• Substance abuse programs• Mental health needs• Education programs at OPRF High School
Fundraising activities	Fundraising activities must be developed, including sponsorship of garage sales, social benefits, conferences, dances, publications, etc.
Private donations	Private donations need to be solicited in support of either the organization as a whole or specific projects. Specific programs and targeted individuals need to be identified.
Income from sales	Income from sales of OPLGA-produced literature, buttons, T-shirts, banners, posters, etc. may be applied in support of activities of the organization.

Appendix A

OPLGA Bylaws

Adopted Bylaws

Proposed Revised Bylaws

(by Phil Bellerive)

Notice: The documents for this section are not included.

Appendix B

OPLGA Accomplishments

From OPLGA 501 (c) 3 application
with minor revisions/additions

OPLGA Accomplishments

From OPLGA's 501 (c) 3 application with minor revisions

Oak Park Human Rights Amendment	<p>Purpose/description: Protection of lesbians, gays and bisexuals from discrimination in employment (by Village and Village contractors), housing and public accommodations.</p> <p>Date: June 1989.</p> <p>Where/by whom: Amendment initiated by OPLGA request to candidates for village board. Obtained commitment for ordinance amendment from all V.M.A. candidates in March 1989. OPLGA provided verbal and written testimony describing existence of discrimination and need for protections through inclusion of gay, lesbian and bisexual citizens among those protected from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Amendment passed unanimously.</p>
Oak Park/River Forest High School Human Dignity Policy 101 Amendment	<p>Purpose/description: Protect lesbian, gay and bisexual faculty, staff and students from discrimination based on sexual orientation.</p> <p>Date: December 1989.</p> <p>Where/by whom: Amendment initiated by OPLGA request to OPRFHS board of trustees. OPLGA provided verbal and written testimony describing existence of discrimination and need for protections through inclusion of gay, lesbian and bisexual students, faculty and staff among those protected from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Amendment passed unanimously.</p>
Oak Park AIDS Task Force	<p>Purpose/description: Public health promotion - Develop multi-governmental, community-inclusive AIDS strategic plan for the village of Oak Park directed toward education, prevention and support of residents impacted by HIV/AIDS.</p> <p>Date: August 1989 - December 1990.</p> <p>Where/by whom: Demanded (by OPLGA and Community Response) of Village board candidates in 1989 election. Obtained commitment of candidates prior to election. Established by Village board following adoption of amendments to human rights ordinance.</p>
AIDS Awareness Month	<p>Purpose/description: Community AIDS education aimed at elimination of discrimination and promotion of support for persons affected by HIV. Various community activities planned and implemented by committee composed of major community institutions.</p>

	<p>Date: June 1989, October 1990, October 1992 and October 1993 (planned).</p> <p>Where/by whom: Initiated by Oak Park Health Department. OPLGA participates in planning and implementation of activities. In 1989, AIDS Awareness Month included display of portions of the NAMES Project quilt and performance of the Harvey Fierstein play "On Tidy Endings" at Village Hall.</p>
Holocaust Memorial Services	<p>Purpose/description: Promote understanding of the Holocaust and impact (historical) of discrimination in society.</p> <p>Date: May 1989 and May 1990.</p> <p>Where/by whom: Services in Oak Park Village Hall with testimonials from representatives of various minority groups including OPLGA representing survivors of the Holocaust.</p>
Youth Drop-In Center	<p>Purpose/description: Promote positive development and self-esteem among adolescents - OPLGA provides a safe environment for adolescents aged 14-20 to explore issues of sexual orientation/identity through peer discussions and activities facilitated by trained adult volunteers. Programs include films and presentations by outside groups, including the Oak Park Health Department and Family Service and Mental Health Center of Oak Park and River Forest.</p> <p>Date: weekly since June 1991.</p> <p>Where/by whom: The OPLGA Youth Drop-In Center is located in a public space donated by the Oak Park Park District. Volunteer facilitators receive initial and on-going training from OPLGA, the Oak Park Health Department, Horizons Community Services, Family Services and Mental Health Center of Oak Park and River Forest and the Midwest AIDS Training and Education Center (University of Illinois at Chicago) among others.</p>
Candidates' Forum	<p>Description/purpose: Education - OPLGA promotes understanding of the election process, issues and candidates' qualifications by providing an environment in which candidates and OPLGA members are able to freely express and exchange their opinions and positions on issues of importance to gay men and lesbians.</p> <p>Date: Recurring</p> <p>Where/by whom: OPLGA has provided in-house "coffee" discussion opportunities for candidates to meet with members of the gay and lesbian community in a safe environment where disclosure of personal sexual orientation will be kept confidential. The organization has further meet with candidates in public forums (March 1992) held in public facilities for the purpose of focusing on issues of particular concern to the lesbian and gay community. OPLGA has issued questionnaires to candidates on issues and published un-edited responses for distribution to the gay and lesbian community and the community at large.</p>
Organizational Networking	<p>Purpose/description: Membership education - OPLGA maintains contacts with many other organizations world-wide in efforts to share information, insights and experiences that may be of value to our members.</p> <p>Date: Continuous activity.</p> <p>Where/by whom: Exchange of newsletters, participation in joint meetings,</p>

attendance at conferences by OPLGA members. Organizations with which OPLGA maintains communications include:

Community Response (a local AIDS support organization).
Chicago Area Men's Enrichment Organization (C.A.M.E.O.).
Fox Valley Gay Association
Lavender Bouquet (Oak Park women's support group)
West Suburban Gay Association
Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force
International Lesbian and Gay Association (OPLGA attendance at international conferences in 1989 and 1990).
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (OPLGA attendance at national conference in 1991).
National Organization of Women (N.O.W. - West Suburban Chapter).
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.).

Additionally, OPLGA is represented on the Cook County State's Attorney's Task Force on Gay and Lesbian Issues.

Community Education and Training

Purpose/description: Prevention of discrimination and promotion of inclusion of lesbians, gays and bisexuals in community activities is fostered by OPLGA through a wide variety of community outreach efforts directed to religious congregations, social service agencies and public bodies.

Date: Continuing.

Where/by whom: Participate in and/or lead workshops in churches and local organizations including governmental bodies. Provide in-service training to personnel, staffs and faculties of educational, governmental and social service agencies servicing the lesbian and gay community of Oak Park, including:

Oak Park Health Department
Oak Park Police Department
Oak Park and River Forest High School
Beacon Unitarian Church of Oak Park
First United Church of Oak Park
First United Church of Oak Park
Third Unitarian Church, Chicago
Sara's Inn (domestic violence service agency/shelter)
Community Response (HIV/AIDS service agency)
Family Service and Mental Health Center of Oak Park and River Forest.

Public education

Description/purpose: Communicate the experience and needs of lesbian and gay youth to students, faculties, counselors and administrators of youth education programs.

Date/Where/by Whom: Following is a list of public speaking engagements by Youth Committee members from fall 1991 - present:

October 28, 1991	Naperville High School
	7 sociology classes - 200 students.
Fall, 1991	University of Illinois at Chicago
	College of Nursing
	"Stress and Coping: Working with Lesbian and

Fall, 1991	Gay Clients and Patients" - 150 students. College of DuPage
January 13, 1992	Undergraduate psychology seminar - 40 students. Oak Park-River Forest High School
January 27, 1992	8 psychology/human behavior classes - 250 students. Oak Park Public Schools (high school, elementary and jr. high faculty in-service)
February 20, 1992	"Working with Gay/Lesbian Learners" - 50 faculty members. Illinois Benedictine College
Winter, 1992	Counseling Psychology graduate seminar - 20 students. College of DuPage
Winter, 1992	Undergraduate psychology seminar - 40 students. University of Illinois at Chicago
March 24, 1992	College of Nursing "Stress and Coping: Working with Lesbian and Gay Clients and Patients" - 30 students. Oak Park-River Forest High School
Spring, 1992	Three sociology classes - 90 students. Naperville High School
June 1, 1992	Seven sociology classes - 200 students. Oak Park-River Forest High School
June 17, 1992	Seven psychology/human behavior classes - 250 students. University of Illinois at Chicago
June 29, 1992	College of Nursing "Stress and Coping: Working with Lesbian and Gay Clients and Patients" - 100 students. College of DuPage Graduate Psychology Class for Addiction Counselors - 20 students (taped for broadcast on DuPage Public Television).

Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival

Description/purpose: Promotion of understanding and celebration of diversity - In order to promote tolerance, acceptance and understanding between Oak Park's lesbian and gay community and the community at large. It is necessary to celebrate the richness of cultural and artistic creativity made possible by diversity.

Date: June 1991 and June 1992 (planned to be an annual event).

Where/by whom: OPLGA co-sponsored the first annual Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival in Scoville Park (downtown Oak Park) in 1991 drawing approximately 4,000 residents and visitors to participate in an art fair including games, poetry, readings, exhibitions by visual artists, dance performances and concerts by local and nationally recognized artists. Recognized guest and emcee of the concert was John Clarke, Co-Secretary General of the International Lesbian and Gay Association, who is a former resident of Oak Park.

The second annual Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival was singly sponsored by OPLGA and held in Scoville Park as a kick-off to local "Lesbian and Gay Pride Week", which was officially declared by the President of the Village of Oak Park upon OPLGA request.

Social Activities	<p>Description/purpose: Recreation - to promote interaction and understanding between members of the lesbian and gay community and provide opportunities for open self-expression in supportive social settings. To break down social barriers leading to isolation frequently encountered by gays and lesbians living in a hostile society.</p> <p>Date: On-going activities.</p> <p>Where/by whom: Recreational activities sponsored by OPLGA include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Fundraising Dances - OPLGA sponsors semi-annual fundraising dances to which all are invited.OPLGA Film Club - Bi-monthly in-house video presentations of films of relevance to gay men and lesbians.Monthly OPLGA Potluck Dinners - A monthly potluck dinner held in the homes of OPLGA members to which all are invited (including heterosexuals) to join in social fellowship.Camping Retreat - OPLGA has sponsored camping retreats for members enjoying outdoor recreation.Men's Awareness Group - A recurring seven-week series of opportunities to develop self-expression in a male-supportive environment (a private home).Women's Group - A recurring meeting of women (heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual) in a private home (topics and times as selected by group).
Project Empowerment Retreat	<p>Description/purpose: Self-empowerment program for teachers - Lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers in public and private schools are among the most intimidated of all professional groups. The Project Empowerment Retreat provided an opportunity to find new ways for teachers to support each other and to develop strategies to overcome the homophobia faced in schools every day. The goal of the retreat was to create a proud and powerful network of professional gay and lesbian educators able to bring personal expression to their lives and work environments.</p> <p>Date: October 26-28, 1990.</p> <p>Where/by whom: The Project Empowerment Retreat was held in the training room of Oak Park Village Hall in space donated by the village of Oak Park for the event. The retreat was led by representatives of the Equity Institute, Amherst, MA, in coordination with OPLGA volunteer facilitators.</p>
Day in Our Village	<p>Description/purpose: Public education/recreation - Each year, for the past three years, OPLGA has participated in Oak Park's village-wide celebration "Day in Our Village" which permits all organizations in the village to introduce themselves to village residents in a festive park setting. OPLGA's display table in the park has included distribution of literature, bibliographies and program calendars while volunteers are on hand to answer questions.</p> <p>Date: June 1990, 1991 and 1992 (annual event).</p> <p>Where/by whom: Table display staffed by OPLGA volunteers in various public parks of Oak Park.</p>
Chicago Gay Pride Parade	<p>Description/purpose: Public education/celebration - Each year, for the past three years, OPLGA has participated in the Chicago Gay Pride Parade held in June to commemorate the Stonewall Rebellion, the beginning of the modern gay and lesbian</p>

liberation movement. The purpose of the parade is both to express our pride in who we are and to celebrate our liberation from social oppression. To some extent, and as a secondary concern, the parade has also served to educate the heterosexual public regarding the magnitude and diversity of the lesbian and gay community.

Date: June 1990, 1991 and 1992 (on-going annual event).

Where/by whom: The parade is held each year on the north side of Chicago. Marchers in the parade accompanying the OPLGA banner include both heterosexual and homosexual residents of Oak Park and representatives from several local churches.

OPLGA Leadership Retreat

Description/purpose: Leadership development/strategic planning - each year, OPLGA provides a weekend retreat for the organization's board to review the year's activities and to plan for the future of the organization. The retreat provides an opportunity for reflection and review of objectives as well as development of a framework for the following year's activities.

Date: Spring 1990, Fall 1991 and Fall 1992.

Where/by whom: The retreat is held in hotel conference facilities or retreat centers and is attended by the entire OPLGA board.

Fundraising Events

Description/purpose: OPLGA has sponsored and/or co-sponsored fundraising events generating funds for other organizations and agencies providing services to the lesbian and gay community as well as events for fundraising for OPLGA.

Date: Recurring.

Where/by whom: Fundraising events sponsored by OPLGA include the following:

Oak Park Cultural Arts Festival Concert, June 1991, with performance by Chris Williamson and Trez Fure for the benefit of OPLGA and the International Lesbian and Gay Association.

"J.S. Bach for AIDS" concert, March 1992, with classical baroque performances by three internationally known musicians for the benefit of Community Response, a local HIV/AIDS service organization.

Appendix C

Activity Areas

From 1990 OPLGA Board Retreat

Strengths and Weaknesses

From 1991 OPLGA Board Retreat

Solutions to Problems

From 1991 OPLGA Board Retreat

Practical Visions: Dreams

Contradictions - Dragons

Proposed Action Areas

Five Areas of Major Activity

(from 1990 OPLGA Board Retreat)

Youth	Outreach	Education
Find ways to develop a youth group.	Increase outreach to other gay and lesbian groups and organizations.	Assess, monitor, and give input to providers of community services.
Educate people who work with youth, i.e., high schools, churches, youth commissions.	Distribute OPLGA literature to the public.	Establish training workshops and a speakers bureau.
Develop professional resources for gay and lesbian youth.	Set up a telephone/welcoming committee.	Work with media/print/library resources: guidelines, inventory, bibliography.
Educate gay and non-gay youth.	Become involved in events in the gay and lesbian community.	Produce news articles - at least one per quarter.
Provide input on curriculum in public and parochial schools.	Publicize OPLGA events through the media.	Produce OPLGA publications.
	Increase circulation of the OPLGA newsletter.	Increase public visibility of OPLGA and its membership.
	Improve maintenance of database/mailing list.	Network with religious community.
	Write letters on behalf of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA).	

Five Areas of Major Activity

(from 1990 OPLGA Board Retreat)

Public Policy	Social Activities	Additional Areas of Concern
Provide input into the lawmaking process: employment, domestic partnership issues, etc.	Dances	Fundraising
Meet with Phil Rock and other elected officials.	Theater parties	Referral services
Meet with candidates for public office.	Potlucks	Membership support
Monitor boards (Village, Library, Township, Mental Health, Public Health, Parks).	Outings (Great America, camping trips, etc.)	Legal formalization of OPLGA
Increase our presence on village and other commissions.	Film/Video groups	Program development
Establish a phone tree.	Play reading	Database development
	Garage sale	
	Book club/discussion groups	
	Game nights	
	Singles mixers	

Review of Strengths and Weaknesses

(from 1991 OPLGA Board Retreat)

Decision Making	Strengths	Weaknesses
Is there a progression through a process?	Good public image.	Policies and procedures not clear.
Tend to have spinoffs - ideas that occur to a group of members and tend to be implemented outside of Task Force structure.	Leadership strength - trust and direction.	Communications within Board not clear - unclear accountability.
Core people tend to wear a lot of hats, but may be hesitant to seek out help from others.	Clear focus: flexible, vision is clear.	Leaders spread too thin.
What happens when we skip a step in decision making?	Mix of men and women; educational diversity and personal backgrounds. Respect for all opinions and diversity.	Board decisions may exclude individual members. Underdeveloped ability to enrich each other.
	Enthusiasm. Individuality.	<p>Participation problems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Limited outreach to members b) Exclude individual members from decisions c) Inadequate ethnic or cultural diversity d) Lack of volunteers <p>Responsiveness problems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Issues over personalized b) Not enough recognition for individual contributions c) Lack of clarification of responses <p>Resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Lack of permanent space b) Financial resource needs <p>Conflict resolution:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Do we bury conflict? Do we avoid dealing with it? b) Do we benefit from the struggle to resolve deep conflicts?

Review of Possible Solutions

(from 1991 OPLGA Board Retreat)

Decision Making	Accountability	Procedural Problems
Regular attendance at Board meetings.	Formulate Board election process.	Include a process check as part of each Board Meeting agenda. A time to check to determine if any members have any issues to raise or to take stock of successes.
Written procedures about decision making.	Task Forces report to Board - Summary to inform board for input and need authorization.	Review and amend updated bylaws.
Agenda and minutes at Board meetings sent out ahead of time.	Task forces to have regular opportunity for in-depth review at board meetings (1-2 times a year for each task force).	Nominating committee needed.

Review of Possible Solutions

(from 1991 OPLGA Board Retreat)

Overtaxed Leadership	Validation	Personnel Issues
<p>Membership issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Ideas: articles in Oak Park press; Meeting procedures: Introductions at meetings, literature and welcoming committee. b) Take over a coffeehouse and spread the word around of a regular drop-in night. c) Pat Davis to convene a membership meeting. 	<p>People feel undervalued. Solutions suggested include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Try to appreciate communication styles and strengths. b) Try reflective listening (restating what has been heard). c) Try to give positive feedback in meetings. d) Have an appreciation event once a year. 	<p>Develop Organizational Procedures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Need to have procedures for organization. Marsha, Phil and Bekah to be on committee to develop these. b) Activities: office development, resource and financial development, grant management, non-task force activities.

Spin-off Activities

(from 1991 OPLGA Board Retreat)

Youth Drop-In Center	Cultural Arts Festival	
<p>Develop long-term plan to transition to another agency.</p> <p>Already have an advisory board with outside agency representation.</p> <p>Issue of liability insurance needs to be explored.</p>	<p>Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) OPLGA Task Force reporting to Board. b) Committee reporting to Outreach Task Force. c) Affiliate with OPLGA (but not be accountable to OPLGA). d) Separate from OPLGA. <p>Issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Community relations (both OPLGA and Festival benefit from association). b) Financial risk, losses to both if separate. <p>Consensus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Festival to be an OPLGA Task Force with chair or liaison person(s) on Board. b) Ethel, Jane and Pat to draft a mission statement for festival. c) Festival to be main agenda for December board meeting with presentation of mission, budget and plans. 	

Practical Visions: Dreams

Gay/lesbian Community Center	Normalize L/G Empowerment	Destigmatize Gays and Lesbians
Establish lesbian and gay community center in Oak Park.	Visible gay and lesbian influence in community power structures.	Gay and lesbians citizens viewed as desirable part of whole community.
Provide visible office and telephone listing and HOTLINE.	Diversity - including gays, lesbians and bisexuals - seen as part of celebrated diversity in the community.	Gays and lesbians valued for the special cultural contributions and wisdom that we bring.
Provide meeting space	Regular inclusion of lesbians and gays in community newspapers.	
Establish resource center	Readily identifiable signage on gay/lesbian community center.	
Provide public symbol of presence of lesbians and gays in the village.		
Promote social contact.		
Make office upbeat, active, open and positive.		

Practical Visions: Dreams

Focused Board Involvement	Gender Parity	Increased Minority Participation
<p>Fundraising normalized and ongoing.</p> <p>\$50,000/year budget.</p> <p>Established financial base: members, community, public sector contracts, foundation grants and individual contributions.</p> <p>Self-supporting through membership contributions with outside funding required only for special outreach, social service or education projects.</p>	<p>Maintain gender parity in leadership roles.</p> <p>Focus on issues of sexism as it relates to homophobia.</p>	<p>Outreach to minority communities and provide opportunities for input on planning and development by minorities.</p> <p>Assure representation and balance.</p> <p>Network and join in coalitions with other groups representing other minority groups.</p>

Underlying Contradictions: Dragons

Resistance to Involvement	Underutilized Board	Politics of Homophobia
Internalized homophobia among lesbians and gays - undervalued self-worth.	Board members are overextended, over-booked and under-directed.	Community leaders fear to express open support.
Fear of discrimination.	Need to expand board to:	Gays and lesbians fear to express needs in public.
No experience in adult community involvement - in either gay or straight communities.	a) Increase capability b) Make more diverse.	Community leaders don't know what we need.
Social isolation of lesbians and gays.	Unclear areas of responsibility and authority.	a) Left out of budgets b) Left out of programs c) Left out of benefits and supports.
The closet as "option of choice" precludes involvement.	Limitations of time and commitment.	No socially acceptable notion of a "positive" lesbian or gay lifestyle.
Territoriality: little networking or co-sponsorship with other lesbian and gay groups.	Need to take on fundraising as a major board responsibility.	Ignorance of lesbian and gay history.
Sense that participation in OPLGA precludes participation (because of time limitations?) in other community groups.		Reluctance of lesbians and gays to participate in mainstream community organizations as gays and lesbians - reluctance to "represent" OPLGA at village events/planning meetings, etc.
		Few foundations fund gay and lesbian organizations.
		Gays and lesbians seen as partisan advocates in "controversial" areas support of lesbians and gays precludes "balanced" support.
		Gays equated with AIDS.

Underlying Contradictions: Dragons

Personal limits and Stress	Diversity of Issues	Lack of Minority Participation
<p>Limitations of capabilities and experience.</p> <p>Limitations of time.</p> <p>Limitations of energy.</p> <p>Cynicism and burnout from high-stress participation.</p> <p>Inability to focus efforts.</p> <p>Short-term involvements.</p> <p>Inability to commit.</p> <p>Difficulties with conflict resolution.</p>	<p>Expertise missing in specialized areas of need:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Youth and education (psycho-social issues) b) Race relations and cultural pluralism c) Politics d) Social services e) Art and culture f) Justice system g) Police h) Harassment and hate crime (violence/domestic violence, etc.) <p>Representation missing from diverse sectors of community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) African-American gays and lesbians b) Married gays and lesbians c) Single and young lesbians and gays d) Parents and friends of gays and lesbians 	<p>Minority representation in all areas falls far short of balance between OPLGA and the Oak Park population.</p> <p>Lack of networking.</p> <p>Not enough joint-sponsorship of projects = coalition building.</p>

Proposed Action Agenda

Membership		Fundraising
Recruitment	Support	Support from Members
<p>Distribute fliers, brochures, etc. in public places (libraries, village hall, township offices, etc.) and in gay/lesbian bars.</p> <p>Distribute literature in the City through gay/lesbian organizations and businesses.</p> <p>Make presentations to other gay/lesbian groups.</p> <p>Join with other groups on outings and social events.</p> <p>Develop joint projects with other gay/lesbian organizations (MetroForum).</p> <p>Distribute newsletter, bulletins and calendars to other organizations. Advertise in other newsletters.</p> <p>Phonathon to contact potential members.</p> <p>"Bring a Friend" event.</p>	<p>Maintain communication through regular newsletters, bulletins, calendars of events, etc.</p> <p>Query members on interests and needs.</p> <p>Facilitate communication between members.</p> <p>Provide opportunities for self-expression by individual members.</p> <p>Provide orientation and guidance to new members.</p> <p>Develop resources for members (directories of professional services, etc.)</p> <p>Solicit feedback from participants in OPLGA events.</p> <p>Sponsor Volleyball and other sports events.</p> <p>Sponsor Book Club to promote cultural awareness.</p>	<p>Membership dues: Increase membership.</p> <p>Solicit targeted contributions for specific projects.</p> <p>Develop Social/Fundraising events: Dances, outings, concerts, etc.</p>

Proposed Action Agenda

Fundraising	Volunteers	
Outside Support	Recruitment	Development
<p>Promote fundraising concerts and community-wide events.</p> <p>Sale of publication: directories, "Pride Book", etc.</p> <p>Sale of items: T-shirts, buttons, flags, bumper stickers, cards, etc.</p> <p>Garage sales.</p> <p>Advertising sales in newsletter.</p> <p>Government grants for service programs.</p> <p>Foundation grants for service and advocacy.</p> <p>Organization grants from churches, etc.</p> <p>Oak Park Development Block Grants.</p>	<p>Encourage participation in all OPLGA activities.</p> <p>Provide support for people in dealing with "closet issues."</p> <p>Provide opportunities for individual contributions to planning and implementation of OPLGA events.</p> <p>Assure confidentiality when required.</p> <p>Provide safe environment for exploration by new members.</p> <p>Sponsor a coming out group.</p> <p>Follow-up calls to new members.</p>	<p>Open doors and encourage participation in committees and task force groups by new members.</p> <p>Encourage individual efforts in areas of concern to individual members. Provide support.</p> <p>Develop recreational/social events on a regular basis. Provide variety and encourage input and ideas.</p> <p>Thank people for their contributions at every opportunity and in every possible way.</p>

APPENDIX III

Wednesday Journal interviews with Reverends Deacon and Pritchard

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WEDNESDAY JOURNAL

Wednesday Journal September 13, 2000 25



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Gay rights

vs.

God's wrongs

Rev. Ray Pritchard and Rev. Jay Deacon
try to move from division to dialogue

Edited by KEN TRAINOR

Dialogue may be the only avenue to finding common ground on some of today's most divisive social issues. In some cases dialogue

may actually be the common ground.

So it was notable that the pastors of two churches located only a block away from one another and representing two ends of the political and theological spectrum had never met one another in person until they accepted our invitation to discuss their respec-

tive points of view on the issue of gay rights vs. God's wrongs. In the third and final segment, the two preachers moved from division to dialogue.

Deacon: Let me mention a few parts of the rhetoric

see PREACHERS on page 35

VIEWPOINTS

Preachers

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[from conservative Christians] that have very much troubled the over the years. I've been in endless talk shows with people from the Christian Coalition or whatever. One is: "The gay lifestyle is unhealthy. You see people die of AIDS." Well, that's not true. That's a lie. That's a statement. The vast majority of cases of AIDS are transmitted heterosexually, something like 92 percent or so. The rest are divided between same-sex and drug transmissions. That statement is dishonest. It's made to scare people.

Another one—when we were trying to get the civil rights law passed in the Massachusetts State House, you had to virtually climb over the lobbyists from the [Catholic] archdiocese to get into the chamber. They were all over. And they were distributing these little books. The book made a number of assertions: 40 percent of gay men have sex with animals and 50 percent cat feces. This is just defamation. Why is the Church passing out stuff like that? Or the line about recruiting chil-

dren, which [came from] Anie Bryant. Can we do without distortions of truth in making our case? This would help a great deal.

Is it acceptable for an organization like OPALCA [Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association] to have a presence in the schools to work with kids?

Deacon: I went to school. I was a kid. I grew up with anti-gay and pro-heterosexual propaganda. To give a voice to this other population—to say there's this other possibility—is not to convert heterosexual kids. It's to allow to be heard the voice of another part of humanity that's out there suffering daily in schools, feeling all alone, getting no support.

You're talking about kids who already know they're gay. What about the argument that says kids are confused about their entire identity at this age, including sexual orientation. What about those kids?

Deacon: They've still got a whole lot more propaganda from the heterosexual side. If the case for their heterosexuality is thus weak that one little argument, one little presentation in the face of all the rest that you undergo in the course of a few

years of socialization [could undermine their sexuality]... that would seem to say that maybe everybody is essentially homosexual, which I don't think is true. But then, whence the fear?

Pritchard: We've been too nice now for awhile. We just about had that cookout set up. Let's go back to the beginning of it. Don't you see, I think, one of the deepest disengagements, for which, hono, I cannot imagine a common ground, is the conviction of our side that no one is created homosexual, that there is no such thing as an inborn [preference]. To us, it doesn't help to talk about orientation. It just confuses the issue.

My personal view is that it won't surprise me if someday, somebody, digging around the brain, says, "There's some predisposition to homosexuality." Nobody knows the whole story of genetics. Since I'm not a brain scientist, I can't get into that side of the argument. But to me, the issue is this: Should we talk about orientation? Should we talk about choices that people make?

We would say Jay is who he is the result of thousands of choices he's made over the years. I'm not speaking just of the sexual part, but of everything. I'm the result of choices I've made. I really object to the teaching in our public schools that a certain number of people in the population simply are truly homosexual [and] that should be recognized as a fact. We dispute the fact. We truly, deeply dispute the fact that anybody was born or intended by God to be homosexual. This is the result of a series of choices people have made, and they should be held accountable for those choices. We really ought to talk about heterosexual behavior, homosexual deeds or words instead of talking about orientation. If somebody says, "I feel these urges toward somebody of my own sex," I wouldn't say, "You're a terrible sinner." I would say, "What you do with that is all important in the eyes of God. The choices you make respecting the desires of your heart, that's what you're going to be held accountable for."

This, Jay, is a deep issue between us, and I honestly don't know where to find the middle ground on something like this.

Deacon: The evangelical argument—which I certainly knew well because I grew up with it, learned it in an evangelical seminary and an Assembly of God



'The choices you make respecting the desires of your heart, that's what you're going to be held accountable for.'

* Rev. Ray Pritchard

bible collage—is that sexuality is the good gift of God. You have to be a Christian, whether you have the gift of celibacy or not. And St. Paul argues in Romans 1 that somebody like me got to be this way for the purpose of defying God. I threw off my real heterosexual nature. That's not my story. That's not the story of anybody I know. So I don't know who he's talking about, but he's not talking about me.

Pritchard: Yeah, he is talking about you, and he's talking about every other gay and lesbian person in the world. You are gay because you choose [it]. Every homosexual relationship was a chosen one.

I don't believe anybody ever wakes up and says, "Well, I'm going to be homosexual today." I think it's a choice for some people while we're growing up. I agree this is a very complex issue. But, yeah, I think Paul is right, Jay I really do. You are what you are because you threw off what God said.

Deacon: There you have the essential

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disagreement. For me to hang my whole life on that which utterly violates my own nature—the words of St. Paul [and his] attitudes about sex, about women, about the equality of sexes. There isn't any reason on earth I should take St. Paul's word for it. Who's he?"

I spent a few years in the Metropolitan Community Church in Hartford and Chicago, making the case that the Bible isn't really so anti-gay. I mostly still think so, but there are a few exceptions. I still think that most of the passages from the

Bible used to make a case against homosexuality are a very poor use of scripture or exegesis.

Pritchard: It's hard to get around Romans 1.

Deacon: If St. Paul were sitting right there, he would not be agreeing with me. He would be agreeing with Pritchard.

Pritchard: Jay and I agree on that.

Deacon: The point is, I don't think St. Paul is authoritative. I don't believe that any human literature is without fault, flowing directly from God. There are many wonderful writings with much wisdom, and it's all a big mixed bag. I don't much like what Paul had to say about slavery and

women. I'm not going to just find some new way around it. I'm going to say, "Paul, you're wrong." He's not wrong about everything, but then neither are you or I.

But, is there no room in your faith to be able to say the Bible is wrong on anything?

Pritchard: I think there is. I'll ramble on my because I have to. Just as I said the great point earlier that we have to say sometimes there's a mystery here we don't understand. If you said to me, "Do you understand everything in the Bible?" No, I don't know anybody who does, and I wouldn't trust anybody when they find a lot more in the Bible than I don't fully understand in terms of texts and passages. Some of them I have studied for years. You come to an understanding. Sometimes you come to a different understanding later. There are many mysteries.

But somebody said it's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me. It's the parts of the Bible I do understand. The difference between us is that Jay says, in all sincerity, Paul's wrong because it's a human book and a human author, and I say all scripture is given by inspiration of God. When Paul wrote, he was literally being guided by the Holy Spirit. What he wrote was what God wanted written.

Deacon: There's a lot of problems with that, of course. First of all, you better assume the people who find many with interest and the homosexuals. The shelfish

[prohibition] is just small stuff. If you've got to say this guy speaks for God, and the transmission from ancient documents to me is intact and perfect, then you pretty well got to buy the whole thing and do it.

On the other hand, if you both agree you don't understand everything in the Bible, then that may be close as you can get to common ground: the mystery of what God meant.

Pritchard: We both would say that I am sure.

Deacon: Yes, for me to sit here and say I understand it all would contradict previous statements I've made.

Pritchard: I believe it all. I wouldn't say that I understand it all. There are many mysteries. The points he's raising go back to hermeneutics class—questions of interpretation and so on.

Jay, do you homosexuals know they're heterosexual from an early age?

Deacon: Well, I know there's a lot of those now, but there's an awful lot of older stories—like the story of my former brother-in-law, who was going to go off and get "corrected." They were going to go to a shrink and get "fixed." So they got married, and they made a woman miserable. They made themselves miserable. They made a big mess, and then they finally came out.

Pritchard: One of the issues today is the whole existence of ministries, from our side, to people who want to come out of

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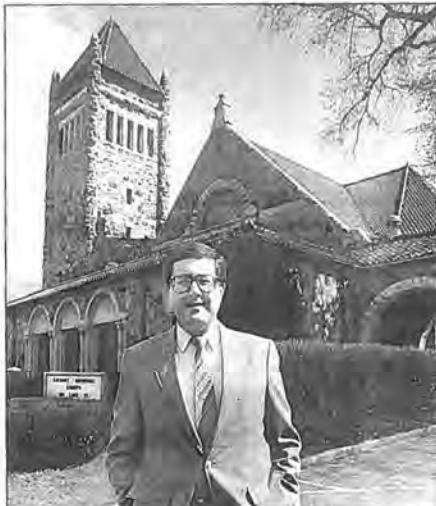
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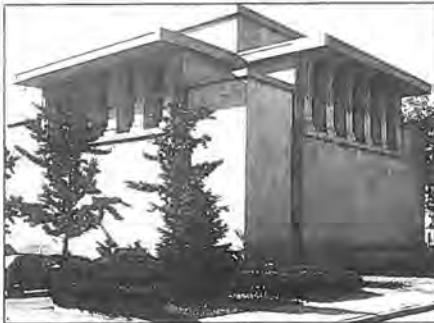
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the homosexual way of life. It's very controversial. Those ads ran a couple of years ago that you have referenced in one of your sermons. You won't be surprised to know I was quite happy with those ads, quite supportive.

I think the record is clear that there are thousands of men and women in America who don't get a lot of publicity, who are in the gay and lesbian lifestyle, who, through the power of God, have been truly, truly changed, and no longer are in that way of life. They're very happy and productive. Not all clients are married. Not all of them have kids.

By the way, I don't think the call of God to a homosexual person is: You must become heterosexual. I believe the call of God to a homosexual person is: You must become holy. And to become holy means you must leave that which God calls on and then walk in righteousness.

I am not with the people who say you've got to prove that you're truly converted by getting a wife and having kids. That may happen, but it may not. I also understand that people will struggle with temptation in the sexual area whether they are homosexual or heterosexual. Just because a person's come to Christ doesn't mean that the struggle and temptation of life will end when they've converted. But our belief is that, through Jesus Christ, real life transformation is possible.

Deacon: I certainly have no problem with anyone making whatever choice it is, if they can find peace. But I know a fair

amount about the evangelical ex-gays. Some of the folks in those very ads wound up returning.

Pritchard: Yes, there's a couple of pretty notorious stories.

Deacon: A couple of founders ended up falling in love and living together. I think you're talking about a program of torment for an awful lot of people to attempt this. I hate to see somebody go through that; that's their choice, that's their choice.

Pritchard: I think you're right. That's their choice. I don't think that anybody should be forced against their will in this area. You mean deprogramming?

Pritchard: That's right.

Deacon: It doesn't work anyway. That may work with kids who get into these weird cults in college, but sexuality is a powerful force.

Deacon: It's a powerful force that for it to be changed really requires a deep inner desire.

Deacon: And it still isn't going to be easy, and it's going to take time. Choice is very important.

Deacon: It sounds like you're both saying that if you are genuinely an evangelical fundamentalist personality, but you happen to be homosexual, you can still be a conservative Christian as long as you remain celibate. Is it possible to do this and feel good about it?

Deacon: That's their choice, but what investment have they got in that?

Pritchard: Celibacy is tough anyway, but it's impossible unless it's something that you really, really want. But that's our

position. Celibacy, walking in the way that God has commanded in his word, what happens after that, you have to wait and see. These are complex issues.

Deacon: I'm curious, Ken. You didn't bring together a center-right and a center-left. You reached a little further out here. What are you thinking? You have a certain passion for dialogue or you wouldn't have done this.

I'm fascinated by the question of whether two such different viewpoints can actually come to terms and find middle ground—whether it's "tolerance" or whatever we call it—to see if that's possible. You're right. I have a passion for dialogue, for seeing if there can take place. That's what I did.

Pritchard: I've been thinking about something, Jay, that you've called to my attention, that I'm going to change. In that sermon where it says, "we've tolerated them," I'm going to take that word out. That word shouldn't be in there. You've convinced me on that. It sends a message that I didn't want to send, and it's heard in a way that I don't want it to be heard. I'm going to take that out. I'm going to take it off the website. I'm going to take it off the printed sermon. I hadn't thought about your point of view. It's hard enough to say what you believe. Why say something that you know not being heard the way you want to be heard? You've convinced me on that.

Deacon: And when I say that rhetoric like this can lead to Matthew Shepard on a fence, I also know that you don't want Matthew Shepard on a fence. You wouldn't put Matthew Shepard on a fence. You're horrified by that.

Pritchard: I'm horrified by this guy (Fred Phelps), too. He's not every going to come to our church.

I want to end where I began. I want to make a pitch for our websites—uniteitemple.org, his is easier to remember than ours. Ours is cncop.org, which stands for Calvary Memorial Church Oak Park. Somebody already had calvarymemori-



'I'm going to take that word out. That word shouldn't be in there. You've convinced me on that. It sends a message that I didn't want to send, and it's heard in a way that I don't want it to be heard.'

* Ray Jay Deacon

al.com...

And if you want to put this interview on those websites, feel free. It might facilitate further dialog. I really appreciate both of you taking part in this.

Deacon: If we didn't like arguing, we wouldn't be here.

Pritchard: That's exactly right. We wouldn't be where we are today. I'm glad to meet you after all these years, Jay. Thank you, Ken, for doing this. There aren't a lot of newspapers that would do this. I think it's good for both sides—and for the people in the middle—to have these kinds of discussions.



Hugging: Jay Deacon (left) chairs with friends at the fourth annual OPAL Gala last June at the Mar-Luc House sponsored by the Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association.



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Church neighbors/ worlds apart



Viewpoints/WEDNESDAY JOURNAL

Can Rev. Ray Pritchard (left) and Rev. Jay Deacon agree on a definition of tolerance and find peaceful co-existence?

Edited by KEN TRAINOR

Their respective congregations gather each week within a block of the other, yet Rev. Ray Pritchard of Calvary Church and Rev. Jay Deacon of Unity Temple had never met—until last week, when we asked them to take part in an unusual dialogue at the offices of *Wednesday Journal*.

In spite of their geographical proximity, they are worlds apart—theologically, politically and in almost every other way imaginable. Deacon, who is gay, leads a congregation of free-thinking (and predominantly heterosexual) Unitarian-Universalists while Pritchard represents the straight-and-narrow path of Conservative Christians. Curious about whether there was any room at all for common ground, we asked them to sit in and discuss their positions on the thorny issues surrounding religion and homosexuality.

Pritchard, who has been at Calvary for 11 years and has become a familiar spokesperson for the Conservative Christian point of view in Oak Park, hails from Alabama, and still retains his accent. Deacon, who is starting his eighth year at Unity and is an outspoken advocate for gay and lesbian rights, hasn't lost his East Coast edge. Ironically, his early theological training was evangelical Christian.

One of the things that separates the two of you is the authority of the Bible. Conservative Christians say there is a strong Biblical basis for opposing homosexuality, but Unitarian-Universalists in particular do not consider the Bible to be the ultimate authority.

or **PREACHERS** on page 26

VIEWPOINTS

Preachers

*Continued from page 27***Deacon** *Unitarian-Universalists would say there are no bibles and many bibles. These particular books, some bishops, emperors and bureaucrats of the ancient church tell us, are the truths, while they banned and burned other documents. Emerson would say there are many scriptures and no single authoritative scripture because the final authority must exist within**your own experience of the divine.***Pritchard:** *One of the things that's really obvious, if you look at his web site and ours, you just get a good feel for two churches. We're a block apart, but we're on opposite sides of the spectrum. Neither one of us feels badly about that. We are who we are. Probably right here you've got two of the most controversial, notorious pastors in the village of Oak Park. He's been outspoken, and I've certainly been outspoken.**So then give us the quick overview of why homosexuality is wrong, according to the*

YARA WISCHER/WEDNESDAY JOURNAL

Impasse: Reverends Jay Deacon and Ray Pritchard aren't praying; they're searching for common ground.**Bible.****Pritchard:** *The brief answer is, as I read the scripture, that God has actually spoken—that the Bible truly is the word of God. That really is the difference. When we read the Book of Genesis, we see that God laid out the plan in the first two chapters—it's one man with one woman. Genesis, Chap. 2 says, "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." God's will for humanity, his design for marriage, is one man with one woman.**Admittedly, if you read on through the Bible, you see David having all these wives and Jacob had a bunch of wives. But, you know, every time they got into polygamy, it just got them into trouble. You can't find a time where polygamy helped anybody in the Bible.**Then you come to the other Biblical sexual, Genesis 19... you have the attempted homo-sexual rape in Sodom & Gomorrah. Then you come to the Book of Judges, the Book of Leviticus, where [there are] clear prohibitions against homosexuality in the Old Testament. Come into the New Testament, you've got the words of Jesus in Matthew, Chap. 19, reaffirming the Biblical view of marriage.**Then you've got the plain declaration, 1st Timothy, Chap. 1, and in 1st Corinthians, Chap. 6, that classes homosexuality with murder, with adultery, with thievery. In fact, 1st Corinthians 6 even says no homosexual shall inherit the Kingdom of God.**Probably the clearest statement is the Book of Romans, Chap. 1, where Paul talks about how humanity has turned away from God, and all humanity is now under the wrath of God. One result is idolatry, prostitution, circumcision, verse 22, and 27. Paul says that when humanity turns away from God, one of the results is widespread, open homosexuality as society continues to spiral downward. Finally, at the end of the chapter, he says they not only do these things, but they rejoice in those who do them. They praise their public.**So there's a pretty bleak picture painted in the Book of Romans. I do understand that there are some attempts to reinterpret the Bible, [but] I think that most people with a good, average education, who read the Bible, would come to the conclusion—even if you don't consider it the word of God—that the Bible clearly says that homosexuality is wrong.**And Father, Jay, how do you or other ministers who do not oppose homosexuality, come to terms with what's in the Bible?***Deacon:** *A lot of folks who define themselves very clearly as Christians, don't agree with Ray about this. The Bible has finally gotten defined to these particular 66 books that you like. As late as the 16th Century, they were still arguing about what was in it.**But I have to say, it would be a tragic thing if the highest attainments of human consciousness had to be confined and defined by the light and the wisdom of thousands of years. In an era when slavery was considered the divine plan.**In the 19th Century, these were preachers all across the South, many in the North as well—defending the Southern slavery because the Bible, according to them, said*

TOM VONTHORN/WEDNESDAY JOURNAL

'Tell me, if we are not to be tolerated in Oak Park, where? An island in the ocean?'**Rev. Jay Deacon**
Unity Temple

slavery is the divine plan. It's God's will. It's certainly a very biblical institution.

Are we going to define the role of women according to the Bible? The Southern Baptist Church, according to selected passages of the Bible and St. Paul, certainly does.

But we can move beyond that. The finest religious voices throughout all of history have said very much what Emerson said: that at its heart and core and at its best, religion is about first-hand experience of the divine—that the love that enfolds us and sustains us is not bound by the limited knowledge of 2000 years ago, that human consciousness still unfolds, that God speaks. Emerson, in his words, had an inkling that God speaks, but that God speaks.

There are a lot of ways of being religious that are not reliant upon the limited grasp of St. Paul. There are some very serious perils in hooking ourselves to the authority of St. Paul, of the Levitical prohibitions. The church has designated some of them "moral law"—the ones they figure they can fulfill and everyone better—and the ones they can't, they'll call "ceremonial law." So if you want to eat shellfish, that's ceremonial law. That doesn't apply. You don't propose that people who lend money be stoned to death, but that's what the Bible says.

And so it is with the institution of marriage, men and women for the purpose of procreation. That seemed to make a lot of sense when the world seemed pretty enormous and our tribe seemed pretty small and



Clear Sky Street Festival

Saturday, September 9
(rain date September 10)

4:00-9:00 p.m.
Keystone Park

Lake St. & Keystone Ave. adjacent to the park
Free for everyone! (food will be sold separately)

Join the Police Department, the Park District and the Community Center for an evening of positive fun! Bring your friends and family and step by for a picnic or organized events and activities on the streets of River Forest! Local vendors will sell food. Features include a moonwalk, dunk tank, carriage rides, climbing wall, giveaways and more!

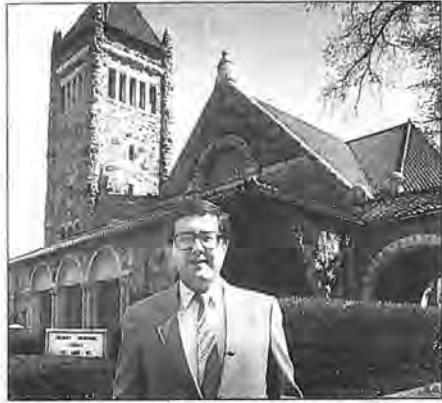
Dance to a DJ, Chomp on some Chow
(hot dogs, pop, ice cream & more)

And Go Goofy on the Games!

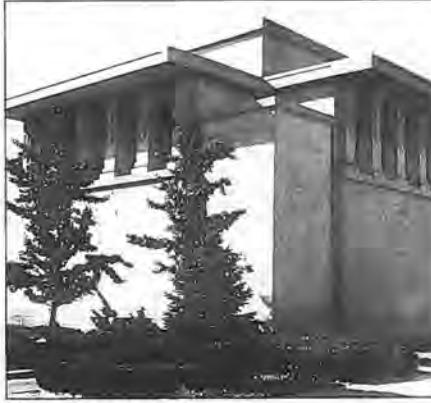
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Kendra Sullivan at the RF Police Department
366-8500 ext. 343
Cindy Simpson at the RF Park District
366-6660 or Holly Simmons at the RF Community Center 771-6159

Choose The Right Path



Time warp: Rev. Ray Pritchard (left) stands before Calvary church in the early 1990s. Rev. Jay Deacon preaches at the Unity Temple.



weak. We better reproduce. But if you're going to be consistent, then let us declare invalid marriages that don't produce children, or at least forbid sexuality in marriages that cannot or don't. Let's be consistent. But if marriage is about God and not exclusively biological children, if it's about companionship, about mutual love and sexual stimulus to growth, then let's be consistent with that. But you can't have it both ways.

In spite of Conservative Christian criticism about homosexual promiscuity, do you know gay couples who are capable of committing to a lifelong monogamous marriage?

Deacon: Of course I do. I think immediately of my cousin and his monogamous, permanent relationship with a British man. I think of what they go through because of discriminatory laws in the United States, what they have to do to make sure that none of his partners—when they lived in Britain, after all—where my cousin would gain permanent residency. But because of the discriminatory laws and the hatred of gay people in the United States, there is a constant battle, constant fear, trying to stay together in a nation whose laws want them apart. It's a painful thing to watch. The laws we presently have are very destructive to same-sex relationships, and there are those who want it that way.

Pritchard: What our laws should be doing is making a judgment about what marriage is and should be. When Utah wanted to become a state, heavily Mormon, it went all the way to the Supreme Court, which said at the time that gay marriage shall be outlawed in the United States. That's a whole situation, assessing the whole situation, made a decision that marriage is this, and it's not that.

Deacon: That was a case where the

Supreme Court ruled that U.S. law isn't going to float from a church's doctrine.

Pritchard: Our point, Jay, is that the common good of America is served when marriage is reserved for what it has always been: a man and one woman, joined together in a marriage covenant for life, and that there be no room allowed for same-sex relationships at all.

Deacon: That's the standpoint of the heterosexual majority and its cultural imperialism. The good of people who happen to be gay or lesbian doesn't count—the happiness, the need for companionship ...

Pritchard: But that very argument was used by the Mormons in Utah and was found to be convincing. And I think by many people today, that same argument is found to be specious. The common good is upheld when it is one man with one woman for a lifetime.

Don't you mean the common good of the most people?

Pritchard: That it is in the common interest of humanity, the common interest of society, that marriage be [so] defined.

Or to at least have a single definition.

Deacon: Now how are you going to have a single definition of marriage? There are institutions that go back for centuries—that have been largely defined by the property rights of the man and labor, in that the patriarch of the family needed some help running his farm or whatever. You selected a wife who could help you. That family, consisting of people

you might buy or sell or beat or kill or love or whatever you wanted, belonged to you. They were defined also by the ability of a family to raise a dowry or the need of a family to receive one.

In other words, society's definition of marriage and family has changed over the centuries.

Deacon: Of course it has. And for anyone to say my particular definition of marriage and family has the weight of history and tradition is preposterous.

Pritchard: And that is precisely what we're saying. The definition of marriage as one man—one woman—does have the weight of history, of tradition, and it does come from the hand of God.

Deacon: And I couldn't disagree more with a statement than that. Meanwhile, the well-being of gay and lesbian people is adversely affected to the extent that that particular view is enforced upon society

and upon us legislatively. I don't much care what a person chooses to believe or preach in church until it becomes dangerous to me. And, Ray, this is from a sermon of yours upon the election of Joanne Trapani [in 1998].

"In Oak Park this week, we crossed a line that should not have been crossed. Last Tuesday, we elected a self-professed lesbian to the board of trustees. Oak Park is under the judgment of God—not because we have homosexuals living in our midst, but because we have tolerated them, we have welcomed them, we have celebrated them, and

now we have elected them. This is our corporate shame, and it is a mark of God's judgment that this has happened."

Now when I read that, then you shake my hand and say, "Nice to see you." I don't believe you—because you've said this. This compares very closely with attitudes at the beginning of the 20th Century, the utter obsession with hatred of Jews that characterized the right wing in Germany. The compulsion with hatred of gay people seems to characterize the right wing in America.

Pritchard: Could I make a couple of comments here? Number one, I did say that. Number two, the *Wednesday Journal* was kind enough to quote that [at the time]. The Oak Leaves quoted that. And I wrote a letter to them, and they printed it and I signed it when I said, "And just for the record, so you'll know, that sermon is on our web site. We've never taken it off. It's on there for the whole world to see. I think, Jay, this gets down to the nub of the issue."

Deacon: What you want is for me not to exist.

Pritchard: I do agree there has been far too much animosity from people who call themselves Christians toward gay and lesbian people.

Deacon: But you don't want the village of Oak Park to tolerate my being here?

Pritchard: I really, really do not appreciate this fellow from Kansas, Fred Phelps, who goes around saying, "I'm here to tell you to be a Christian, he's got a web site, Godhatesfags.com, filled with such bile, such hatred. I want to get everything out on the table. If the question is asked, how do I feel about the violence against gay and lesbians?"

Deacon: You just did violence against gays and lesbians—the kind of statement

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you made [in the 1997 sermon] to I don't know how many people is the kind of thing that leads to Matthew Shepard being in a fence.

Prichard: You know, there's really no way to respond because I basically are defining the term in such a way that we can't even have a conversation.

Jay: *If Conservative Christians say homosexuality is wrong, is that really connected to a single spectrum that ends in anti-gay violence?*

Deacon: No, there's a difference. There's a difference between saying, "We believe this is wrong. We're not going to do this," and saying, "This village should not tolerate you being here."

Prichard: What I really believe is we shouldn't have censored her, and I'm sorry that we did. But I don't mean that in a personal sense. I'm sure she's a wonderful person, but she's a homophobe, and she's a homophobe.

If we did not openly gay people to office. Now I happen to believe that she's probably done a great job as a trustee. It's not about that. And I also accept the democratic process. If somebody from my side ran for office and identified themselves as a strong evangelical Christian, there are people in this village who would vote against that person on that basis. And you know what? That's OK with me.

He said there's too much animosity from Conservative Christians toward gays. Do their pastor do enough to disown that animosity and speak against it?

Prichard: Good question. Whatever we do is probably not ever going to be enough, but we don't get enough credit for what we

do. A couple of years ago, sometime after the Matthew Shepard killing, there was a march through Downtown Oak Park and came up by the church. A week later there was an article in the Oak Leaves. In the article, a speaker evidently said at the rally, "Why doesn't Pastor Ray Prichard condemn the violence and the killing of Matthew Shepard?" I was angry when I heard that because the Sunday after he was killed, I got up and said to my congregation, "This is wrong."

I said, "Violence is not the way to bring the message of Christ to the world." I was angry that the Oak Leaves didn't even bother to pick up the phone and call me. They printed a slander against me without even calling to check. I wrote them a pretty tough letter which they would not publish. I've written letters to the *Journal* for it years.

We're in kind of a Catch 22, so I want to go on record clearly saying I oppose all forms of discrimination. I oppose all forms of discrimination, all threats against anybody on the basis of what they say, what they do, their sexual orientation, their religion, their racial background, their ethnic background. And I am very glad that those people who left Matthew Shepard out there hanging have been brought to justice.

Deacon: Fred Phelps said almost exactly what you just said. I think you have a fundamental problem, and it's a problem that I had in my fundamentalist days, too. If you say that we must not tolerate having homosexual living here, and then you say what you just said, those two statements don't jive.

Prichard: In all practicality, Jay, I will not let you decide for me where my state-

ments jive. I stand by both of them.

Deacon: Tell me, if we are not to be tolerated in Oak Park, where? An island in the ocean?

Prichard: No.

Then what exactly do you mean by "not tolerating" their presence here?

Prichard: I thought Kathryn Stockett's column ["A viewpoint"] was wonderful in Oak Park? [Wednesday, Aug. 23] was wonderful this week. She pointed out that if "in tolerance" means to accept, then we're going to have a hard time getting along. If "tolerate" means to be patient and to try to be charitable toward those with whom you have deep disagreements, we can do that. I think we ought to try to get along. We ought to try to live together, try to be friendly. Politically and emotionally and theologically, we're on opposite ends of the spectrum. But I want you to know that I'm glad you're at Unity Temple.

I could tell you reading [your web site] that you really do care about your community, and I think you're doing a good job. I think that you're doing them a good service in providing the ministry they want. I think they're fortunate to have you there. I wish you all the best. I wish you long life and good health.

We've lived in the same town for eight years. We've never met each other before now, but I'm glad to meet you today. I'll be glad to meet you tomorrow, and I will treat you with personal kindness and respect whenever I see you. The only issue our swords are going to cross is when matters respecting homosexuality come out in the public arena. I hope that you and the folks in the community to all of us. What happens in the government of Oak Park is a concern to all of us. And we are certainly going to

speak up and make our views known.

What would tolerance look like to you, if it were true tolerance?

Deacon: There are conditions under which tolerance really isn't possible. Under the conditions defined by the Apostle Paul, where the sinners are consigned to hell, there isn't any tolerance. The Apostle Paul views sinners as in an ancient fear or ignorance or prejudice, divine authorization and pronounces the ultimate condemnation upon such people. If you're going to go quite literally with the Apostle Paul, there isn't any basis for tolerance.

Prichard: Jay, we are not going to give up our foundation. We are not going to do that. As far as I'm concerned, we are far more intolerant of me than I am of you. I am much more willing to live with you, especially, than you are to live with me. Let the record show.

Deacon: The last contradiction that, Jay, I have never seen anything like this among evangelicals Christians. I don't think anything like this is done by evangelical Christians. But when you make public statements like this, this is kind of thing that leads, for us, to a new Holocaust.

Prichard: You basically are putting me with the Nazis. [Earlier] you tried to put me with the slaveholders. Really, I don't think we're going to be having a cocktail together, my friend.

Deacon: I don't think so.

Prichard: You basically are putting me with the slaveholders. Really, I don't think we're going to be having a cocktail together, my friend.

Deacon: No, Ray, the record is right here.

Next week: An inter-faith barbecue to celebrate tolerance as a mutual goal?

Moratorium will help end barbarous penalty

A number of Oak Parkers attended a recent conference held at the Thompson Center by the commissioners studying the death penalty in Illinois. The commissioners were seeking input on the punishment of Chicago-area residents. It was truly remarkable. There were over 100 people present and about 50 testimonials were given.

The environment was almost utopian in its perception and understanding of the evil of trials and executions practiced in Illinois (and elsewhere). In view of the pervasive popularity of capital punishment in our country, the witness of evil described that morning seemed phenomenal.

Statistical and conclusive evidence of willful misconduct, insure, willful evidence, illegalities and bias was presented many times over by attorneys, researchers, a rabbi, several pastors and others.

Since the death penalty was given by mothers, sisters and wives of men and boys sentenced to death row after dishonest convictions against their sons and relatives. It was impossible not to feel sorrow for the emotional, grieving despair and sobys of these women who had lived through anguish

trials against their relatives.

Sadly, our criminal justice system is too often governed by a "pro-forma" category. Racial, ethnic, poverty and minority characteristics fit neatly into a "suspect-profile" category. Too often, heavy-handed police workmen, prosecutors eager for conviction, and overzealous and biased systems create a bias that leads to discriminatory victories. The unfortunate defendant who easily fits the suspect-profile has the double jeopardy of court-appointed inferior defense.

Stacked evidence is easy to win over inadequate defense. Too incredible to believe, we say. Well, the appointment of a Moratorium

Commission on the Death Penalty after 13 wrongful death sentences broke a record against the 12 executed "criminals" in Illinois history bears witness to that bad habit in our criminal justice system.

A Moratorium 2000 is active now, seeking to end capital punishment worldwide—

—aimed at the U.S.—along with a number of moral and social practices that barterous, brutal practice. Signs petitions will be presented to the United Nations on Dec. 10.

Oak Parkers who wish to take part may call 386-2891 for more information.

Dorothy Willey
Oak Park

Contract extension is good news for OP schools

I have read the *Wednesday Journal's* articles and discussions regarding the five-year extension of District 97 Superintendent Jack Fagan's contract. What that means to me is that Oak Park's children will have at least five more years of stable, focused and challenging elementary education.

My first year teaching in District 97 was 1966. Since then I've seen superintendents swing in and out our door. In my opinion, none has possessed the intellectual and emotional match with the community that Jack possesses.

My very best to Jack, the District 97 Board of Education and the community that Oak Park.

Sandra J. Oliver, D.97 administrator
Special Education, 1973-1993

Needed: FDR, Jr. to save us from WWIII

On April 12, 1945, the day President Franklin Roosevelt died, I was a 19-year-old Morse Code and Radio-Teletype opera-

tor stationed on the island of Terceira, a Portuguese possession located in the North Atlantic Ocean.

While working one of the teletype machines, a message came from Washington, D.C. It contained words from Steven Ealy, President Roosevelt's Press Secretary. Fifty-five years later I still remember the message and the words of the message. He said, "President Roosevelt died at Warm Springs, Georgia. He lived his life as he wanted to and now has passed away." Needless to say, those of us who had lived through the economic depression years of the 1930s and the war years, 1939-45, were shocked at his death.

Franklin Roosevelt's death continues to have tragic consequences for all of us. Some scholars believe if he had survived a number of years longer, there would not have been the Cold War with its enormous waste of lives and resources.

In a world now bristling with nuclear weapons, a president who had worldwide foreign policy mistakes since 1945, where is there a person of Roosevelt's stature to help change events away from possible World War III disaster?

William Beck
Oak Park



NEED TO REACH US?

Call Viewpoints Editor
Ken Trainor at 524-8300, ext. 136
ktrainor@wjinc.com

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Unity Temple



Calvary Memorial Church

**'If you can't speak
the truth in love,
don't speak at all'**

Part two of a three part conversation between
Rev. Ray Pritchard and Rev. Jay Deacon

Edited by KEN TRAINOR

When we asked Rev. Jay Deacon of Unity Temple and Rev. Ray Pritchard of Calvary Memorial Church to sit down for a conversation on gay rights and The Bible, we didn't expect a lovefest. Though their congregations meet within a block of the other, they are on opposite ends of the theological and political spectrum. Pritchard has long been considered a spokesperson for conservative Christians in Oak Park, whereas Deacon heads the liberal Unitarian-Universalists and is an active advocate for gay rights. Part II follows the initial broadsides with a

more focused effort to find areas of agreement:

Is there something Ray Pritchard or other conservative Christians could do, Jay, that would convince you there's a possibility for tolerance?

Deacon: Yes. If a person can say, "My knowledge is finite. I can be wrong. God is judge and not me. I don't always know the mind of God perfectly. There are many things in the Bible that are not perfectly clear to me that are certainly problems. I

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have this problem because of how I understand the Gospel, but in humility, I'm not God, and I'm just going to have to acknowledge my limitations and say I don't know what the answer is."

So someone could still say they're opposed to homosexuality, but you need a public declaration that they're not condemning you to hell. I'm still opposed to it because of what I read in the Bible, but I can live with you because I'm not your judge?

Deacon: Certainly, and over the years I have known people who have taken that stance. I can respect that stance.

Rev. Deacon: You take that stance?

Pritchard: In truth, you want me to be something other than what I am, which is a person who truly believes. The Bible is the word of God and must be applied to the problems of modern society.

I know you're morally opposed, but are you morally right?

Pritchard: I don't think that's what he's really saying. Jay, what I think you're really saying is, in the end, what you believe is The Bible's not the word of God, not in the sense that we use the term. And the only way an evangelical Christian is going to come to what you said, truly, is to give up their belief that The Bible is the word of God.

Remember when we had the vote on the referendum [for the domestic partnership recognition]? We were in the middle of that, and some guy called me. I didn't know

you to hell because of who you are, what you say, what you do. In the end, The Bible says, we must each of us stand individually before the Lord to be judged for what we've done. On that day, we'll all stand there. And there's going to be a lot of surprises when we get to heaven.

Somebody said there'll be three surprises: 1) Some people are there that you didn't expect to see there; 2) Some people aren't there that you were sure were going to be there; and the biggest surprise of all will be that people who are there—so great is the grace of God.

So I'm very happy to look at you and say, I don't know. I'm only in sales. God's in administration. I'm happy to leave it there. I don't want to look at anybody and say, "You're going to hell" or "You're going to heaven." That's in the hands of God.

Jay, I've heard a lot of conservative Christians or evangelical Christians claim that they are just as much the victims of bashing as gay. You are or other gays intolerant of conservative Christians?

Deacon: I went to public school. I know how I was treated because people thought I was gay. I was treated in this society for 54 years. I've been harassed on the streets more than once. I've been discriminated out of jobs. Are evangelical Christians victims of bashing? I don't believe in that sense that they are.

Many of us have a certain sense of missing out on giving evangelical Christians because there has been a pretty consistent rhetoric against gay and lesbian people coming from them. We have sought to counter that, but I don't think it's fair to



TOM WILSON/WEDNESDAY JOURNAL

Collision course: "When you start in two different places, it's going to be hard to come together fully."

try about it.

You don't take it personally?

Not at all. If you're going to live in Oak Park, and if you're going to stick your head above the ramparts, somebody's going to shoot at you. I think Oak Park is remarkably open-minded for people of many, many different backgrounds. I do think there's a lot of persecution of Christians, but it's not really here. It's in the Sudan, China, India, Nepal, other parts of the world where there's a greater religious persecution. Oak Park is a great place to live.

You're on record as being opposed to the violence against gay. Do you go further and push your congregation to examine themselves about whether they have allowed some hatred of the sinner to creep in?

Pritchard: There's misguided people on every side, people who are emotionally unbalanced and people who become radical and go across the edge. I've told our people over and over again, "Look, we're here to hold up the word of God and tell people that Jesus Christ can really change your life." I'm not going to say "gay" that you're yelling at them, you're segmenting at them, if you're shooting at them, if you're shouting at them, how are they going to listen? How are they going to be convinced? If you feel like you need to resort to namecalling or intimidation, you don't belong in Calvary Memorial Church. Go somewhere else."

Do you think it's out of bounds to take the step beyond disapproval and oppose laws that protect homosexual rights?

Pritchard: Heck no.

Why can't that be a hurdle act?

Pritchard: If I were in your shoes, that's the way I would see it, but the whole essence of a representative democracy is that you bring your own views to the table, and you make your views known. The po-

litical arena is rough-and-tumble and compromise and see what you can get done. I think that's all to the good.

Deacon: Let me say something that I think could be the basis for a peaceful coexistence. I was in Vermont this past month [where] there is full legal recognition of civil unions with all the rights enjoyed by heterosexuals, genuine equality. It's not marriage. Of course, so long as there is marriage, I'm going to fight for the right to marry. But what Vermont has done is fairly unique. It is not so unique. Vermont may or may not satisfy this standard depending on your religious beliefs. But before the law, we're equal. In Vermont, the wedding of church and state has been undone, at least in this new institution of civil unions. That's the way I think it ought to be. In a pluralistic society, equal rights have been assured by law in a way that does not compromise the religious institutions that don't want to recognize it. It makes the religious ritual of marriage a separate thing from the legal contract.

Pritchard: Speaking of suspicions, the suspicion on our side is that they're doing this to us to see how we stand on the way to full marriage benefits recognized by the state. From a purely pragmatic point of view, it will be really interesting to see what the courts do with this, because I don't think this is the last state where this is going to happen. This battle's going to be fought all across the country. I don't have a strong sense what the final outcome's going to be.

Deacon: This holds possibility for coming to terms, and it does another good thing because I don't think we clergy ought to be signing legal forms that assure people legal benefits and economic benefits. We should be doing the religious thing.

Pritchard: Actually I generally agree with that.

I assume, Ray, that you're opposed to



WEDNESDAY JOURNAL/EDWARD RICHARD

Call to worship: Rev. Jay Deacon (left) during an interfaith service at Unity Temple with the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

him. He was on our side of that issue. He said, "Rev. Pritchard, you're on record as saying that not everybody who disagrees with you is going to go to hell." I am on record as saying that. I said, "In the end, God is in charge of where you're where when we die." He's in charge of all of us. "I told him, "Look, I'm in sales, an administrator." That's really the way I feel.

Deacon: That's heartening to hear.

Pritchard: Jay, the truth is, I do not know where you're going to go when you die. But you know what? I don't consign

say that this discrimination or bashing works both ways.

So if not intolerance, then a lot of suspicion?

Deacon: There's suspicion, there's fear for our being.

Pritchard: There's too much complaining from our side—I'm talking about conservative Christians. I'm not for that charge that I'm being persecuted. Jay and I are mixing it up pretty good, but he's a big guy. I am, too. So what? I'm going to go home and eat lunch. I'm not going to wor-

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having the government tell you that you have to marry gays in your church.

Pritchard: I can't foresee that happening. That would present a challenge.

Deacon: In the Vermont solution, that would never happen.

Clearly there are suspicions on both sides of this discussion. People talk a lot about "hidden agendas." So, do you buy the notion of a "gay hidden agenda?"

Pritchard: There's no "hidden" agenda. You can read what Jay writes. He's pretty upfront about it. They want full acceptance of their life and their relationship in society. Is that pretty fair, Jay?

Deacon: I think so. When people say "hidden agenda," they add a few little twists—like gay people want to recruit children. But set those things aside—rhetoric to excite an audience or something. Do we want full civil rights protection? Do we want equality before the law? You bet. That's an agenda.

Pritchard: And one part of our agenda is to do whatever we can to change as possible. That's a political issue. That's a cultural issue, too, as things have shifted in our society the last 20 or 30 years. Actually, I'm pretty cheerful about this. I think the tide, Jay, is probably rolling more in your direction. At one level I'm not happy about that, but at another level, that's the way it is, and you either live in the world you're in ... or not. There's a lot more talk about homo-sexuality everywhere in our society than there was 30-40 years ago.

Deacon: Well, there are a lot more gay and lesbian people who are "out." And that makes all the difference.

Pritchard: I may not particularly like

Jay and I are mixing it up pretty good, but he's a big guy, I am, too. So what? I'm going to go home and eat lunch. I'm not going to worry about it.

* Ron Ray Pritchard



Moving heaven and hell: "I don't have a hell, but if I had one, I wouldn't send him there."

that, but I also have decided, life is short. I'm not going to spend my days being angry about huge cultural trends that I can't personally control. Life is too short. You have to pick your battles. You have to decide what you're going to concern about and what's not going to matter. I'm not happy about the fact that the gay rights movement has made all of these strides, but I'm smart enough to recognize it and say, "It's happening." I'm not happy about that.

I do think it's really good if we can find a way to live together, even though we have big disagreements and even though in the political arena we're going to be fighting each other. I also think it's very good, on both sides, if we find a way to use rhetoric that doesn't unnecessarily enflame.

Deacon: Sure, and I think there are a couple of things here that I would want conservative Christians to think about: 1) I would hope they would have enough confidence in their own heterosexual marriage to fear it's not a fragile thing that it's going to be undermined by the other side. 2) The idea of forcing religious institutions to marry same-sex couples is absurd. Gay and lesbian folks are not interested in forcing evangelical churches to conduct marriage for same-sex couples. We respect the religious views of other people, of these churches. The civil union leaves religious their integrity, leaves them to operate within the religious realm without becoming instruments of the state to carry out pluralistic state policies that are going to violate their particular beliefs. We shouldn't be doing that. And that's the genius of civil unions.

Pritchard: What I'm hoping is that, as we continue to have this over the next few years, with many more discussions like this taking place, we can do it with a tone of as much reasonableness as possible, understanding that when you start in two different places, it's going to be hard to come to-

gether fully. But I do think the point you've raised is very important—that churches not be forced to do something that is against their own deeply held convictions. That we all agree on. That's truly un-American, against the principles that nation was founded upon. Is there some fear of that among conservative Christians? Yeah, there is.

Pritchard: And I want to say that fear is unfounded, but I understand that it would be there.

Let's posit peaceful co-existence and the end of hostile rhetoric. What about interaction? I assume there hasn't been much interaction on both sides.

Pritchard: In my congregation, my people tell me the opposite. You've already made the point that homosexuals have come out of the closet much more in the last 20-30 years. So it's no surprise that my people in the universities and the public schools, in their places of work, deal with gay and lesbian people in the streets, as their bosses, as people who work for them, as their neighbors. I think there needs to be—I'm not going to say more interaction—but I tell people you ought to try to be friends with everybody. You ought not to say, "I'm only going to be friends with people who are just like me." We've got a message to share, the message of the Gospel. Plus, it's good common Christianity. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself. I don't find that my people live in a cocoon.

But there's an evangelical dimension to conservative Christianity. Does the moral obligation share your faith extend only to preventing disapproval of homosexuality or does it extend to trying to change that person?

Pritchard: Jesus said, go and take the good news to every creature. Boy, it's a sad version of Christianity if I look at Jay, and the only thing I can say to him is "Sinner,

sinner, you're going to hell." That's a sad version of Christianity. It's also a sad version of me.

That's the bad news. It's also a sad version if every time I see Jay, the only thing I want to talk about is homosexuality and my religion. We ought to talk about all of life, all of creation, all of God's life for evangelical Christians is what we believe about Jesus Christ and sharing the Good News. In the normal course of time, whether you are talking to a person who is gay or straight, if you develop a friendship, eventually those topics are going to come up, and you ought to talk about it. And you ought to share Christ. And, yes, in there you're probably going to get that homosexuality in Romans 1 and Genesis, and what's going to happen then depends on the person, depends on the previous relationship. Could that end the friendship? Yes, but there are a lot of times when it won't.

I tell my people, "Build friendships. Don't look at people as objects of conversion. Build relationships. Open doors, pray, and remember, this is Good News, not Bad News. Share the Good News and see what God does."

Deacon: I take this to be very genuine. I don't have a hell, but if I had one, I wouldn't send him there.

Pritchard: Thank you, sir, thank you. We ought to have a sense of humor, and we ought to build relationships. I know there's a stereotype of evangelical Christians being "the army" going to crash the opposition. You can't do that to people by crushing them. You can't do that to people.

Deacon: There's a tremendous range of interaction, personalities, points of view. In the recent issue of a gay newspaper in Boston, there was a long interview with Tammy Faye Bakker. Now I never did like her make-up—or her singing—very much. But her attitudes toward gay folks are marvelous. She's an evangelical Christian—there's no doubt about that. Stereotypes don't serve us well. You might be surprised if you're locked into your stereotype.

Pritchard: That's not easy to get to. The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians 4, said, "Speak the truth in love." That's what I'm there. You have to speak the truth loudly, we've got to do it in love. For all of us, it's really easy to fall off in one of those extremes. I am going to speak the truth—sort of "sins in the hands of an angry God"—and there are times, I think, when strong language is very necessary. But it's also possible to fall off the other side and say, "I'm going to love you, but I'm not going to tell you the truth that I think you really need to hear."

The challenge for Christians is to speak the truth, but to speak it in love. I would go so far as to say to my own people, "If you can't speak the truth in love, then don't." Wait until you can. Take a deep breath, wait until you can speak the truth in love. If you can't speak it in love, don't speak it at all because the danger will be that what you're trying to say won't be heard anyway. It'll just increase the anger and the hostility, which doesn't help any of us.

*** But what about gays in the schools? Stay tuned for next week's third and final segment.**



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