

Hubert Kennedy

Coming Out in Providence

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Please send any comments and suggestions to: hubertk@pacbell.net.



Hubert Kennedy in front of Providence College Library (1980)

Introduction

Some years ago an editor approached me with the request that I shorten and bring up to date my booklet *Coming Out in Providence* (1976) for inclusion in a collection of coming-out stories. I did not do it, thinking that I would have to cut out the Bicentennial Event part of the story, which is historically valuable. Nor did I see a way to revise my own “coming-out” story in a way that would reflect my current situation. But perhaps now is the time to reissue the booklet in an ebook edition that leaves it the historical document I intended it to be.

It is interesting that during the celebrations of the bicentennial of the United States in 1976 there were, I believe, only two official events that were gay related—and the one in Providence, Rhode Island, was the only one that was such by order of a federal judge. My booklet contains the story of the struggle to bring that about. It also tells my personal story in a way that was meant to be encouraging to other gay persons. Here, the events related are accurate, but the tone is much more optimistic than I really felt at the time. I also felt restrained in my criticism of Providence College, since I wanted to keep my daily routine as professor of mathematics as pleasant and viable as possible. And so I avoided expressing views that would antagonize my colleagues.

Nor is this the place to do it. For what purpose? Providence College is a small liberal arts college run by the Dominican Order of the Catholic Church. This is the order that ran the Spanish Inquisition. In the words of one of the priests on campus: “The thirteenth was the greatest of centuries. The world has gone downhill since.” I left Providence College in 1986 and moved to San Francisco, glad to be rid of the oppressive atmosphere that during my last ten years there turned me into a non-person—or viewed me as “the” campus homosexual, since apparently my coming-out story encouraged no one else there to follow my example. A handful of closeted gay men introduced themselves to me, but I was friendly with only one of the Dominican priests at the college, a professor of philosophy, and I only saw him in my own home, where he visited me in drag and called himself “Patti.”



Hubert Kennedy and Patti

My original booklet was self-published in an edition of less than 200 copies, and so had only a small circulation. I have not changed it for this ebook edition, since it does accurately reflect the anti-homosexual attitude of the time and the courage of the small group that fought to be recognized as part of the bicentennial celebrations. For the historical record, I have added in an appendix a couple of public speeches I made in Providence. One was part of the Bicentennial Event described in the booklet. The other was at a hearing on a proposed anti-discrimination law for the state a couple of years later, where I urged that sexual orientation be included. That did not happen. I have also added a few footnotes (the original booklet had no footnotes) to correct historical inaccuracies and further identify a few persons mentioned in my narrative.

The original edition had only two photographs: one of the Rev. Joseph H. Gilbert, who spearheaded the move to have a Congress of People With Gay Concerns be part of the bicentennial celebrations in Providence, the other of me and Eric Gordon in the first gay pride parade in Providence. I hope that a new generation of gay people will find my “Coming Out in Providence” of interest!

Hubert Kennedy
San Francisco
June 2002



Reverend Joseph H. Gilbert

Coming Out in Providence

by Hubert Kennedy

Preface

This is the story of two events. One is my own ‘coming out’; the other is the first Gay Pride Parade in Providence. Although these two events are not separate—I was in the parade, and the parade was very much a part of my coming out—nevertheless I know the parade story primarily through newspaper reports. I had no part in planning it.

The man who almost single-handedly planned the parade and surrounding events, Rev. Joseph H. Gilbert, pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church in Providence, said in the spring of 1976 that I was the only “openly gay professional” in Rhode Island. This may have been true. (I wondered then what “professional” meant; now I am not sure what “openly gay” means.) But I do not pretend that my story is unique. Rhode Island is, after all, a very small state and seldom in the vanguard of any movement.

Nevertheless, the fact that a “Congress of People With Gay Concerns” became an official Bicentennial Event in Rhode Island is of historical interest and its story is worth telling. I know that story primarily as it touched me. Interest in my own story cannot be so general. Still, the world will not change overnight and some may be encouraged by reading it. I hope so. There is, then, a double reason for telling all this, and if the emphasis seems to be on my personal story, that is because I know it better.

In the preparation of this account, my special thanks go to Raymond Lariviere, who furnished me all relevant clippings from the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* (and who accidentally suggested the title “Coming Out in Providence”), and to my dear friend Gary Rocchio, who made coming out in Providence a pleasure and who urged me to write this story.

H I M

HIM is the name of the German monthly in which I placed a friendship ad in the late fall of 1974. This was the first time I had deliberately tried to contact other gay men. I was 43 years old and although I had lived in Providence for 13 years, I had no gay friends here, nor had I ever been in a gay bar. This will seem extraordinary to many young liberated gay persons, but I am sure my situation was not unusual. The reasons for it were not unusual, either.

I grew up in a small mining village in Florida. By the time I graduated from high school in 1949, I knew that I was sexually attracted to other boys, but at the beginning of my first year as a university student, I became a Catholic and absorbed the teaching that not only were homosexual acts sinful, but I also had an obligation to avoid other homosexuals as “occasions of sin.” This was still my attitude a dozen years later when in 1961 (after graduation, two years in the Army, another in a Jesuit novitiate, and several more in graduate school) I arrived in Providence to join the faculty of Providence College.

I had in the meantime also become convinced that my homosexuality was a disease that could be cured, so as soon as I could afford it, I carefully selected a psychiatrist who was Catholic (to avoid any conflict with my faith) and began what turned out to be four years of psychoanalysis. During all this time, my analyst remained optimistic about the possibility of my changing sexual orientation—he told me so each time he returned from his quarterly Florida vacations. Part of my ‘therapy’ consisted of carefully avoiding other homosexuals. Thus, it is not surprising that when I left for a year’s sabbatical leave in Italy in 1966, I knew no other gay people in Providence. The next eight years are not so easily explained.

For several reasons, although the results are certainly not unrelated, I returned from that year in Italy to neither psychoanalysis nor the Catholic Church. For a while my attitude toward analysis was simply disappointment; later I learned that the venture had been doomed from the beginning and I gradually acquired a more and more positive attitude toward homosexuality. What is not a sickness cannot be cured. My attitude toward relig-

ion also evolved, so that what began as a negative rejection of superstition turned into a positive acceptance of atheism.

But lifestyles do not change so quickly and, while this was an exciting intellectual and spiritual liberation, it all remained inside me. I very much wanted to be more open, but was afraid of the reaction I might receive. "I'd do it," I thought, "if I had someone to give me moral support." Somehow that person never materialized.

Thus, some time before I went to Germany in 1974, I had decided to experiment with 'coming out' there. If it worked, I reasoned, I can continue when I return to Providence. If I find that the reaction is too much for me, I can leave it behind me in Germany.

As it turned out, I began my experiment with a group of other Americans who were in a German language program with me in Berlin. The result was positive and one of that group has since become a very good friend. My next experiment (I still saw it as such) was at a conference of professional colleagues, mostly German. The result was again positive and, in fact, one of them has since become a very dear friend.

After that I settled down for the year on a Fulbright-Hays research grant, similar to the one I had in Italy in 1966-67, in Konstanz, a small, rather provincial town on the Swiss border. It was then that I advertised in HIM. That brought several replies, with varying degrees of interest, one of which resulted in a friendship with a charming young man, who recently took a Ph.D. at the Free University in Berlin, where he lives with another student.

I decided that my German coming out experiment had been a success, and I determined to continue it in Providence in the fall of 1975. I had in the meantime learned of the *Gay Community News* in Boston and, after my experience with HIM, thought that this would furnish a way to meet other gay men. One of the first things I did when I got back was to subscribe to *GCN*.

2

G A U 3

The first issue of *GCN* I received when my subscription started contained news of the third annual Gay Academic Union Conference (GAU3) to be held at Columbia Uni-

versity over the Thanksgiving weekend. I decided to attend. But the issue I saw first was sent me by a friend two weeks earlier and contained a news item that I found much more interesting, because it concerned Rhode Island. This was the report that the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission had rejected the request of the Rev. Joseph Gilbert that the 1976 Gay Pride events be incorporated into the Bicentennial festivities.

Rev. Gilbert had written the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission (known as "RI76") on 11 July 1975, saying: "We understand that the Old State House is being made available to community groups for public meetings and we would like to ask that we might explore with you the possibility of holding our Congress there." He was referring to his plan for a Congress of People With Gay Concerns. Taking note of the Commission's effort to involve the State's many diverse ethnic groups in the celebration, he said that "Gay people are not exactly an ethnic group, but the Gay Community is certainly a subculture within the larger community." In what was to become his touchstone, he added: "We have always been in your midst."

But at its 19 August meeting, RI76 rejected this request. Dr. Patrick Conley, chairman of the Commission, cited the so-called sodomy laws of Rhode Island as one reason for the rejection: "It was also the feeling of RI76, which is, of course, a state Commission, that certain practices advocated by the Gay Movement are in direct contravention of General law 11-10-1, and the interpretation of that statute by the Rhode Island Supreme Court in the State v. Milne, 98 R.I. 315 (1962). As a state agency it is inadvisable to endorse groups which advocate practices that are of questionable legality." (Section 11-10-1 of the general laws entitled "The abominable and detestable crime against nature" reads: "Every person who shall be convicted of the abominable and detestable crime against nature either with mankind or with any beast shall be imprisoned not exceeding twenty (20) years or less than seven (7) years.")

According to *GCN*, "Rhode Island's People With Gay Concerns is planning to sue that state's Bicentennial Commission for its refusal to incorporate gays into the Rhode Island Bicentennial celebrations. The gay organization has already enlisted the assistance of the American Civil Liberties Union and the ACLU's lawyers have tentatively agreed to take the case." I eagerly looked for further news of this in later issues of *GCN*, but found nothing. Assuming the matter had been dropped, I had forgotten all about it and

did not associate Rev. Gilbert with it when I finally met him in the spring. It was an underestimate of his persistence!

My more immediate concern in the fall of 1975 was the question of how to come out to the Providence College community and how to meet other gay men. Because of my German experience, the obvious answer to the second question was to place an ad in *GCN* and this was, in fact, moderately successful. The first question was not so easily answered. I began by coming out to members of my Mathematics Department, but most if not all of them knew already. Nor did I get any more reaction from several others with whom I talked. They either knew already or pretended they did. At any rate, their positive reactions matched my positive statement.

I wrote an acquaintance at Western Illinois University, whom I had met at the language program in Berlin, that I was “gradually coming out of the closet.” “How can you do it gradually?” he asked. “If you told three people at WIU one evening, it would be all over campus by next morning.” But this seems not always to be the case; it is more difficult to ‘go public’ than most people imagine. (A year later a pen pal in a somewhat similar situation in Toronto wrote me: “I’ll be interested to hear how you are getting on *continuing* coming out.”)

Not only was this aspect of coming out surprising, but the invariably positive reaction I received was unexpected, since every person with whom I had spoken predicted negative reactions and all advised against going public.

In earlier years I often wondered when meeting someone new, “What would he think if he knew that I am gay?” The question became, “What will he say when I tell him I am gay?” I needed some way to come out publicly, so that I wouldn’t have to look for ways to tell each individual. The campus weekly newspaper, *The Cowl*, immediately suggested itself. But could this be done without seeming contrived or sensational?

It occurred to me that I might report on my visit to the Gay Academic Union Conference in New York in November. I wasn’t sure what would happen there, but it would be current news and it would be an obvious context in which to state my own gayness. The editor of *The Cowl* was interested, but said that there would be only one issue of the paper before the Christmas recess and that was the annual all-sports issue. In January

GAU3 would no longer be news, but an interview about it might still be of interest. We tentatively agreed on that. I returned from New York even more enthusiastic.

GAU3 was a mind-blowing experience! The papers and discussions were very informative and I felt frustrated, not being able to attend all of them. But the most exhilarating thing for me was just to be together with 1000 other gay people. I had felt isolated for too long. I learned more about the gay movement in those three days than I had known before, and I returned to Providence more determined than ever to come out publicly. The annual campus ROTC Christmas party furnished the next occasion.

3

R O T C

The ROTC party is usually the earliest of the campus Christmas parties; this year it was held the afternoon of 10 December. I told a campus friend that I planned to wear the “Gay Power” button I had brought back from New York. He advised against it, but I was reaching the breaking point: I *had* to find out what the reaction would be. Besides, the case of ex-Air Force Staff Sgt. Leonard Matlovich was in the news at that time and I saw this as a “zap for Mat”. The trial of Matlovich was being discussed in the gay press and there was a long article about it in *The New York Times Magazine* of 9 November 1975, written by Martin Duberman, Distinguished Professor of History at Lehman College, C.U.N.Y. I heard Duberman speak at GAU3 and would meet Matlovich the following spring in Providence.

I was nervous at the ROTC party, conscious at every moment of the button I was wearing. I don’t know if many people noticed my nervousness; I’m sure they noticed my button, but few of them commented on it—at least not to me. The few comments I got there and later, however, showed an unexpected pattern. The *fact* of my homosexuality was not disturbing, but everyone was puzzled about *why* I wanted this to be public knowledge. After all, no other homosexual was public at Providence College, among either the faculty or students.¹

1. Until then all faculty members had been invited to every ROTC Christmas party. After then, there were only individual invitations. Needless to say, I was never invited.

I strongly felt a need for personal liberation and integration and it was obvious to me that coming out helped fill this need; this seldom seems obvious to non-gay people. I returned home from the party, exhausted but feeling that I had passed another trial. I saw the ROTC party as my first step in coming out to the PC community, but perhaps even more important was something that had happened the day before. At the last meeting of the semester in each of my classes I closed the hour with a personal announcement: “In January there will probably be an article about me in *The Cowl*. Among other things it will say that I am gay. This may or may not cause some discussion. If it does, I hope that you will speak up and honestly say what it has been like, being in class with me.” This little statement came back to haunt me later.

4

C O W L

My ‘official’ coming out took place with the first issue of *The Cowl* in the spring semester, on 21 January 1976. There was a photo on the front page and an article headlined “Kennedy Decides To Leave ‘Closet’.” Under the photo was the statement, “Dr. Hubert C. Kennedy has ‘come out’ and announced that he is gay,” and a quotation from the interview: “I think the times really are changing.... Perhaps I can be more honest.” The article was not what I would have written, but I was entirely delighted with it.

I was interviewed by two reporters, who brought a cassette recorder. Apparently thinking that GAU3 was no longer news, their questions concentrated on my reasons for coming out. Half way through the interview we discovered that the recorder was not working. Since they had not been taking notes, I became apprehensive about the forthcoming article. I was reassured, however, by their effort to record my comments correctly.

I was especially pleased by their courtesy in letting me see the completed article before it went to press. In an attempt to present an interesting lead, the article began: “Last December, Dr. Hubert C. Kennedy made an announcement to his Modern Algebra class. He ‘came out’ — announced that he is gay.” I thought that this gave undue importance to what was really only a passing remark—in fact, I had not even mentioned it in the inter-

view—but otherwise I was very pleased by the factually correct and generally positive tone of the article. (Its author was later named “Rookie-of-the-year” by the editor.)

The negative reaction that everyone seemed to anticipate did not come—at least not right away—but there was very little of the encouragement I had hoped for. Apart from one class in which a student, holding a copy of *The Cowl*, stood up when I entered and said “Right on!” there seemed no difference in the attitude of my students. More reaction, mostly positive, came from my colleagues. As I had never been friendly with any of the priests on campus, it was some time before any reaction from them reached me.

In the meantime, *GCN* carried the *Cowl* story in its issue of 21 February. I hoped this would lead to closer contact with the gay community in Providence. About this time, too, I attended one session of a gay rap group. I have since become friends with several people who were there, but at the time I was discouraged by the fact that most ‘politically’ minded gay people in Providence are members of the Metropolitan Community Church. Since I am an atheist, I did not feel entirely comfortable.

The editor of *The Cowl* expected to be deluged by letters regarding the article about me. He received only two. The first was trivial and I ignored it. The second was more important because it was from Rev. Joseph L. Lennon, O.P., one of the vice presidents of the college, and was published on 10 March. According to him, to come out publicly is “to wash one’s dirty linen in public,” and he advised the homosexual who “wants help with his problem” to “avoid the proximate occasions of sin, e.g. declining membership in homosexual organizations, staying away from gay hangouts, gay parties, etc.”

In my reply, published on 31 March, I tried to cover many of the points raised, ending with: “The ‘problem’ is not homosexuality; the problem is the hatred of homosexuals that exists in modern society, that leads to suppression of personal freedoms, that at its worst led to the mass murders that exterminated thousands of homosexuals in the Nazi gas ovens, and at its best leads to the substitution of prudence for love as the cardinal virtue.”

That response brought the strongest public support I received from a colleague. In a letter in the next issue of *The Cowl* that began: “Bravo, Hubert Kennedy. Your letter hits the matter squarely: so often, self-righteous critics ignore the serious biases of their philosophical premises while they overwhelm us with their unshakable logic.” The support

was welcome, but in the meantime I had received encouragement away from the campus of Providence College.

5

R I C

At Rhode Island College there was a “Symposium on Homosexuality” in March, sponsored by the RIC Gay Alliance, in cooperation with the MCC Campus Ministry. Rev. Joseph H. Gilbert, pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church in Providence, had invited me to speak at this event and my name had appeared on a preliminary announcement, with the note: “(we believe) the first openly gay professional in Rhode Island.”

The Symposium lasted five days and was followed on Saturday by a “Gay Disco Dance.” The principal speakers were: Troy D. Perry, founder of the Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches; Elaine Noble, member of the Massachusetts House of representatives; and Leonard Matlovich. I was scheduled with Elaine Noble on the program “Gay Life Styles,” along with Marti Paglio, business owner, and the female impressionist Ernest Carr. It was an exhilarating evening. I was hugged by Matlovich, kissed by Noble, and pronounced “Fantastic!” by Perry—one of his favorite pronouncements—altogether, a heady experience for someone recently out of the closet!

More important, I met Joseph Gilbert and began to appreciate his abilities. By the time of Gay Pride Week, I appreciated them a great deal more, but at the time he still seemed to me a bit quixotic. By then I was aware that he was still determined to have the Gay Pride events in June be a part of the official Rhode Island Bicentennial celebration, but I doubted he would succeed. Nonetheless, I optimistically stated in my talk: “I think that my historian colleague at Providence College will one day have to face the issue of Gayness in colonial America.” This was a reference to Dr. Patrick Conley, chairman of the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission and Professor of History at Providence College. My prediction came true sooner than I expected!

This spring, too, I began to test my own gay insights with several letters to *GCN*. In every case my letter was a follow-up to an earlier article or letter in the paper. Already in

December 1975, I wrote to correct a false impression regarding the notorious German law 'Paragraph 175'. In March, I wrote to criticize use of behavior modification to change sexual orientation, as the author of a letter had urged, "from young male boys to that of an *adult homosexual*." I wrote: "There needs to be a recognition of the rights of minors, and not just 'consenting adults', to have sexual relations with one another and with adults of their choice."

In April, I replied to a letter in *GCN* that advised divorcing the gay rights movement from other issues, including transvestites,, feminism, bisexual liberation, prisoners, ped-erasty. I wrote: "In an effort to embrace, or be embraced by, the political spectrum, he has watered down the gay rights issue to—what? Indeed, it is difficult to see who stands to gain what, after our obvious sisters and brothers have been sold down the river." Later came a bit of camp, prompted by a satiric sketch of the life of Alexander von Humboldt. But Providence College remained deprived of my wit, as an attempt to get *GCN* into the college library failed.

On 1 March, I wrote to the Director of the Library and recommended *GCN*. The Director consulted with a member of the Sociology Department and, getting the opinion that the paper could be useful, entered a subscription. When the paper failed to show after several weeks, I was told that the subscription had to be withdrawn because "the budget was overdrawn." I offered to pay for a subscription, but the Director returned my check, saying that all gifts must be channeled through the office of the Vice President for Institutional Development. I then sent a check there and was told that I had been misinformed: "I am, therefore, returning your check but I shall endeavor to discover what the actual process is and to correct this misinformation." There the matter rested, as the Director refused to take further action. Later I learned that he had been called in by the President and told that he "did not want that newspaper in the library."²

The administration of the college was also using other ways to keep gay voices from being heard on campus. Early in February a member of the Education Department asked the Vice President for Academic Affairs: "Would the administration object to Professor Kennedy discussing the topic of homosexuality with my guidance classes?" The reply was: "I do not think that this question should arise since Dr. Kennedy's professional

2. I learned this from the Director of the Library, a closeted gay man.

qualifications are in mathematics rather than in the behavioral sciences.” An attempt to get a more direct answer to the question failed and that matter, too, was dropped. Despite the expectation of several of my colleagues, no member of the administration had contacted me directly about any of this. That came in late April.

6

P C

One morning in April an assistant to the President of PC called to make an appointment for me to speak with the President the next day; he said he did not know why. I agreed to the meeting and called the President later in the day to ask what he wanted to discuss. He said he wanted to speak with me about a matter of “some concern.” I persisted: “You don’t want to tell me what it is, then?” “I prefer to speak with you personally about it; the matter is somewhat complicated.”

When I arrived in his office at the appointed time, I was confronted by the President³ and the Executive Vice President⁴ and the Vice President for Academic Affairs.⁵ The session lasted 50 minutes and the topic was, of course, my homosexuality. But despite the assertion of the President near the end of this time that I now saw the reasons he could not tell me the topic earlier, I did not. Indeed, the purpose of that session was never quite clear to me.

The President began it by saying that he saw the possibility of a conflict with my contractual obligations, since I am a stated homosexual, and he asked what my intentions were relative to the college. I said I intended to stay, that I enjoy my teaching and my research. He asked if I felt I had not broken any contractual obligations. I said I felt I had not and that my intention was to live up to my contractual obligations. In the following discussion they agreed that “advocating homosexuality” would be a violation of my contract and in turn they gave examples of what they meant by this, asking whether I “intended” to do any of them. Despite the President’s assurance that this was “an informal meeting in which no charges were being brought” against me (!) I answered only that I

3. Thomas R. Peterson, O.P.

4. Robert A. Morris, O.P.

5. Paul Thomson, formerly an Episcopalian priest, recently converted to Catholicism.

intended to fulfill my contractual obligations. Thus the meeting ended on a somewhat incomplete note. I can only guess at what the President wanted from me.

Three weeks later a reporter from *The Cowl* interviewed me about that meeting. The reporter said that a rumor was going around that I had been asked to resign and asked if this were true. I said “no,” discussed the meeting with the reporter, and suggested that the others at the meeting be asked for their views. I later learned that the President refused to discuss the matter with the reporter and, in fact, the editor was directed not to publish the article in the summer issue.

So the rumor persisted, especially when I had not received my renewal contract two weeks after apparently all other faculty members had received theirs. Someone jokingly suggested that the time was being used to think up another clause to add, but the idea seemed paranoid to me. In fact, when the contract arrived there was a cover letter from the President that stated in part: “Your public statements concerning your homosexuality are matters of your personal concern over which I do not at this time intend to stand in judgment. In all fairness, I must point out that I would consider the use of your classroom or your position as professor at Providence College to defend, advocate or further the cause of any gay movement on the campus at Providence College a direct violation of this contract which would result in the institution of procedures directed toward your dismissal for cause. This letter will serve as formal notice of this fact and the contract is being offered with this as a condition.”⁶

In the meantime, the summer issue of *The Cowl* had appeared with an editorial beginning: “If it were not for an administrative directive handed down to *The Cowl* this month, you would be reading a story in this issue about a certain faculty member of Providence College.” I was, of course, that “certain faculty member,” although my name was not given there or in the story about this editorial which followed in the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*. The *Journal* story prompted a letter from the former editor of *The Cowl*, pointing out the censorship involved. This, too, was published in the *Providence Journal*. But the *Journal* reporter also did not reveal the content of the suppressed article, so the rumor of my being asked to leave PC continued. Hence, I followed with a letter in

6. In later contracts the following statement was added: “Acceptance of this contract by the faculty member is deemed to include acceptance of the educational objectives of the college and of the responsibilities and obligations of faculty members at the college as set forth in the *Faculty Manual*.”

which I quoted from the President's letter of 22 June: "I was pleased to receive from you the assurance that you intend to fulfill your contractual obligations."

I also wrote in that letter: "That there are people who seek to deny freedom of expression to homosexuals is only too evident from the obstacles put in the path of the Toward a Gayer Bicentennial Committee. Fortunately, there are also courageous defenders of First Amendment rights such as Judge Pettine and Mr. Cimini (who published the article in *The Cowl* last January in which I 'came out' to the college community.) They, and the favorable reaction I have received from the majority of my colleagues, make me optimistic for the future, as I said at the recent Congress of People With Gay Concerns, where I spoke as a member of the Gay Academic Union of New England." The story of that Congress must now be told.

7

T G B C

On 13 May 1976 the Toward a Gayer Bicentennial Committee (TGBC) managed to get its suit against the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission (RI76) heard in U.S. District Court by Chief Judge Raymond J. Pettine. However, in one of its several delaying actions, RI76 successfully argued that the suit did not individually name the 24 members of the Commission, so the case was postponed by Judge Pettine until 1 June, to allow TGBC to file the necessary legal papers. The report on this the next day in the *Providence Journal* brought the matter to public attention. Since most of the later legal maneuvers were also reported in the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, this story can most simply be told in excerpts from those reports.

On 2 June the newspaper reported:

The Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission withheld its official recognition from a homosexual group because there was no relationship between the Bicentennial and the group's aims and because the group advocates practices of questionable legality.

Patrick T. Conley, commission chairman testified yesterday at a U.S. District Court hearing that these are the basic reasons for rejecting the group's request to use the Old State House for a "congress of gay concerns," and to obtain recognition of a Gay Pride Parade.

The Toward a Gayer Bicentennial Committee, described as an umbrella group of various homosexual groups, plans the two activities for June 26 during National Gay Pride Week.

The commission, in a case brought by the local affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union, is asking federal court to order the commission to grant the committee requests....

The Rev. Joseph H. Gilbert, pastor of the mostly homosexual Metropolitan Community Church of Providence, testified that the goal of the June 26 activities is to help homosexuals develop better acceptance of themselves. "We were a part of this society 200 years ago and we are a part of this society now," he said.

Judge Pettine ruled on the case a week later. On 9 June the newspaper reported:

"Does the Bicentennial Commission need reminding that, from the perspective of British loyalists, the Bicentennial celebrates one of history's greatest illegal events?"

With that remark, a federal Judge today summed up his ruling on a proposal to make the Bicentennial assertedly "gayer."

Chief Judge Raymond J. Pettine opened the doors for—but did not actually grant—endorsement of a Bicentennial program proposed by a Rhode Island homosexual group....

In today's ruling, the Judge gave the commission one week to endorse the group's proposals or, as an alternative, write "in clear and precise terms capable of even-handed application" the standards to be used in evaluating the proposals.

If the commission wants to formulate new standards, then the homosexual group is allowed to file a new proposal. The commission then has five days either

to approve a new proposal or give “a clear and precise written explanation of any other decision.”

The Judge wrote: “I cannot help but note the irony of the Bicentennial Commission expressing reluctance to provide a forum for the plaintiffs’ exercise of their First Amendment rights because they might advocate conduct which is illegal.”

The next day the newspaper reported:

Dr. Patrick T. Conley, chairman of the state Bicentennial Commission, said yesterday that his organization will abide by a federal court decision and endorse a Rhode Island homosexual group’s use of the Old State House for a “congress of gay concerns.”

An angry Conley, however, said he found the decision “amazing.” ...

Conley said the commission now has no choice but to approve the endorsement at its Tuesday meeting and let the group use the Old State House.

“I was astounded by the decision,” said an angered Conley. “I’d use even stronger language, but then I’d be in contempt of court.”

The chairman said he thought the group’s attorney, Stephen Fortunato, Jr., of the American Civil Liberties Union, failed to show that the group’s First Amendment rights Here being denied. Judge Pettine disagreed....

[Conley] said the alternative to rewrite the evaluation standards was really no choice at all.

This view was repeated in a report of 11 June:

Dr. Patrick T. Conley, commission chairman, yesterday termed the decision “ultralibertarian, devoid of wisdom, and unsound,” and announced the commission would no longer endorse any programs....

“It seems clear from Judge Pettine’s decision that any group or special interest, no matter how bizarre or repulsive, could demand RI76 endorsement as a

matter of right—even if their cause had no relation to the Bicentennial and flaunted the law of this state,” Dr. Conley said.

On the same day the *Providence Journal* supported Judge Pettine’s decision in an editorial that said:

Whatever one may think about the Gay Liberation Movement, homosexuals and bisexuals have the same rights everyone else has under the U.S. Constitution. That point was forcefully underscored in U.S. District Court here this week by Judge Raymond J. Pettine....

But perhaps most interesting, Judge Pettine noted that “the plaintiffs’ proposals involve only the expression and exchange of ideas.... No ideas are so far beyond the pale of the wider community’s values that they are also beyond the boundaries of the First Amendment.” ...

Freedom of beliefs and of speech did not begin in Rhode Island, but their roots are deep here. Judge Pettine’s decision is another needed and important reminder that even unpopular views are entitled to a public forum.

8

R I 7 6

This editorial prompted a letter from Dr. Conley, that was published on 15 June and said in part:

A long litany of highly-successful Bicentennial projects and events (well covered by *Journal* reporters) has been ignored by the editorial board. This smug coterie of poison penman only rear their heads to criticize the state’s Bicentennial effort (perhaps because people of their attitude and outlook do not control the policy of the Bicentennial Commission). In view of your hypercritical and hypocritical stance toward the commission, your support of the homosexuals was predictable....

The Gay decision which the editors applaud is a Pandora's box which paves the way for state support via forced commission endorsement of any conceivable ad hoc organization such as Prostitutes for Peace, Rapists Unrestrained, Anarchists United, or *Journal* Editors for Fairness.

Dr. Conley also changed his mind about abiding by the judge's decision. As reported on 15 June:

Dr. Patrick T. Conley, chairman of the state Bicentennial Commission has sent a letter to Chief Judge Raymond J. Pettine of the U.S. District Court requesting "further clarification" of his decision to allow a Rhode Island homosexual group to use the Old State House for "a congress of gay concerns.

Conley said yesterday his commission "basically thought (the ruling) was not clear" and may appeal. The letter reportedly requests a meeting with Judge Pettine to discuss the ruling. Judge Pettine was not available for comment.

Stephen Fortunato Jr., attorney for the Toward a Gayer Bicentennial Committee, called the proposal of the meeting "preposterous." He said the Bicentennial unit should "go along with the decision." ...

Conley said he does not want to see the group use the building, but, if they must in accordance with any ruling, he does not want the event to have the "affirmative endorsement of the Bicentennial Commission." He said the group's proposal had "no connection with the Bicentennial" and, as a state group, the commission should not support the activities of any group that violates state law.

There is a possibility of an appeal according to Conley. Fortunato said: "I think if there is an appeal the first circuit (court) will apply the first amendment with the same force Judge Pettine used."

He added, "As this thing goes on I become increasingly convinced that if this were happening during the time of the Revolution, Conley would have been on the side of the British."

In the same issue of the newspaper there was a report of continued vandalism of the property of the Metropolitan Community Church in Providence and of attacks on its members. Colonel Walter McQueeney, chief of police, said the department would try to help the church with its vandalism problem. "I'm receptive to hearing from any church that has a problem. But I want you to know that I've never heard of this church." Apparently Col. McQueeney had not read *The Evening Bulletin* of two nights before, for there in the column written by the resource section of the Division of Youth Development, Rhode Island Department of Community Affairs, a 19-year old homosexual seeking to meet others like himself was advised about the Metropolitan Community Church, with address, times and types of activities available being given. But McQueeney would soon learn more about MCC!

In the meantime. Dr. Conley's change of mind about accepting Judge Pettine's decision was translated into action. As reported on 17 June:

The state Bicentennial Commission last night decided to do all it can to deny a homosexual group access to the Old State House for a forum later this month.

Chief Judge Raymond J. Pettine of U.S. District Court last week told the commission either to allow the homosexual group access to the historic building and endorse its bicentennial proposal or to write precise standards for evaluating the group's request for endorsement by today.

The commission last night voted to take the latter alternative in hopes that the clarified standards for bicentennial proposals and endorsements will be sufficient to deny the homosexual proposal.

While prepared to act with haste, commission members also decided to ask Judge Pettine to extend today's deadline for developing specific guidelines for judging the merits of bicentennial proposals.

The planned Congress of People With Gay Concerns was now only nine days away. By the delay in writing new guidelines and other tactics, RI76 not only forced TOBC to prepare its proposal in haste, but lessened the effect of the eventual decision—something that Dr. Conley claimed afterwards as a "moral victory."

The *Providence Journal* reported on 18 June:

New guidelines for endorsement of Bicentennial projects were submitted to Chief Judge Raymond J. Pettine of U.S. District Court yesterday by the state Bicentennial Commission in hopes that the new standards will be explicit enough to deny a homosexual group endorsement and access to the Old State House.

Judge Pettine said “There’s no need for me to comment on the new guidelines” because it’s not up to him right now to decide if they are acceptable. He said the next step is for the Toward a Gayer Bicentennial Committee to submit a new proposal to the commission in keeping with the new guidelines.

The Rev. Joseph H. Gilbert, pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of Providence, composed primarily of homosexuals, said he expects to file the new proposal this morning. The commission will then have five days to grant the proposal or provide a clear explanation for denial.

The new proposal was submitted and after the maximum allowable delay, RI76 announced its decision. As reported on 23 June:

The Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission last night rejected all four components of a new proposal submitted by a homosexual group last week. The new proposal was submitted by the group in keeping with the commission’s new guidelines for endorsement of Bicentennial projects.

The commission is expected to submit a clear explanation of their reasons for denial to Chief Judge Raymond J. Pettine of U.S. District Court today, according to the commission’s attorneys. Judge Pettine has ruled that any denial must be accompanied by an explanation.

In their new proposal, the Toward a Gayer Bicentennial Committee requested endorsement of a “Gay Pride Day” parade on Saturday, use of the Old State House for a “congress of people with gay concerns” before the parade, a prayer vigil on the steps of the Federal Building late Saturday night, and designation of this week as “Gay Pride Week” on the Bicentennial Calendar.

Stephen J. Fortunato Jr., attorney for the homosexuals, said the group will “definitely proceed back into court.” He also said the new guidelines the commission submitted last week “do not pass constitutional muster. “ Last week he advised the homosexual group to submit their new proposal stating that they are not “convinced of the constitutionality” of the guidelines.

As if this were not enough of an obstacle in the path of TOBC, another difficulty now developed. Col. McQueeney had by now learned more about the MCC, and he was having no part of it. The newspaper reported on Thursday, 24 June, just two days before the planned Gay Pride parade:

Col. Walter A. McQueeney, city police chief, said yesterday he does not intend to allow homosexuals “who are willfully breaking the law ... to parade down the streets of Providence.”

The “Toward a Gayer Bicentennial Committee” has requested a parade permit for Saturday as the culmination of the “Gay Pride Week” being observed by the Metropolitan Community Church of Greater Providence. One of the church’s main ministries is to homosexuals.

Stephen J. Fortunato Jr., attorney for the committee, said he will seek a restraining order to stop McQueeney from preventing the group from marching. “If I have to sue (McQueeney) I’ll sue him,” Fortunato said.

Mayor Vincent A. Cianci Jr. said Saturday that he “would probably go along with the colonel’s decision.” Cianci, as acting public safety director, would actually sign the parade permit....

The Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission has also denied endorsement of the “Gay Pride Week” parade, citing as one of their reasons the unlikelihood of permission to parade....

Fortunato said “at no time has the position of (the group) been to have the parade depending upon endorsement. Endorsement or no endorsement, my clients have the right to have this parade.”

William H. Lopes, Director, The Urban Educational Center of Rhode Island, wrote a letter-to-the-editor of the *Providence Journal*:

The Bicentennial is too much with us, but it does seem an apt time to remind Colonel McQueeney that the whole point of the American experience is that peaceful expressions of diverse opinions and beliefs are to be encouraged. His tastes and beliefs are not at issue; he is certainly free to express them in whatever manner is suitable. He is not—at any rate, should not be—free to prevent the peaceful expression of others.

At the same time, cracks were beginning to show in the solid front that Dr. Conley had attempted to present. On Friday, 25 June, the newspaper reported:

Albert T. Klyberg, executive director of the Rhode Island Historical Society, resigned as of Wednesday from the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission Foundation because of dissatisfaction over the state Bicentennial Commission's vote to deny a homosexual group access to the Old State House....

Klyberg, who has been active with the Commission Foundation since 1969, said since he could not vote on the issue, he felt the only way he could express his opinion and beliefs was to resign.

He said he hand-delivered his letter of resignation to the Bicentennial Commission Foundation office Wednesday and received a letter from Dr. Conley yesterday morning. He said Conley “regretted my decision as much as I regretted having to do it.” [The newspaper quoted him as saying that Conley “greeted” his decision, but this is surely a typographical error.]

However, Conley denied he received a letter from him and also denied he sent a letter to him. “I don’t know anything about a letter,” Conley said. Klyberg said he considered endorsement of the homosexual group’s activities a “technicality” in the issue.

Because of this action, Klyberg was nominated by the R.I. Affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union for a Government Officials' Civil Liberties Award.

9

C P W G C

In the meantime RI76 waited until the last possible moment to submit its decision to Judge Pettine. But on Friday, 25 June, the newspaper headline announced: "Homosexuals have right to use Old State House, Pettine rules."

The Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission today was ordered by a federal judge to open the Old State House on Benefit Street to a homosexual group which plans to hold "A Congress of People With Gay Concerns" there tomorrow. The commission must also endorse the event.

Chief Judge Raymond J. Pettine of U.S. District Court also ruled that the city must give the group a permit for a parade scheduled for 2 p.m. tomorrow. The commission does not have to endorse the parade, he said.

The homosexual group can also be denied endorsement by the state commission of their planned prayer vigil Saturday night, a "Gay Pride Day," and a "Gay Pride Week," the judge ruled.

Pettine said that the state Bicentennial Commission, which has resisted the homosexual group's requests for endorsement, must make the congress at the Old State House an official event.

He ruled the proposal by the Toward a Gayer Bicentennial Committee clearly follows the commission's new guidelines and "relates to means to improve the nation and state and delineates the role of special groups in that process of improvement."

He added, "The Bicentennial Commission is not being asked to declare its agreement with the ideas to be expressed" at the congress; it is being asked "to provide a forum for the group to exercise their freedom of speech."

Ha said that the commission itself decided to base access to the Old State House upon endorsement.

Judge Pettine granted a temporary restraining order to bar the city's police chief and acting commissioner of public safety from preventing the parade....

Colonel McQueeney had denied the parade permit, saying it would endanger "public safety in the downtown Providence area," that there "was no community interest in such a parade" and that the "persons marching in the parade would advocate illegal behavior."

Judge Pettine, in his ruling, said he recognized the "steadfast opposition" of the police chief but that the group has an overriding right to freedom of expression.

He ordered the city and all employees involved to be restrained from prohibiting the group's parade tomorrow.

There was little time for rejoicing, as the Congress, parade, and prayer vigil were to be held the next day. However, my speech was written, and I had the pleasure of seeing friends on TV, making the banner I was to carry the next day in the parade.

The Congress was of more interest to me than the Gay Pride parade, and I did not attend the prayer vigil in the evening. Despite the fact that the Congress was a legally endorsed Bicentennial Event, the *Providence Journal* did not report on it, and the report on the parade was somewhat perfunctory.

When Rev. Gilbert arrived at the Old State House, he noted that the flag with the 'ri76' logo that was usually there was missing, but he was able to replace it by another reading "ri76 Has a Gay Concern" and he distributed flyers of a lovely cherry color containing the ri76 logo and advertising: "Public Notice. Proclaim liberty throughout all the land. A Congress of People With Gay Concerns. June 26 '76 — 10 a.m. Old State House. North Main Street. Providence."

176 PUBLIC **176**
NOTICE

PROCLAIM LIBERTY
THROUGHOUT
ALL THE LAND

A CONGRESS OF
PEOPLE WITH
GAY CONCERNS

JUNE 26 '76 - 10: AM

176 OLD **176**
STATE HOUSE
NORTH MAIN STREET
PROVIDENCE

The group in attendance did not number more than 30, but the intensity of their commitment was clear. Rev. Gilbert opened the Congress and led the singing of “We Shall Overcome.” He then called on me. After recognizing the role that he had played in bringing the Congress about, I observed: “Last March I said at the Symposium on Homosexuality at Rhode Island College that I thought my historian colleague at Providence College would one day have to face the issue of Gayness in colonial America. I had no idea my prediction would come true so soon!”

I noted various anniversaries—the bicentennial, of course, but also the Great Swamp Fight of 300 years earlier and the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Recalling Roger Williams’ struggle for freedom of conscience in religious questions, I commented: “But we insist upon the right to decide for ourselves, through the exercise of our own conscience and reason, what is right and wrong for us no less in the sexual than in the religious sphere.” Further, in the words of Jeremy Bentham in 1776: “This much is certain; that a system that is never to be censured, will never be improved, that if nothing is ever to be found fault with, nothing will ever be amended.”

I reminded the audience of the religious origins of the terms “faggot” and “bugger” in their association with heretics, and recalled to them the Nazi crimes against homosexuals. Then came a poem of Goethe, written in 1776, entitled “Hope” (the motto of the State of Rhode Island), whose theme I applied to the Congress. I concluded with the cry: “Gay Revolution!”

There followed the reading of a “Gay Declaration of Independence” by Raymond Lariviere, which received the unanimous approval of the Congress. After a talk by the pastor of MCC Hartford, the Congress adjourned to the Roger Williams Spring. There, Eric Gordon, of Hartford’s radio program “None of the Above,” read a scholarly paper on the oppression of homosexuals in Nazi Germany.⁷ He pointed out that it is estimated that approximately one-quarter million homosexuals were exterminated in the period from 1937 to 1945.⁸ Several religious talks followed, after which the Congress adjourned.

7. Eric Gordon later wrote the excellent biography *Mark the Music: The Life and Works of Marc Blitzstein* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989).

8. This estimate, attributed to an Austrian church group, was wildly exaggerated. More recent research shows that between 5,000 and 15,000 homosexuals were sent to concentration camps.

We gathered again at 2:00 p.m. for the Gay Pride parade. The *Providence Journal* reported in an article headed “City tolerates first homosexual parade”:

Armed with a court order, almost 70 members and supporters of the “Toward a Gay Bicentennial Committee” marched through Kennedy Plaza yesterday in what was said to be the first homosexual parade in city history.

To the beat of a drum, the strumming of a guitar and the buzzing of a kazoo, the group marched past a crowd of several hundred onlookers. The marchers chanted songs and carried signs and flags proclaiming homosexual pride. Some were dressed in colorful clothes; others reflected the Bicentennial theme with symbols such as fake muskets and three-cornered hats. An American flag was carried at the head of the parade.

There were no serious incidents. Most spectators appeared to be curious, skeptical or hostile to the group. Some bystanders admitted that they too were homosexual or that they sympathized with the group’s march. There also were a few who vocally denounced the marchers on religious grounds and said they were “damned to hell” unless they repented.

“The point of this is for us to recognize that we’ve always been around, we’ve always been persecuted and that it stops today,” said the Rev. Joseph Gilbert, an organizer of the event and pastor of the city’s Metropolitan Community Church which administers to a largely homosexual congregation....

Late last night the long day ended with a vigil in front of the federal Building around midnight. The purpose was to “memorialize gay people who died unknown, forgotten and unremembered,” Mr. Gilbert said.

In the parade. Eric Gordon and I carried the banner that had been made for me, reading “Gay Academic Union of New England.” This banner now hangs in my home, a treasured souvenir of our first Gay Pride parade and of my Coming Out in Providence.



Hubert Kennedy and Eric Gordon

Postscript

The reader may well ask: “OK, but what happened at PC? Did you continue your gay liberation activities or are you still on the faculty? I am still on the faculty and I refuse to accept the implied dichotomy. In a letter published in *The Cowl*, I criticized the session on homosexuality at the Forum on Sexuality, held at PC three days in September 1976. That was a dismal affair, at which no homosexuals were allowed to speak or even to ask questions. While written questions were allowed, only two were answered. The two I submitted were not mentioned.

The extent to which the atmosphere at PC is suppressive is shown by the fact that, to date, no other faculty member or student at the college has come out publicly. This cannot be blamed entirely on the college, however, for it cannot be merely from fear of losing one’s job or of being beat up or of being insulted. No, that most successful of all oppressions, self-oppression is at work. This is true not only at PC, but also in the city of Providence, and in varying degrees in the rest of the country. Made to feel isolated and different, gay people have accepted and internalized prevailing attitudes of society. We have come to feel inferior and to accept our oppression as just. But it does no good to plead for greater tolerance; we must liberate ourselves. As Kurt Hiller said in an appeal “to the homosexuals of Germany” in 1921: “The liberation of homosexuals can only be the work of homosexuals themselves.” The brutal slowness with which attitudes change he was to note 34 years later. Commenting on the failure of the Israeli parliament to liberalize laws against homosexuality, Hiller wrote: “That representatives of an ethnic minority that has been horribly persecuted should themselves persecute an equally harmless and guiltless biological minority—what sentiment could arise in a thinking person other than boundless contempt!

But progress *is* being made. Faggots are developing a culture; we are beginning to recover our gay history. It should soon be apparent to anyone willing to see it that, in the words of Rev. Gilbert, “We have always been in the midst of the people.”

Providence, Rhode Island

8 December 1976

Appendix

Speech delivered at the Congress of People With Gay Concerns (a Rhode Island Bicentennial Event), Old State House, Providence, 26 June 1976

I would like to thank the Rev. Joseph Gilbert for asking me to speak today, and I know I can express to Joe the appreciation of all of us for his patience and perseverance that helped make this occasion possible. Without him it would never have happened.

Last March I said at the Symposium on Homosexuality at Rhode Island College that I thought my historian colleague at Providence College would one day have to face the issue of Gayness in colonial America. I had no idea my prediction would come true so soon!

There can be no doubt that “we were always in the midst of the people.” But if it has been difficult for us to speak out today (indeed, taking a lawsuit to gain access to this ‘semi-forum’), one should not wonder at the silence in that age of cruelty and superstition. Happily, Rhode Island and its champion Roger Williams fought against the religious intolerance that characterized some other parts of New England. One historian, writing of Massachusetts, said: “It appears that in executing the decree of banishment of the Quakers, the penalty was added, of whipping their naked backs with ten lashes, in each successive town, while tied on the cart, in which they were transported to the border of the Colony. The present town of Dedham appears to have been the legal frontier of the Christian civilization, blessed with exhibiting the benign spectacle of the naked backs of women, bleeding under the lashes of an executioner.”

Three hundred years ago, following the Great Swamp Fight between the Narragansetts and a combined force from Plymouth, Massachusetts, and Connecticut— who then withdrew, leaving the Rhode Islanders at the mercy of the Indians— Providence and other towns were burned. Yet in March of 1676 the Assembly passed a law “that noe Indians in this Collony be a slave.” This contrasts with the practice in other colonies, where some were even shipped to North Africa to be sold in the market. Not that Rhode Island

has an unblemished record in this matter; slavery was introduced at an early period in its history and continued until it became extinct with the death of the last slave in 1859.

Nor, indeed, that all religious views were equally tolerated. On this site in 1766, to celebrate the repeal of the Stamp Act, the citizens of Providence drank thirty-four toasts to various prominent people, as well as to Industry & Commerce, Arts & Sciences, and the Downfall of Popery.

No one needs to be reminded of the revolution that we are celebrating because this year is '76. Does anyone need to be reminded of the revolution we are celebrating because of the date? Seven years ago this week occurred the so-called Stonewall Riots in New York City. No doubt that act of rebellion seemed as illegal to the 'authorities' then as the rebellious colonists seemed to the British authorities in 1776. The war that followed lasted seven years, ending with the Peace of Versailles in 1783, by which Britain recognized the independence of the United States. By our presence here in the Old State House seven years after the Stonewall Riots, we demonstrate a recognition, however grudgingly given, of our independence. But our battle is not over. Gay sisters and brothers, do not lose heart in the struggle! And you others, who may feel, as George III did, that we should trust your paternal benevolence, note that an independent United States became one of Britain's strongest allies. American Society has much to gain by a recognition and fostering of individual freedom and cultural diversity.

And speaking of that magic number 'seven', I would like to mention a legacy of not just our colonial period, but the medieval past. I mean the current so-called sodomy law in Rhode Island: "Every person who shall be convicted of the abominable and detestable crime against nature either with mankind or with beast shall be imprisoned not exceeding 20 years or less than 7 years." Who is the victim of such 'crimes'? Nature? What most people mean, of course, when they use the term 'unnatural' is that the act is somehow repugnant to them, because out of line with the interpretation of sex provided in some particular theological or philosophical system. But we insist upon the right to decide for ourselves, through the exercise of our own conscience and reason, what is right and what is wrong for us no less in the sexual than in the religious sphere.

Was it argued against our appearing here that we might advocate illegal acts? Let my lawyer colleague recall the words of the great legal philosopher Jeremy Bentham, pub-

lished in his work *A Fragment on Government* exactly 200 years ago: “Thus much is certain; that a system that is never to be censured, will never be improved; that if nothing is ever to be found fault with, nothing will ever be mended.”

But we have stopped burning witches in New England—or have we? Have not homosexuals become the new witches? Indeed, have they not always been? We need only recall the origin of the derogatory words ‘bugger’ and ‘faggot’. The word ‘faggot’ basically means a bundle of sticks, such as were used in the burning of witches and other heretics, and even recanted heretics were required to wear a patch showing a faggot to remind them of this.⁹ The association of homosexuality with heresy is seen also in the word ‘bugger’ that comes from a French word meaning Bulgarian and referred to a heresy related to that of the Albigensians, against whom St. Dominic preached and Pope Innocent III declared a crusade that led to the slaughter of thousands of people in one of the most bloodthirsty wars in France.

But the Gay Liberation Movement did not start with Stonewall, although that was indeed an important new beginning. Already in the second half of the 19th century there was a pioneer movement in Europe, especially associated with the name of Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany. This led, among other results, to the abolition of the anti-homosexual laws in Russia following the 1917 Revolution. This movement came to an end in the early 1930’s—in the Soviet Union the old Czarist laws were reintroduced under Stalin’s rule, while in Germany the Nazis made homosexuals one of their prime targets of attack. Ironically, the communists denounced homosexuality as a fascist aberration, while the fascists associated it with communism. It is estimated that between 1937 and 1945 nearly 1/4 million homosexuals were exterminated in the Nazi concentration camps.¹⁰ In these camps they were identified by having to wear a pink triangle and were treated as the lowest of the low. It is in memory of this that many of us wear the pink triangle, some with the motto “Never Again!” on it.

After the war there was a rebirth of the Gay Liberation Movement in Europe and in America. At first organizations chose names that did not directly identify them as homosexual: Mattachine Society, Daughters of Bilitis, One Inc., Society for Individual Rights.

9. My explanation of the origin of the word ‘faggot’ for homosexual was false.

10. This estimate, attributed to an Austrian church group, was wildly exaggerated. More recent research shows that between 5,000 and 15,000 homosexuals were sent to concentration camps.

With Stonewall, a new, more militant period began. Gay people are no longer just pleading behind the scenes for better treatment, we are in the open demanding our equal rights. How far we have to go is only vaguely symbolized by the difficulties in gaining access to 'ri 76'. The homophobia—hatred of homosexuals—that this effort revealed is all too evident. It seems that homophobia never has enough victims. The worst thing about it, however, is that many homosexuals victimize themselves by accepting this unloving and unscientific view. It is this self-acceptance of punishment that distinguishes a victim from a martyr. The sociologist Wainright Churchill wrote: "What these people need in order to advance their cause as human beings is fewer victims and more martyrs." Well, I don't want to be a martyr—but I *will* no longer be a victim. I say that's spinach and I say to hell with it!

In an editorial following Judge Pettine's original decision, the *Providence Journal* wrote; "Freedom of belief and of speech did not begin in Rhode Island, but their roots are deep here." We are now exercising these freedoms to demand the right not just to discuss our beliefs, but to act on them, so long as we do not infringe on the rights of others. To this end we ask the legislature to repeal all laws forbidding consensual sexual acts and to amend anti-discrimination laws to also forbid discrimination on the basis of sexual or affectional preference.

Progress is being made. Until recently all states had laws prohibiting homosexual acts. Fifteen states have now decriminalized these acts for some portion of their population. Several cities have passed ordinances prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual or affectional preference. Such efforts have been supported by resolutions of many organizations, including: the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Bar Association, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science—to name just a few.

Gay people are the second largest minority group in this country. Some comparison can be made between the black movement and the gay movement. It is difficult to do because they are very different in many ways, and I leave it to others to discuss. But if there is one thing the black movement has to teach us, it is that gay people must liberate themselves; we cannot depend on others to do it for us. And the motto here, I think, has to be "Come out!" This can, and does, mean different things to different people, and of course

there are many more degrees than the three one usually hears about in rap groups: coming out to oneself, coming out to one's family and friends, and coming out to the general public. So I say, come out—wherever you are. And as an educator I believe one way to do this is to inform yourself.

Nowadays there is much more information available than there was when I was growing up in a small mining village in Florida. I don't mean that you have to read a sociological study of homosexuality—just reading an 'advice to the lovelorn' column in a gay newspaper can give one something to think about. New England is fortunate in having perhaps the best gay weekly in the country, the *GCN* or *Gay Community News*, published in Boston. Even Gov. Dukakis has recognized *GCN* by giving it a commendation for "exceptional service to the gay community." While it doesn't have an 'advice to the lovelorn' column—yet—it does have up to date news of events such as this one, feature articles, book and movie reviews, and of course witty and incisive letters to the editor (occasionally written by me). This kind of reading can be liberating. If you don't think so, then ask yourself why others want to keep it from you. Why, for example, did Providence College reject a gift subscription to *GCN* for its library? You may have read in the *Providence Journal* last week that the Providence College newspaper was not allowed to print an article about a "certain faculty member." I was the subject of that article. Why was it suppressed? I cannot answer these questions, since I am not a spokesman for Providence College.

One of the things the movement needs right now, I think, is for established professional people to come out. Christopher Isherwood said last year at California State College at Long Beach: "I wish more prominent people could bring themselves to come out of their closets. Nearly always the world knows who they are already, however hard they try to fool it. Coming out would actually make their lives less isolated and troubled; it would give them faith and courage in themselves. And isn't that worth far more than the notoriety they already enjoy?"

I would like to conclude by returning to 1776 and a poem written that year by the great German poet Goethe. It is called "Hope" (which I need not remind you is the motto of the State of Rhode Island) and I would apply it to our discussions here today:

Bring about high happiness, my daily task,
May I accomplish it!
Let, oh let me not grow weary!
No, these are not empty dreams:
Now only stems, these trees will one day be fruitful and give shelter.¹¹

And in 1976 I say: “Gay Revolution!”¹²

Hubert Kennedy

11. Hoffnung

Schaff, das Tagwerk meiner Hände,
Hohes Glück, daß ichs vollende!
Laß, o laß mich nicht ermatten!
Nein, es sind nicht leere Träume:
Jetzt nur Stangen, diese Bäume
Geben einst noch Frucht und Schatten.

12. At this point I raised my left fist in the air.

Speech before the Rhode Island Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 28 March 1978, regarding a proposed anti-discrimination law.

Hubert Kennedy, 33 Huxley Avenue, Providence, RI 02908

Despite fine sounding promises, there remains in this country gross and unjust discrimination against women, blacks, and other minorities. A bill such as the proposed Human Rights Act is badly needed. It would be a step in the direction of simple justice to eliminate the advantages gained by the suppression of others, and allow us to get on with the real economic problems of providing jobs and a decent living for everyone. I urge passage of this bill. It has, however, an obvious, and fatal, flaw. It should be amended to include "sexual orientation" as a category of persons against whom discrimination will not be tolerated.

The lack of this clause is fatal, for a bill without it would show a less than complete commitment to human rights. What could the phrase "human rights" *mean* then to the ten per cent of our population who are homosexual? And the flaw is obvious, indeed there are those who say gay people should be discriminated against, and they are spreading their propaganda in a well financed campaign. But there are some who say that this is not an issue in Rhode Island, that there is no overt discrimination against gay people. But let me give an example: I am a tenured college professor and I have made no secret of my sexual orientation. Last spring I was physically attacked on the campus of my college, and three weeks ago I found an anonymous note on the door of my office urging the killing of all gays. (I pass over the derisive name calling of students, the obscene telephone calls in the middle of the night.) For you not to include "sexual orientation" in your bill is to say to these bigots, "Yes, it's OK to discriminate against gay people."

Well, I say it's *not* OK, and I would like to suggest some reasons why not: First, for those who say gay people are sick, I remind them that even the conservative American Psychiatric Association has agreed that homosexuality is not a sickness. That is definitely a non-issue. A more subtle basis for discrimination is the belief that those who do not conform to some arbitrarily established norm are somehow incomplete. This is the per-

verse tradition of Thomas Aquinas, who taught that women are “defective and misbegotten.”¹³ This medieval and unscientific doctrine should be decisively rejected.

Thirdly, there are those who insist on forcing their religious beliefs on others. I am not a religious person. I leave it to others to argue whether or not those who oppose homosexuals for this reason are interpreting their religion correctly. But that is not at issue here. In Rhode Island, within the tradition of Roger Williams and the principle of separation of Church and State, the question can only be: “Do homosexuals have human rights?” Even the most committed religious person should be able to answer that question. As Archbishop John Roach, of the Catholic archdiocese of St. Paul, Minnesota, recently said: “The Catholic community recognizes and affirms the human dignity and worth of homosexuals as persons and accordingly calls for the protection of their basic human rights.”

I would like to close by saying that I am not a spokesman for any organization or institution—but I believe my views express the feelings of many gay people. And even though I have talked at some length about gay people, emphatically I wish to express my solidarity with women, blacks, ethnic, linguistic, and other minorities, who too long have had to suffer discrimination. “Human rights” is an idea whose time has come. I urge passage of a bill that will protect the rights of sexual minorities, of all oppressed minorities.

13. *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Q. 92, Art. 1, Reply to Obj. 1.