



The Legacy Walk (Chicago)

by Owen Keehnen

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On October 11, 2012, the twenty-fifth anniversary of National Coming Out Day, Chicago's Legacy Walk was officially unveiled in a formal dedication ceremony. Amidst the fanfare of a glbtq veterans' military color guard, the flags of the U.S. Armed Forces, and the playing of Taps, the solid cast bronze plaque honoring Sgt. Leonard Matlovich was revealed from beneath the draping of a rainbow flag.

Matlovich's plaque was one of a series of honorary plaques unveiled simultaneously--each recognizing the contributions glbtq individuals have made to world history and culture.

In all, eighteen plaques were mounted on the ten pairs of "Rainbow Pylons" that designate the half-mile stretch of Chicago's North Halsted Street as the nexus of the city's diverse glbtq community--the first, and still the world's only, architectural streetscape recognizing the contributions of glbtq people.

Affixing the plaques in a place of honor for public recognition is an unprecedented act to reclaim and celebrate glbtq contributions to world history and culture. These stories are set in bronze so that our lives, our heroes, and our legacy will never again be edited or redacted from history.

The Legacy Project is the brainchild of activist Victor Salvo who was inspired while witnessing the first unfolding of the AIDS Memorial Quilt at the National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights in 1987. Seeing the vastness of the Quilt, and the staggering loss it represented--and convinced AIDS would eventually claim everyone--Salvo thought, "These people are gone now and we are here to remember them. But who will remember who came before *us* when *we* are gone?" The idea for an outdoor memorial recognizing glbtq contributions to history was born.

In 1999 a Special Commemorative Issue of *TIME* Magazine highlighting the "Top 100 People of the 20th Century in Science" included a story about British Mathematician and Nazi "Enigma Code" breaker Alan Turing. Salvo, who regarded himself a "seasoned gay activist" was shocked that Turing, a gay man whose contributions changed the course of world history, was unknown to him. A survivor of a suicide attempt when he was a teenager, Salvo was especially troubled to learn that Turing had been driven to take his own life--an incalculable loss to humanity.

Turing's importance to history, yet his oversight in most history books, turned Salvo's pipe-dream of an outdoor memorial into an obsession. He sought the advice of several long-time community activists who had worked to bring the pylons to North Halsted. His friend and mentor, Arthur Johnston, arranged a pivotal meeting with noted historian George Chauncey, whose advice and encouragement sent Salvo on a personal quest to learn as much as he could about glbtq contributions to history.



Top: A pylon on North Halsted Street at night.
Above: An attached Legacy Project plaque commemorating Jane Addams.
Photographs by Owen Keehnen.

Having recognized that the pylons on North Halsted were the ideal stanchions to support the bronze plaque memorials he envisioned, Salvo went to work engineering the attachment method that would effectively turn the pylons into totem poles celebrating various glbtq heroes from history.

His work progressed steadily until it was announced that Chicago's LGBT Center on Halsted would break ground in 2003. Salvo was convinced by Johnston to delay implementing his plans for five years until the Center was completed. The Legacy Project memorial to glbtq historical figures was shelved.

In 2008 while working with writer and historian Owen Keehnen on a job sorting archival materials for donation to the Chicago History Museum, Salvo came across a copy of the *TIME* Magazine article on Alan Turing that had inspired his plans for the pylons. For the first time in five years, Salvo shared his idea; Keehnen encouraged him to resurrect the plan.

Salvo still had his original design drawings and blueprints for the plaque placement on the pylons. While researching the mechanics of starting a non-profit, Salvo began speaking to various members of Chicago's activist community, local historians and academics, the Northalsted Business Alliance (which is responsible for the pylons), and city officials--all in an effort to flesh-out the creation of what would be called THE LEGACY WALK.

Simultaneously, in an effort to illustrate the types of life-stories that might be part of an eventual Legacy Walk installation, Salvo and Keehnen began two years of work researching available sources to identify exemplary candidates for nomination. They crafted over 160 compact biographies encapsulating the accomplishments of notable individuals from over 30 nations, representing over 20 different fields and disciplines, from every walk of life and every facet of the glbtq communities.

Mindful that the target audience for an outdoor installation like the Legacy Walk would know little about LGBT history, Salvo and Keehnen also sought to include several historic milestones such as The Harlem Renaissance, the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, and the Stonewall Riots. These brief biographical and historical sketches would serve as the core of the text for the eventual plaques.

After several months of steady progress the two joined forces with longtime Chicago activist Lori Cannon to form the Founding Board of the Legacy Project. With the approval of the Northalsted Business Alliance, in October of 2010 the group launched the organization's website (www.legacyprojectchicago.org) and "went public" with their plans for the Legacy Walk. A few months later a formal board was established and 501(c)3 non-profit status was granted to the organization.

With the basic elements of the Legacy Project in place, a diverse Selection Committee comprised of seasoned activists and historians was formed. Utilizing an 18-page ballot of nominees from the website, the Selection Committee voted on what would become the first Candidates for Induction in July of 2011. Several months later the organization held a formal fundraiser at Chicago's Palmer House Hotel where the Candidates for Induction were revealed for the first time.

Throughout the project's development, Salvo engaged in protracted negotiations with the City of Chicago's Departments of Law, Cultural Affairs, Human Relations, and Transportation to craft the language of the special new legal framework needed to extend the umbrella of "City-Protected Speech" to the content of the plaques.

Without such protections, the Legacy Walk's plaques would be vulnerable to an anti-gay group's demands to put their own plaques on the pylons, which had been paid for with a city bond issue. The only solution that would permit an independent non-profit to craft plaques that would be insulated from outside challenges

was the unprecedented co-sponsorship of the Legacy Walk by the City of Chicago.

Parallel to the protracted negotiations with the city, the Legacy Project sought sponsorships for the plaques that would be part of Phase One of the Inaugural Dedication in 2012. Those donors were identified among several private individuals, organizations, institutions, and businesses--including Levi Strauss, which sponsored three of the plaques. Final edits to the sponsored plaque texts were submitted to an international body of 24 historians for independent vetting and certification.

Once the certified texts were approved by the City of Chicago (as being appropriate for public display to general audiences), the plaques were ordered.

Eighteen plaques were unveiled on October 11, 2012. In addition to Sgt. Leonard Matlovich, the activist who challenged discrimination in the military, the honorees that day included authors James Baldwin, Reinaldo Arenas, and Oscar Wilde, gay icon and politician Harvey Milk, social justice pioneer Jane Addams, congresswoman Barbara Jordan, Puerto Rican activist and educator Dr. Antonia Pantoja, sexologist Dr. Alfred Kinsey, transsexual pioneer and spokesperson Christine Jorgensen, activist Barbara Gittings, artists Keith Haring and Frida Kahlo, civil rights pioneer Bayard Rustin, physician and founder of the Women's Naval Reserves Dr. Margaret Chung, dance icon Alvin Ailey, the Two Spirit People of the Native American tribes, and Alan Turing, the man whose tragic story inspired the Legacy Walk.

The throngs that crowded the street for the unveiling included several visiting dignitaries such as Dr. Wilhelmina Perry, the surviving partner of Dr. Pantoja; and Walter Naegel, the surviving partner of Bayard Rustin. Other special guests in attendance included Michael Bedwell, executor of Sgt. Leonard Matlovich's estate and two of Matlovich's nieces; Nathen Steininger, a representative of the Two Spirit People; Dr. Chung's biographer, Dr. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu; principal dancer of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Vernard Gilmore; and Anne L. Moore representing Kay Lahusen, the surviving partner of Barbara Gittings.

Phase Two of the Legacy Walk's installation will take place on National Coming-Out Day in 2013, completing the initial 34 available slots on the street. In 2014 the Legacy Project will begin to rotate the plaques into an indoor Visitors' Center that will open in the fall of that year. Every year on National Coming-Out Day approximately one-half of the plaques will move to make room for the incoming class so that the outdoor exhibit will remain dynamic, ensuring a steady stream of visitors to the only museum walk of its kind in the world.

In the spring of 2013, the Legacy Project Education Initiative with the Illinois Safe Schools Alliance will be launched in order to bring the knowledge gained from years of Legacy Project development directly to students who belong to the Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in Illinois High Schools.

Customized lesson plans, study guides, discussion questions, multi-media overviews, and field trips to see the Legacy Walk in person will be brought together as after-school activities aimed at redressing the ignorance of glbtq history in schools. This ignorance contributes not only to anti-gay bullying, but also to the social isolation and cultural marginalization experienced by glbtq teenagers.

The Legacy Walk, the Education Initiative--and an eventual museum--are designed to work together to fulfill the Legacy Project's stated mission to "Inform, enlighten, inspire and foster an appreciation for the many roles Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender people have played in the advancement of world history and culture."

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About the Author

Owen Keehnen is a writer, archivist, and historian. He was recently inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of fame. Conductor of more than 200 interviews with authors, activists, and artists, Keehnen has worked tirelessly to record the experience of glbtq people over three decades. Almost 40 of his interviews may be found in glbtq.com's Special Features. They include informative conversations with authors as diverse as Dorothy Allison, Quentin Crisp, Emma Donoghue, Jaime Manrique, and Sapphire (Ramona Lofton).

A compilation of more than 100 of his interviews is the basis of his book *We're Here, We're Queer: The Gay '90s and Beyond* (2011). He has contributed to several books about Chicago glbtq history. With Tracy Baim, he is co-author of two extensive biographies of Chicago gay legends, *Leatherman: The Legend of Chuck Renslow* (2011) and *Jim Flint: The Boy From Peoria* (2011).