



Rainbow Flag

by Linda Rapp

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A large rainbow flag flying over San Francisco's Castro District (2002).

The rainbow flag, a popular and internationally recognized symbol of gay and lesbian pride, was designed by Gilbert Baker in 1978.

In response to the request of the committee organizing the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Freedom Day Parade for a symbol that could be used year after year, Baker created a flag with eight horizontal stripes of different colors. After two huge rainbow flags were flown at the parade that year, the symbol gained immediate popularity in the San Francisco gay community.

The Original and the Revised Designs

In Gilbert's original design, each of the eight colors represented a concept. Hot pink stood for sexuality, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for the sun, green for nature, turquoise for art, indigo for harmony, and violet for spirit. Baker, together with some two dozen volunteers at the San Francisco Gay Center, dyed fabric and sewed the first flags.

Demand for rainbow flags made it necessary to find a source of mass production. The Paramount Flag Company of San Francisco undertook the job in 1979. Before commercial production began, lack of availability of materials and cost considerations caused a change in the design of the flag.

The hot pink and turquoise stripes were eliminated, and the indigo was replaced with blue, yielding the form that is used today. In 1986 the rainbow flag was recognized as an official flag by the International Flag Association.

Some versions of the rainbow flag add a white lambda or a pink triangle to the design. AIDS activist Leonard Matlovich proposed adding a black stripe to the bottom of the flag to symbolize the AIDS crisis. He intended that the black stripes should be removed from the flags and burned when a cure for AIDS is found. His suggestion, however, has not been widely adopted.

A Symbol of Pride, a Source of Controversy

The rainbow flag is frequently a feature of gay and lesbian pride parades. A particularly spectacular example--one mile in length--was seen in the 1994 New York parade commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Stonewall. Flag-bearers, who had donated money for the provision of services to people with AIDS, were given pieces of the flag as a memento of the event.

The rainbow flag has sometimes been flown at government buildings. In June, 1999, for example, it was raised at city halls in San Francisco and Worcester, Massachusetts.

The display in Worcester drew a citizen complaint at a city council meeting. Mayor Raymond V. Mariano, who called the complainant's remarks "the most obvious example of hate and bigotry" that he had heard in

almost two decades on the council, and all the other councilors decided to keep the flag aloft.

In the same month, a rainbow flag was displayed on the grounds of the Statehouse in Columbus, Ohio, in conjunction with a gay pride march. Charles Spingola, a street preacher, and Toni Peters, the daughter of a Baptist minister, tore down and burned the flag, for which both were convicted of criminal damaging.

Businesses sometimes fly the rainbow flag to indicate that they are gay-friendly or as an expression of pride by the owners. Such displays occasionally lead to controversy.

In 1998, for example, Selectman John Miller of Ogunquit, Maine, demanded that innkeepers David Mills and Garry John remove a rainbow flag from their building. In the ensuing weeks, five rainbow flags were stolen from the inn, openly gay Selectman Robert G. Brown resigned in protest, and citizens collected more than four times the number of signatures needed to recall Miller.

In 2000, pumpkin farmers Eric Cox and Gina Richard of Centreville, Virginia, became targets of a boycott by the Vienna, Virginia chapter of Tradition of Roman Catholic Homes (TORCH) because of two rainbow flags that had flown at their farm for over ten years.

The flags, which Cox and Richard had first put up as "a cheery addition" to their décor, took on added meaning for them when their daughter came out as a lesbian. The boycott was largely unsuccessful. Despite pressure from Vienna TORCH, the Springfield TORCH chapter supported the farm, as did various local gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual groups.

Also in 2000, San Diego apartment-building owners Peter Janpaul and Anthony Block were criticized on a talk radio show for flying the rainbow flag, but their tenants had no objection. When President Clinton attended a fund-raiser at the building, one of his Secret Service agents told Janpaul "I appreciate what you're doing for us."

The practice of flying the rainbow flag to indicate the pride of a gay household enjoyed a particular vogue in the late 1980s, especially in the San Francisco area. In 1988 John Stout of West Hollywood, California, successfully sued his landlords for the right to display a rainbow flag on the balcony of his apartment.

A similar dispute arose in 2000 in Gwinnett County, Georgia, when developers of a subdivision told a gay couple, Stace Duvall and Ed Graham, to remove their rainbow flag because it was not "in good taste." According to the Architectural Control Committee, the only flags in good taste were the American flag and the flag of the state of Georgia, formerly the symbol of the Confederacy.

Once the developers sold the last house in the subdivision and a homeowners' association was formed, Duvall and Graham resumed flying their rainbow flag and no one complained. Indeed, both men were elected to the association board.

The rainbow motif, whether in the form of a flag or not, has come to symbolize gay pride. In Traverse City, Michigan, in 2000, in the wake of a series of hate crimes including an attack on a worker at a gay bar, the city commission approved a bumper sticker with a rainbow pattern with stylized human figures resembling jigsaw-puzzle pieces and the motto "We are Traverse City."

The intention of the commissioners was to put some of the stickers on city vehicles and distribute the rest to citizens in order to promote unity. Instead they found themselves in the middle of a heated debate. Gay-rights groups praised the choice of the rainbow design, while opponents condemned it.

The commission eventually stopped distributing the stickers, removed those on official vehicles, and sold the remainder to a local civil rights advocacy group, Hate-Free TC, which made them available to the public.

The Rainbow Sash Movement

The rainbow has also been adopted by the Rainbow Sash Movement (RSM), a group of gay Catholics and their supporters. Founded in Australia in 1998, RSM, which now also has branches in England and the United States, is seeking a dialogue with Catholic leaders about the church's teachings regarding homosexuality. Members wear their rainbow sashes when seeking to receive communion during Mass.

In Melbourne, Australia, Westminster, England, New York City, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, sash-wearers have been refused the eucharist, but the dioceses of Rochester, New York, and St. Paul-Minneapolis, Minnesota have welcomed RSM members.

The rainbow flag continues to be a powerful and popular symbol. It is used as part of the design of many products, including apparel, jewelry, decorative objects, and items for pets.

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