



## Endean, Steve (1948-1993)

by Vicki L. Eaklor

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Steve Endean was one of the most important glbtq activists of the post-Stonewall era. Termed "visionary" by all who knew him, he also stirred controversy within and outside gay politics in his conviction that "mainstreaming" the movement was the way for glbtq Americans to achieve equality. To that end, he became the nation's first gay rights lobbyist in 1978 and two years later founded the Human Rights Campaign Fund, now the Human Rights Campaign, America's largest glbtq political organization.

Stephen Robert Endean was born on August 6, 1948, in Davenport, Iowa. He grew up in the Midwest and attended the University of Minnesota (1968-1972) as a political science major. Putting theory into practice, he soon became involved in local and state politics but feared that his sexuality was incompatible with a public life. Initially thinking, in his words, that he must "stop being gay" in order to pursue a political career, he "discovered being gay isn't specific acts but a state of mind."

From then on he devoted his life to the gay rights movement (the term then in use) and to legislative action, founding Minnesota's first gay and lesbian political group (Gay Rights Legislative Committee) in 1971. He became the state's first gay and lesbian rights lobbyist, working on such landmark measures as the Twin Cities' gay rights ordinances (passed in the mid-1970s) and Minnesota's state-wide non-discrimination bill (finally passed only a few months before Endean's death in 1993).

To complement his small income as a lobbyist, he worked at the coat check counter at Sutton's, a popular Minneapolis gay bar, advertising "Well-Hung Coats by Wee-Bee [his nickname]," and used that as another opportunity for politicking.

The backlash against gay rights and other progressive causes in the late 1970s solidified Endean's view that nationwide action, especially a national gay and lesbian rights bill, was essential. He was an early Co-Chair of the National Gay Task Force Board of Directors, and was among those who fought--bravely, but unsuccessfully--repeals of gay rights measures in Dade County, Florida (1977) and St. Paul, Minnesota (1978). By late 1978, when the murders of Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone in San Francisco sparked a renewed wave of protest, Endean had moved to Washington, D. C., to become Director of the fledgling Gay Rights National Lobby.

Gay Rights National Lobby was but the first of Endean's three-pronged plan for a fully mature political movement, which, in his view, demanded lobbying, raising money for gay-friendly candidates, and creating grassroots pressure. Thus, while leading GRNL, he launched the Human Rights Campaign (Fund) in 1980, the first national gay rights political action committee, and became its first Executive Director.

Conflicts with other activists, including *Advocate* publisher David Goodstein, led to Endean's removal from both GRNL and HRC(F) in 1983, but he returned to GRNL in 1985; after the two organizations merged later that year, Endean's Fairness Fund, a grassroots program to generate constituent mail, became HRC(F)'s Field Division, later renamed Speak Out.

By this time AIDS was a personal as well as national issue: diagnosed HIV-positive in 1985, Endean devoted increasing energy to AIDS issues through Speak Out, while also advocating coalition-building, especially with feminists and African Americans, and continuing the fight for national legislation.

Although Endean's declining health forced his retirement on disability in 1991, he initiated the National Endorsement Campaign, to persuade political and media opinion leaders publicly to support gay and lesbian rights, and began writing his movement memoir, *Into the Mainstream*. The same year he saw the National Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights Act reintroduced in Congress with over 100 co-sponsors. No such bill has yet been passed, but many of its goals--in employment, health care, and domestic partnership rights--have been accomplished by other means. These gains stand as legacies of his energy and vision.

A self-described "Midwestern Catholic boy" who loved sports and sex, Steve Endean became a devoted member of the Metropolitan Community Church, writing that "my quest for civil rights, equal justice and human dignity was a part of God's calling for me." In a letter to a friend he added, "when I think about 'my family' I not only think of family (which is mostly in Minneapolis) and friends but in terms of the broader gay and lesbian community."

Steve Endean died of AIDS-related complications on August 4, 1993.

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### **About the Author**

**Vicki L. Eaklor** is Professor of History at Alfred University. She is a past chair of the committee on Lesbian and Gay History and is especially interested in pedagogy. She has written extensively on sexuality and gender, especially as they intersect with politics and culture. Among her books is *Queer America: A GLBT History of the 20th Century*.