



## Gay Activists Alliance

by Linda Rapp

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The Gay Activists Alliance was formed in 1969 with the goal of working through the political system to secure and defend the rights of gay men and lesbians.

The founders of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) were members of the Gay Liberation Front who had become dissatisfied with the direction that the organization had taken. The Gay Liberation Front had allied itself with the Black Panther Party and was active in the movement against the war in Vietnam. Its leaders preached a radical political agenda, including the overthrow of capitalism.

Arthur Evans, Jim Owles, and Marty Robinson were among the first activists to consider a break with the Gay Liberation Front. In December 1969 they convened a group of approximately twenty people in the New York apartment of Evans's lover Arthur Bell and organized their new association. Other original members included Kay Tobin Lahusen, Vito Russo, and Morty Manford, whose parents, Jeanne and Jules Manford, founded P-FLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays).

A central tenet of the GAA was that they would devote their activities solely and specifically to gay and lesbian rights. Furthermore, they would work within the political system, seeking to abolish discriminatory sex laws, promoting gay and lesbian civil rights, and challenging politicians and candidates to state their views on gay rights issues.

Owles was chosen to be the first president of the GAA.

The political tactics of the GAA included "zaps"--public confrontations with officials that sought to draw media attention. Among the early objects of the zaps was New York mayor John V. Lindsay, whom the GAA held accountable for police harassment at gay bars, including the Stonewall Inn.

The confrontations with Lindsay continued through 1972, when the mayor made a bid to be the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party. The tactic eventually became controversial since others in the gay rights movement considered Lindsay relatively sympathetic and believed that harassing him could be counterproductive.

In addition to protesting against politicians who failed to take a pro-gay rights stance, the GAA worked enthusiastically for those who did. They were active supporters of Congresswoman Bella Abzug, whose campaign appearances included stops at GAA events and a bathhouse, and gay rights activist Franklin Kameny in his unsuccessful bid to become a Delegate from Washington, D. C. in the United States House of Representatives.

One of the GAA's principal goals in New York was passage of a bill to prohibit employment discrimination against gay men and lesbians. The GAA began campaigning for such a measure in early 1970.

The issue came to a head late the next year as GAA members not only continued to confront Lindsay but

also challenged other contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination to state their views on gay and lesbian rights.

At New York hearings on the employment bill--which was vigorously opposed by the police and fire departments, among others--the GAA conducted frequent and often raucous demonstrations. When the legislation came up for a vote in January 1972, it was defeated 7-5 in committee. Nevertheless, a week later Lindsay signed an executive order prohibiting city agencies from discriminating against job candidates based on the applicant's "private sexual orientation." (It would not be until 1986 that the New York City Council passed a bill prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.)

While some criticized the GAA as being overzealous in going after Lindsay, there was no doubt that their demonstrations were often imaginative and attention-getting. In some cases the GAA informed the media of impending actions, which not only garnered publicity but also provided a certain measure of protection against harassment by the police.

To protest the remarks of a New York City clerk who had condemned same-sex marriage, the GAA arrived at his office with a wedding cake topped with figures of same-sex couples and then proceeded to hold a mock wedding for a gay couple.

When in the fall of 1970 *Harper's* magazine ran a scathing article in which the author, Joseph Epstein, declared, "If I had the power to do so, I would wish homosexuality off the face of the earth," GAA members turned up at the *Harper's* office "to show [them] what homosexuals are really like."

They offered the employees coffee, doughnuts, and pamphlets, and sought an opportunity to discuss the Epstein piece. The congenial atmosphere was destroyed, however, when editor Midge Decter denied that the article "reinforce[d] anti-homosexual opinion," whereupon Evans angrily denounced her for running the bigoted and irresponsible article.

In addition to its political activism, the GAA served a social function. Early in 1971 the group rented a Victorian firehouse in SoHo as its headquarters. They painted the façade bright red and set out the GAA flag. The banner featured the organization's logo, the lower-case Greek letter lambda, created by Tom Doerr, a graphic designer (and Robinson's lover). GAA literature explained that the lambda represented "a complete exchange of energy--that moment or span of time witness to absolute activity" in the notation of chemistry and physics.

The Firehouse began its tradition of weekly dances in May 1971. The events were an immediate hit. Not only did the dances provide a significant source of income for the GAA, but they also attracted new members. Some in the organization worried that the dances would distract attention from the GAA's serious political mission, but it soon became apparent that the Firehouse was important as a community center and a visible sign of gay men and lesbians in the city.

Schisms eventually arose in the GAA. Led by Jean O'Leary, many women members, finding that they had little voice in the primarily male GAA, left in 1973 to create their own organization, Lesbian Feminist Liberation, to focus specifically on lesbian rights.

The same year a split occurred between GAA president Bruce Voeller and a faction of the membership. Critics of the well-educated Voeller felt that he was out of touch with the GAA's "community roots." Voeller, for his part, complained of the "blue-jean elitism" of his detractors, who opposed his efforts to reduce the amount of street activism and steer the GAA into the mainstream of political discourse.

As a result of the imbroglio, Voeller quit in October 1973. He promptly invited a number of other discouraged members of the GAA to join him in a new organization, the National Gay Task Force (now the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force).

The GAA lost its Firehouse headquarters in 1974 when arsonists set it ablaze. Both disaffected GAA members and homophobes were considered possible suspects, but the crime has never been solved.

Its membership greatly diminished for a while, the GAA nevertheless continued its zaps, pickets (most notably of the home of homophobic lawyer Adam Wollinsky, in response to a column he wrote for the *New York Daily News*), and other activities. In 1977, in response to the Anita Bryant crusade, the organization experienced an upsurge in membership and expanded its role somewhat to monitor media depictions of homosexuals and homosexuality.

The GAA folded in 1981 or soon thereafter; hence, its life was relatively brief. Yet it is remembered as an important organization of the early post-Stonewall era. It strove to give gay men and lesbians visibility in American politics and a welcoming home in its community center.

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