



Gittings, Barbara (1932-2007)

by Linda Rapp

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Activist Barbara Gittings, a pioneer of the American gay rights movement, compiled an impressive list of accomplishments. In addition to being instrumental in having homosexuality removed from the American Psychiatric Association's list of mental disorders, she founded the New York chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis and edited its magazine, *The Ladder*. She also worked tirelessly within the American Library Association to make materials with glbtq content more accessible to the reading public.

Gittings was born on July 31, 1932 in Vienna, Austria, where her father held a post with the American diplomatic service. The family returned to the United States in the 1940s, eventually settling in Delaware.

After graduating from high school in 1949, Gittings enrolled at Northwestern University, where she intended to be a theater major. During her freshman year she consulted a Chicago psychiatrist who confirmed her inklings that she was homosexual--and offered to "cure" her.

Instead of going into psychotherapy, however, Gittings went to the college libraries--including the medical and law branches--seeking information on homosexuality. She quickly discovered that resources were few, and often to be found "under such headings as 'abnormal,' 'perverted,' or 'deviate.'"

Gittings observed that what information there was dealt almost exclusively with gay men. She was also struck by the fact that there were no references to love.

In the pulp novels of the period Gittings found depictions of love and also of "fairly realistic, flesh-and-blood characters" much more like herself than the images that she had found in the "scientific" literature. It was an edifying discovery despite the almost invariably tragic endings of the stories.

Gittings's research consumed her time. She stopped attending classes, and as a consequence failed the semester. She briefly returned to the family home but soon struck out on her own, moving to Philadelphia.

In her assiduous search for written resources, she discovered *The Homosexual in America* (1951), issued pseudonymously by Edward Sagarin under the name Donald Webster Cory, called his publisher, and arranged to meet him. From Sagarin, she learned about organizations in the fledgling homophile movement, including the Mattachine Society and their publication *ONE*.

Having traveled to California in 1956 to visit *ONE*'s office, she also heard about the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) and attended her first meeting, where she made the acquaintance of the society's founders, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin.



Top: Pioneer Gay rights activist Barbara Gittings at the first homosexual rights demonstration, Philadelphia, July 4, 1965.

Above: Long time activists Barbara Gittings (left) and her partner Kay Tobin Lahusen tell the world just how many years they have been fighting for gay rights in the film *After Stonewall*. Photograph of Barbara Gittings at the Philadelphia demonstration by Kay Tobin Lahusen. Photograph of Barbara Gittings with Kay Tobin Lahusen by Wayne Marquardt. Courtesy www.afterstonewall.com.

Two years later Lyon and Martin asked Gittings to form the first New York chapter of DOB. Although the travel from her home in Philadelphia was a challenge, Gittings embraced the project.

It was at a Daughters of Bilitis picnic in 1961 that Gittings met Kay Lahusen, herself an activist. The two fell in love and soon became partners for life.

In 1963 Gittings succeeded Lyon and Martin as editor of DOB's magazine, *The Ladder*, a position that she held for more than three years. During her editorship, *The Ladder* became a more militant journal that challenged some of the DOB's assimilationist positions. For example, it questioned the reliance on medical authorities and the notion that homosexuals were sick.

Gittings also rejected the DOB's stance against direct political action. Having met and been inspired by Washington, D. C. activist Frank Kameny, she took an active part in early gay rights demonstrations, picketing the White House in 1965 to protest federal employment discrimination and also participating in annual demonstrations on July 4 at Independence Hall.

The tactic of picketing was somewhat controversial at the time. Contention over the issue led to Gittings's decision to leave DOB.

Kameny, who was campaigning to have homosexuality removed from the American Psychiatric Association's list of mental disorders, invited Gittings to join the effort, an invitation she eagerly accepted.

In 1971 Kameny and Gittings had an exhibit at the APA convention, and the following year they were invited to participate in a panel discussion entitled "Psychiatry, Friend or Foe to Homosexuals? A Dialogue."

When Lahusen pointed out that the psychiatrists on the panel were heterosexual, Gittings found a gay psychiatrist who agreed to take part provided that he could do so anonymously, wearing a disguise and using a microphone to alter his voice--itself a dramatic statement about homophobia in the profession and in the society at large.

At the panel Gittings read anonymous written statements from other gay psychiatrists as well.

The APA Board of Trustees removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973, a decision subsequently validated by the association's membership. Gittings, who was interviewed by Philadelphia newspapers on that occasion, wryly recalled "a wonderful headline"--"20 Million Homosexuals Gain Instant Cure."

Gittings was particularly concerned with making glbtq literature available to readers. While doing a gay news show on radio station WBAI in New York in 1970 she learned that some gay members of the American Library Association were organizing an interest group, the Task Force on Gay Liberation (renamed the Gay Task Force in 1975).

Since the ALA convention was open to people who were not professional librarians, Gittings attended. She quickly became a leading participant in the Task Force on Gay Liberation's first project, compiling "a short, manageable list of the most positive materials" on gay topics.

From a modest beginning with thirty-seven titles, the Gay Bibliography soon grew enormously and became a valuable tool for libraries and schools. The compilers often received requests for shorter lists dealing with specialized topics and were pleased to comply.

At the 1971 ALA convention in Dallas, the Task Force on Gay Liberation presented its first Gay Book Award to Alma Routsong, who wrote as Isabel Miller, for *A Place for Us* (1969, later republished as *Patience and*

Sarah).

At the Dallas convention Gittings and her colleagues made a "very bold" move by setting up a kissing booth called "Hug a Homosexual" in their exhibit space. No convention-goers took advantage of the offer of free same-sex hugs and kisses, and so Gittings and Routsong embraced each other while television news cameras rolled.

Task Force panels, initiated in 1975, became a fixture at ALA conventions and have been very well received.

Gittings pushed to have the annual Gay Book Award made an official award of the ALA. As she stepped down as coordinator of Gay Task Force in 1986, she was able to announce that the proposal had been adopted.

Gittings was doubly honored with an award of her own. In 2001 GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) instituted the Barbara Gittings Award for activism, of which Gittings was the first recipient.

Gittings appeared in the documentary film *Out of the Past* (1998, directed by Jeff Dupre), which presents the lives of a number of American gay men and lesbians including Sarah Orne Jewett (played by Gwyneth Paltrow) and her partner Annie Adams Fields (Cherry Jones), Bayard Rustin (Leland Gantt), and a lesser known figure, Henry Gerber (Edward Norton), a postal clerk who founded one of the country's first gay rights organizations. Gittings, appearing for herself, displayed "a clipped, composed eloquence" according to reviewer Stephen Holden.

Following a brave battle with breast cancer, Gittings died on February 18, 2007. She was survived by Lahusen.

Together with Lahusen, Gittings was active in glbtq organizations until the very end of her life. Fittingly, the couple planned eventually to donate their extensive collection of books, documents, and photographs to libraries and archives, where they will undoubtedly be a boon to scholars and other readers as well as a fitting tribute to the couple's life of commitment to activism for gay rights.

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.