



Goodstein, David (1932-1985)

by Linda Rapp

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Publisher David Goodstein transformed *The Advocate*, a Los Angeles gay newspaper, into the leading American gay newsmagazine. He also worked as an activist in the cause of gay rights.

Early Life and Career

Goodstein came from a privileged background. Born into a wealthy Denver family in 1932, he had a materially if not socially comfortable childhood. Afflicted with scoliosis, he had to undergo physical therapy for his twisted spine, an effort that was not completely successful.

Schoolmates made fun of his appearance, not just because of his physical problem, but also because he was overweight and effeminate. He claimed to have been even more uncomfortable with his own family and said that he used to hide under the porch to avoid them.

Although Goodstein may not have been handsome or popular, he was certainly intelligent. He received a bachelor's degree in economics from Cornell University in 1954 and went on to earn a law degree from Columbia University. After graduation from law school, he remained in New York City, where he established a flourishing practice as a criminal defense attorney.

He next moved to Wall Street, using the profits from his law career to co-found Compufund, a company that used computers to manage stock portfolios. He also made his first forays into the political world, joining the "brain trust" of Mayor John Lindsay.

The Wells Fargo Bank aggressively recruited Goodstein because of his expertise in computerized investing. When he moved to San Francisco in 1971 to develop a system for the bank, he seemed poised for a successful career in stock management.

The course of his life changed abruptly, however. After Goodstein mentioned to his boss's wife that he was gay, she repeated the information to her husband, and Goodstein was promptly fired.

Gay Activism

Shocked and outraged, Goodstein set his sights on gaining an influential position in politics and in the gay rights movement. Having sold both the lucrative Compufund and some New York real estate, Goodstein had the financial resources to pursue his goals.

Goodstein's first move was to create the Whitman-Radclyffe Foundation (combining the names of gay poet Walt Whitman and lesbian novelist Radclyffe Hall), an organization to educate the public and to further gay and lesbian social and political issues. He hired Jim Foster, a San Francisco gay activist who had recently formed a gay political group, the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club, as executive director. In 1972, Foster became the first openly gay politician to address a Democratic National Convention on the subject of gay

rights.

Goodstein's second venture began in 1972 when he organized the Committee for Sexual Law Reform to support a move to repeal California's sodomy law, which accomplished its goal when the California legislature repealed the statute in 1975 (effective January 1, 1976).

The Advocate

Goodstein's most successful enterprise was the purchase of a newspaper in 1974. For an initial payment of \$300,000, with \$700,000 to be remitted over the next ten years, Goodstein bought *The Advocate*, which had been founded in 1967 as a local Los Angeles newspaper. In 1970, the newspaper had become national in scope, featuring gay news from around the country.

Goodstein transformed the newspaper, which is the oldest continually produced gay publication in the United States. He began by firing all of the editorial staff, as well as columnist Arthur Evans, one of the founders of the Gay Activists Alliance.

Goodstein, who had previously attempted to buy *After Dark*, an entertainment magazine that, while not specifically gay in focus, had a strong appeal for gay men, now chose to change *The Advocate's* emphasis from news-reporting to a magazine that, in addition to news, also covered gay and lesbian culture, with features on celebrities, fashion, and leisure, as well as books and films.

The slogan that Goodstein added to the front page, "Touching your lifestyle," underscored the new direction in which he wanted to take *The Advocate*. The format changed from a rather amateurish newspaper to a glossy magazine. Eventually, he greatly increased the journalistic professionalism of *The Advocate* (and thereby of the gay press generally) by hiring accomplished reporters, such as Randy Shilts and others, and contributing editors, such as Richard Hall, who managed the books section.

Goodstein also moved the publication's headquarters from Los Angeles to San Mateo, which was not only more convenient for him but also out of the orbit of activists in Los Angeles and San Francisco, with whom he frequently engaged in feuds.

Another new feature of *The Advocate* was Goodstein's own column, "Opening Space," which he used to air his views on the gay rights movement.

A Prickly Personality

Although Goodstein aspired to be the leader of that movement, he was a contentious figure who could alienate at least as many people as he inspired. He had no doubts that he was right about everything and no patience with those who disagreed with him. Furthermore, he knew the value of power and did not hesitate to wield it. One of his first decisions as a publisher was that *The Advocate* would not print the names of people whom he regarded as "enemies of the movement."

Bruce Voeller was among the banned, mostly because as director of the National Gay Task Force he held the kind of national leadership position that Goodstein coveted. Activist Morris Kight, on the other hand, had challenged Goodstein's control of the Committee for Sexual Law Reform, starting a long-running feud. Goodstein first shunned him on the pages of the magazine but later assigned Shilts to do an exposé on him. Shilts decided that the negative story was unwarranted, never wrote the piece, and, in 1978, resigned over disagreements with Goodstein.

Kight was typical of the "movement people"--those who took to the streets and other public venues to demonstrate--whom Goodstein considered inappropriate representatives of the gay community. Goodstein, who bred and rode show horses and had an impressive collection of fine art, was, on the other hand,

regarded as an elitist by many activists.

Goodstein hoped that *The Advocate* would appeal to an elite and affluent audience and that readership would reach one million within two years. Circulation did not skyrocket at the rate he had anticipated, though it did become one of the dozen fastest-growing magazines in the country during the 1970s. Within a decade *The Advocate* led, by a very substantial margin, all American gay publications in circulation and in mainstream respectability.

The National Gay Rights Lobby and the Advocate Experience

Goodstein convened *The Advocate* Invitational Conference in 1976 with the goal of founding a new national gay organization to supersede the National Gay Task Force and to establish himself as a leading spokesman. Although the National Gay Rights Lobby was formed at the meeting, Goodstein found his invitees less tractable than he had expected. Many of his ideas were rejected, and Goodstein himself was criticized for his autocratic attitude. As a result he decided not to lend his financial support to the new organization.

Goodstein's next venture was a self-help workshop program called the Advocate Experience. Goodstein, who had taken EST (Erhard Seminar Training) workshops with the program's creator Werner Erhard, called on Rob Eichberg, an EST-trained therapist, to design a program specifically for gay men and lesbians.

The goal of the Advocate Experience was to increase the self-esteem of gay men and lesbians. The sessions were often emotionally wrenching. Goodstein believed so strongly in the value of the workshops that he made them compulsory for *Advocate* employees and fired respected senior editor Sarah Gregory-Lewis when she refused to participate.

The Briggs Initiative

In 1977, Goodstein was among the founders of Concerned Voters of California, an organization formed to oppose the Briggs Initiative. The Briggs Initiative, named after California State Senator John V. Briggs, who proposed it, would have barred gay men and lesbians from working in or teaching in public schools. The issue went before the voters in November 1978, after an acrimonious campaign.

In a major victory for the gay rights movement, the Briggs Initiative was defeated, thanks largely to the efforts of the Concerned Voters of California, which coordinated the campaign.

Advocate Successes and Failures

Despite his frequent disagreements with other leaders, including San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk, whom he initially refused to endorse, but with whom he eventually made peace, Goodstein established *The Advocate* as the newspaper of record for the burgeoning gay and lesbian rights movement. It is hard to see how the movement for equality could have thrived during the 1970s without a national newsmagazine. Moreover, the *Advocate* became a force in the promotion of gay and lesbian culture.

Under Goodstein's leadership, *The Advocate* attracted the first advertisement for the product of a major national company, Absolut vodka, in a gay magazine. Goodstein continually pushed the magazine toward mainstream respectability, attempting to rely less heavily on ad revenues from sexually-oriented products.

One of Goodstein's greatest errors, however, was being slow to understand the seriousness of the threat posed by AIDS. Goodstein believed that AIDS was "a gay equivalent of Legionnaires' Disease" and that the crisis would be short-lived. Thus, news and information about the disease were virtually absent from the pages of *The Advocate* until the spring of 1982.

Death and Legacy

Goodstein died in San Diego on June 22, 1985 as a result of complications after surgery for bowel cancer. A few months earlier he had sold *The Advocate* to Niles Merton, an Orange County businessman.

After Goodstein's death *The Advocate* dissociated itself from Eichberg's workshop program, which changed its name to The Experience and continued in operation until 2001, when it folded because of declining interest.

The Advocate magazine remains a leading national source of glbtq news and now appears in both print and on-line formats.

Perhaps Goodstein's greatest personal legacy was his generous gift to his alma mater Cornell University to help fund the university's Human Sexuality Collection, which officially came into being in 1988. In addition to a significant financial contribution, Goodstein donated some of his own papers and personal memorabilia to the collection.

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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.