



Holidays and Observances

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Holidays and cultural observances bring people together for both celebration and reflection. Throughout the year, the glbtq community unites in pride and in protest, in recognition of a rich heritage and in hope for the future.

GLBTQ Pride Month

On June 11, 1999 President Bill Clinton issued a proclamation declaring June Gay and Lesbian Pride Month. The recognition was welcome, but the myriad people attending festivals and parades throughout the United States, Canada, and many other countries already knew that June was Pride Month.

If the presidential proclamation did not mark the beginning of June as Pride Month, neither did any other particular moment in time: Pride Month was not a deliberately founded and organized event; rather, it is a cultural expression that has grown and evolved and will undoubtedly continue to do so.

Now in large part celebratory, the observance has its roots in both pride and protest. The initial events in the development of Pride Month were commemorations of the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots of June 28, 1969. In New York, a few hundred gay men and lesbians marched from Washington Square to Central Park for a "Gay-In" demonstration. As they progressed, they attracted more and more participants--the number variously estimated at from 5,000 to 15,000--making it the largest gay power demonstration as of that time.

The anniversary of Stonewall was also observed with a march in Los Angeles and rallies in San Francisco and Chicago.

Over time, glbtq organizations in more and more cities began to put on pride events in late June. The quest for equal rights remained a theme of the parades and rallies, but festive elements, such as picnics and performances by gay and lesbian choruses and bands, were added to the programs.

In addition, organizers of pride events sought to reach out for support from allies, especially elected officials, but not always with success. In 1982, for example, the City Council of Atlanta, Georgia passed a resolution that declared June 26 "Lesbian, Gay Male, and Transperson Pride Day" and stated that "the limitation on the pursuit of happiness based upon issues of sexual preference, race, sex, age, religious belief, economic standing, national origin, or physical capability represents the vilest form of discrimination and division," but Mayor Andrew Young refused to sign it.

In the same year, however, Mayor Kathy Whitmire of Houston, Texas, a city whose police department had a long record of harassment of gay and lesbian citizens, addressed a post-parade rally and said, "It's good to see so many people who have been friends of mine for a long time." In that era, her decision to attend a pride event and affirm solidarity was considered newsworthy.



President Bill Clinton issued a proclamation declaring June Gay and Lesbian Pride Month in 1999.

In Canada, where tolerance and equality under the law are incorporated into its Charter of Rights, the refusal of some mayors and city councils to recognize pride observances have led to complaints filed with provincial human rights commissions. In some cases, cities have been fined for refusing to accord pride events the same recognition accorded to other civic celebrations, such as flying the rainbow flag or issuing proclamations of support.

While pride events still do not enjoy universal support from elected officials, many now do either attend events or issue proclamations recognizing the occasion. In election years, it is not uncommon to find office-seekers and members of political organizations campaigning for the glbtq vote at pride events.

The corporate world has taken note of the desirability of attracting glbtq customers, and some companies have become sponsors of pride celebrations. The Disney Corporation holds Gay Days at its theme park Disney World in conjunction with the pride festival in Orlando, Florida. (The company's California park, Disneyland, also hosts Gay Days, but in October, Gay History Month.)

The festival in Orlando runs for an entire week, but in most American cities, pride events take place during a weekend. In some places, including San Francisco and New York, an extravagant and exuberant parade is the centerpiece of the festivities. Other typical events are street fairs, concerts, film screenings, stand-up comedy performances, dances, and recreational activities such as golf outings.

Many festivals also include commitment ceremonies, a joyous event for the participants yet still bittersweet, given the continuing inequality of marriage laws in most places.

Cities around the globe now boast pride celebrations, the great majority of which are held in June. Many places have their events on the last weekend in commemoration of Stonewall, but in some, including Detroit and Orlando, the festivities are traditionally in the first week, while others celebrate in between, putting a rainbow over all of Gay Pride Month on the calendar.

Cities such as São Paulo and Toronto stage parades and other pride celebrations that attract literally millions of participants. They often become national happenings. However, in other cities, including Moscow and Warsaw and other eastern European capitals, pride events are met with stiff governmental and popular resistance, with the participants subject to arrest and sometimes brutal attacks by homophobic mobs.

National Coming Out Day

Inspired by the success of the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights on October 11, 1987, Jean O'Leary, then Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Rights Advocates, joined with Rob Eichberg to create an event that would increase the visibility of glbtq people and encourage those previously silent to make their voices heard.

On the first anniversary of the march, they launched National Coming Out Day. CNN and National Public Radio reported on events held in eighteen states, and the *Oprah Winfrey Show* also took note of the celebrations of pride.

The idea of National Coming Out Day did not find favor with everyone in the glbtq community at first since there was some fear that it might compromise individuals' privacy. Outing people, however, was not the intent; rather, National Coming Out Day offered glbtq people the opportunity to choose to be identified with the community and to make a commitment to the goal of achieving equal rights.

The symbol of National Coming Out Day, Keith Haring's image of a person joyously bursting from a closet,

underscores the individual nature of this step, fosters solidarity among those who have made it, and offers hope to those who, for whatever reason, have not yet been able to kick open the door.

In 1990 Lynn Shepodd became the executive director of National Coming Out Day. An able administrator, she secured tax-exempt status for the organization and also urged the gay press to provide free advertising for events. Some 150 publications cooperated, and as a result, National Coming Out Day was observed in all fifty states and in seven other countries.

The following year, National Coming Out Day received more nationwide attention when Geraldo Rivera hosted spokespersons Dick Sargent, a gay actor who had starred on the sitcom *Bewitched*, and California Assemblywoman Sheila Kuehl on his television show.

In 1993, Shepodd sought to increase the effectiveness of National Coming Out Day by incorporating it into the efforts of the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF, now known as the Human Rights Campaign). "I wanted to kick this project up to the next level, and HRCF had the muscle to do it," she stated.

Under the leadership of Elizabeth Birch, former executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, National Coming Out Day was transformed into the year-round National Coming Out Project, which supports the open expression of glbtq people at home, at school, and at work.

National Coming Out Day has drawn many celebrity glbtq spokespersons, among them Billy Bean, Amanda Barse, Chastity Bono, Dan Butler, Ellen DeGeneres, Melissa Etheridge, Candace Gingrich, RuPaul, Muffin Spencer-Devlin, Michael Stipe, and Rufus Wainwright. Allies, including Betty DeGeneres, the mother of Ellen DeGeneres and the project's first heterosexual spokesperson, Cher, and Cyndi Lauper, have also lent their voices to the effort.

In election years, National Coming Out Day has adopted a "get out the vote" theme to encourage people to rally to the support of candidates who favor equality and to oppose discriminatory ballot initiatives.

National Coming Out Day has become a joyous occasion, particularly on college campuses, where young people are able to discover community and support.

GLBT History Month

Rodney Wilson, a history teacher in a suburban St. Louis, Missouri high school, understood the difficulties of glbtq students picked on and bullied by their classmates since he had been their advocate when they turned to him in their distress. He was also troubled by the lack of acknowledgment of the homosexuality of prominent men and women who have made significant contributions to history. In response to these problems, he set about to establish a teaching initiative through which the achievements of glbtq people would be recognized.

His stated goals were to "fight for the right of every child in every school in America to be safe from fear and intimidation, . . . fight for the right of every teacher . . . in every school in America to be free to live openly and honestly without fear of job loss, . . . [and] fight for the right to have accurate information about lesbians and gays included in the textbooks and curricula of every school."

Wilson proposed October as GLB (now GLBT) History Month because it was during the school year and included National Coming Out Day. National organizations such as Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), the HRC, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and the National Education Association were quick to lend support, but the Christian Action Network condemned the work as a move by "militant homosexuals [who] are making tremendous gains in our public schools--teaching even small

children how to become homosexuals."

Despite such opposition, GLBT History Month has become well established. In 2006 the Equality Forum took over the task of coordinating the project and launched a GLBT History Month web site. Each year the site features 31 "icons"--glbtq people who have made significant social, political, or artistic contributions, one person for each day of the month--with a short video, biography, and bibliography about each. Other videos about GLBT History Month have also been produced and are offered without charge to educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and broadcast outlets.

Southern Decadence

A celebration of glbtq culture in New Orleans, Southern Decadence began on Labor Day weekend 1972 as a going-away party for one of a group of friends living in a rather decrepit cottage in the Faubourg Tremé section of the city. Inspired by Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the housemates had fondly, if ironically, named their home Belle Reve after the plantation of the character Blanche Dubois. Those invited to the party were told to costume as "decadent Southern" characters.

The party was such a success that the friends--many but not all of whom were gay--threw another one the next year. In New Orleans, if you do something twice, it's a tradition. Southern Decadence was off and running.

Approximately fifteen participants--dressed as such characters as Tallulah Bankhead, Belle Watling, Miss America of 1959 Mary Ann Mobley, Helen Keller (not a conspicuously decadent person), and French Quarter eccentric Ruthie the Duck Lady--first gathered at Matassa's Bar in the Quarter and then paraded back to Belle Reve.

The following year, the organizers began choosing Grand Marshals for Southern Decadence. The nature of the celebration remained essentially the same as before, but the number of participants continually grew.

In 1981, by which time most of the original participants were no longer on the scene, Southern Decadence underwent an important transformation from a party for friends to a celebration of gay culture open to all who wished to take part. At the same time, the starting point of the parade was moved to the Golden Lantern bar. Further changes were introduced in 1987, when Grand Marshals began choosing an official theme, song, and colors for each year's festivities.

Attendance rose considerably after Southern Decadence launched a web site in 1995. The increased visibility turned the event from a local celebration to an attraction for tourists. The then-record attendance of 35,000 in 1996 was immediately eclipsed by a participation of 50,000 the following year and continued to grow until 2004, when over 100,000 people reveled at Southern Decadence.

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the city flooded in the last days of August 2005, some conservative Christians, including spokesmen for the groups Repent America and Restore America, claimed that the devastation was divine retribution for the Crescent City's gay culture in general and Southern Decadence in particular. Some more mainstream religious leaders denounced such statements. One gay wag, pointing to the fact that nearly all of the gay bars in the city escaped serious damage while many churches were flooded, asked, "Who does God love?"

As New Orleans recovered, so did Southern Decadence. 2006 saw the addition of a new component, DecaFest, a cultural program organized by local historian and activist Roberts Batson that offers films, concerts by the New Orleans Gay Men's Chorus, comedy shows, panel discussions, and city tours. At 75,000, attendance did not reach pre-Katrina levels but was quite robust under the circumstances.

Attendance in 2007 soared to 135,000. Rip Naquin, a promoter of Southern Decadence, commented, "This

year the festival was so big that it poured [beyond the French Quarter] into the Bywater and the Marigny [neighborhoods] where the gay businesses saw the biggest increases, some more than 50 percent of what they previously did." In all, Southern Decadence brought 150 million dollars to New Orleans that year, making it fourth among tourist events (tied with the Essence Music Festival) in generating revenue for the city.

St. Patrick's Day

When the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization (ILGO) applied to march in New York's St. Patrick's Day Parade in Manhattan in 1991, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who organize the event, placed them on a wait list, ostensibly due to city-imposed limits on the size of the parade. Mayor David Dinkins offered to lift the restrictions so that all wait-listed groups could participate, at which point the Hibernians turned down ILGO's request on the grounds that the parade was a Roman Catholic event and that the Church condemns homosexuality as sinful. Eventually, Division 7 of the Hibernians allowed the ILGO contingent to march with them, although they were not permitted to carry their identifying banner. Dinkins chose to take a place with ILGO instead of leading the parade as mayors traditionally do.

Lawsuits over the issue of inclusion continued until 1995, when the United States Supreme Court ruled that organizers of parades have the right to determine who may or may not take part.

Since parades in the Bronx, Staten Island, and Brooklyn also excluded glbtq Irish-Americans, an inclusive St. Patrick's Day Parade and Irish Fair was established in Queens in 2000. The 2002 inclusive parade honored New York Fire Department chaplain Father Mychal Judge, a proud participant in the Queens parades, who died in the line of duty at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Mardi Gras

Like St. Patrick's Day, Mardi Gras, or Carnival, as it is often called, is technically a religious holiday. The last Tuesday before the penitential fasting season of Lent in the Christian calendar, the holiday has become increasingly secular. A festival known for wild abandon, sexual promiscuity, feasting, drinking, dancing, parading, and elaborate masquerade, it is a significant holiday in cities such as New Orleans, Rio de Janeiro, and, most recently, Sydney, Australia.

Indeed, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is one of the world's largest celebrations of glbtq pride, and lasts for three weeks, usually in February. The festivities include all types of parties, performances, exhibitions, an outdoor fair day, and a two-week film festival. The culminating event is the Mardi Gras Parade, which features over 100 floats from glbtq and gay-friendly organizations, and is broadcast nationally on Australian television.

Tellingly, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras originated in political activism, in the struggle to repeal laws that criminalized homosexual acts and to end police harassment of gay men and lesbians. A demonstration on June 24, 1978 (chosen to commemorate Stonewall) erupted into a riot when police suddenly rescinded the organizers' parade permit and arrested more than fifty people.

Although the police eventually dropped all the charges against those who were arrested, the lesbian and gay community of Australia was galvanized by the attack. Organizers quickly planned a follow-up parade during Mardi Gras, which became an annual event that steadily grew in size over time.

As repressive laws against homosexuality were gradually repealed by the Australian states, the Sydney Mardi Gras celebration became less political and more purely festive. It was ultimately coopted as an annual tourist event, and it attracts thousands of visitors from all over the world.

Day of Silence

The genesis of the Day of Silence, held annually in late April, was a class project at the University of Virginia in 1996. Assigned to create a non-violent protest event, students devised the Day of Silence to call attention to the situation of glbtq youth who are silent about their sexual orientation because of fear of harassment from classmates and lack of support from instructors and administrators.

The organizers were able to secure the participation of more than 150 students--an impressive number for a class project--who carried signs explaining the reason for their silence.

The student organizers recognized the value of their endeavor and reached out to other colleges across the country, receiving an extremely favorable response: in 1997 the Day of Silence was observed at almost one hundred colleges and universities.

In 2001 the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) took over the job of organizing the Day of Silence nationwide and expanding it to include students at high schools and middle schools. The need for awareness of the problems of glbtq teens is particularly acute: a survey conducted by GLSEN in 2005 revealed that eighty percent of glbtq students had suffered harassment at school and that over thirty percent had absented themselves for at least a day because of fear for their own safety.

The need to put an end to violence, bullying, and intimidation could not be more clear; nevertheless, on its Day of Silence web site, GLSEN cautions that "in middle and high schools, getting support from the school administration is critical . . . because it's always important to ask and provide information to win support," which cannot be taken for granted.

Various accommodations are made for the Day of Silence. In some schools, students remain silent all day; in others, they participate in class but maintain silence during lunch hours. Students continue the practice of carrying cards explaining why they are not speaking.

At the end of the school day, many institutions hold a "Breaking the Silence" event at which participants and others have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Glbtq students can express themselves in a safe environment, and potential allies can ask questions and learn valuable lessons about the terrible harm caused by prejudice, harassment, and bullying.

The Day of Silence, despite its goal of creating safer schools and communities for glbtq youth, has met with opposition: a number of conservative Christian groups, including the American Family Association, Mission: America, the Alliance Defense Fund, and the Capitol Resource Institute, have encouraged parents to keep their children home if they attend a school where the Day of Silence is being observed.

The Alliance Defense Fund has, since 2005, countered the Day of Silence with a so-called "Day of Truth" that champions compulsory heterosexuality, decrying homosexuality as sinful and promoting the discredited idea that gay men and lesbians can choose to become heterosexuals. The event has received little support.

The Capitol Resource Institute, whose agenda includes repealing a California law banning discrimination in schools on the basis on sexual orientation, in 2008 urged parents to keep their children out of schools with a Day of Silence, which, they claimed, "disrupts learning" with class discussions of the discrimination and harassment faced by glbtq students. Instead, they suggested sending the children to a "Day of Learning" in Costa Mesa because, said executive director Karen England, "if schools are to be held hostage by a social agenda for a day, we will give them an event where they can learn something."

There is indeed something to be learned--a lesson about the need for treating all people with equal respect and dignity. In 2008, some 5,400 middle schools and high schools and approximately a thousand colleges and universities participated in the Day of Silence to educate their communities about the ongoing struggle for equal rights.

Spirit Day

Related to the Day of Silence is Spirit Day, which is celebrated October 20. The observance was initiated in 2010 by teenager Brittany McMillan as a response to the national epidemic of anti-gay bullying.

Spirit Day is observed most simply by wearing or displaying purple. The idea to display purple on Spirit Day stems from the fact that in some interpretations of the Rainbow flag the color is said to symbolize "spirit."

Spirit Day is also observed at schools across the country, where Gay Straight Alliances distribute purple wristbands and hold meetings to commemorate the day.

In 2011, many media outlets and celebrities brought attention to Spirit Day as a means of supporting glbtq youth. For example, the youth-centered MTV television network displayed its support by turning its on-air logo purple, as well as its Facebook, Twitter, MTV.com, and MTV Act logos. In addition, stars of MTV shows demonstrated support by wearing purple.

Spirit Day is now sponsored by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).

Transgender Day of Remembrance

The Transgender Day of Remembrance, held in November, memorializes those who have been killed as a result of anti-transgender hatred or prejudice. The event began in 1998 to honor Rita Hester, whose murder on November 28, 1998 inspired the "Remembering Our Dead" web project and a San Francisco candlelight vigil in 1999. Since then, the Transgender Day of Remembrance has been observed in dozens of cities and at numerous colleges and universities.

The Transgender Day of Remembrance serves to raise public awareness of hate crimes against transgendered people, while also honoring the lives of individuals who might otherwise be forgotten.

The website Remembering Our Dead, compiled by activist Gwen Smith and hosted by the Gender Education Association, offers information about the Day of Remembrance, lists some of the individuals whose lives have been honored by the memorials, and offers a guide to resources available to organize vigils in support of the observances.

World AIDS Day

To call attention to and mobilize support for the fight against the ongoing scourge of HIV/AIDS, UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) observed the first World AIDS Day on December 1, 1988. In 2005 the task of administering the project was transferred to the independent organization The World AIDS Campaign.

Given the widespread impact of the disease, much of the attention is on people who have contracted the virus by means other than same-sex sexual contact; nevertheless, World AIDS Day remains significant to glbtq people because of the devastating losses in the gay community due to HIV/AIDS.

Celebrate Bisexuality Day

Celebrate Bisexuality Day has been celebrated on September 23 since 1999. The observance was proposed

by three bisexual rights activists, Wendy Curry, Michael Page, and Gigi Raven Wilbur, in order to help make bisexuality and pansexuality more visible and to recognize bisexual culture and history.

Another aim of the holiday is to help ease the marginalization that bisexuals sometimes feel within the glbtq communities as well as within the larger society.

The holiday is often celebrated on university campuses and other venues through events such as lectures, teach-ins, poetry readings, panels, and dances.

International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia

May 17 is celebrated as the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, an annual event organized by the Canadian glbtq group Fondation "Émergence".

The observance may be traced to 2003, when June 4 was designated as a Canadian National Day against Homophobia. As other countries evinced interest in celebrating a day against homophobia, May 17 was chosen as an appropriate date, since that was the day in 1990 that the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

A human rights conference held in connection with the first world Outgames in Montréal in the summer of 2006 adopted the "Declaration of Montréal," whose final recommendation "calls on all the countries in the world, and the United Nations, to recognize and promote the 17th of May of each year as the International Day Against Homophobia."

Now organizations in more than 70 countries observe the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia. It has been officially recognized by the European Union Parliament, Spain, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Costa Rica, the Netherlands, France, Luxembourg, and Brazil, as well as by numerous local authorities across the world, such as the province of Quebec or the city of Buenos Aires.

Harvey Milk Day

A movement to commemorate Milk's birthday, May 22, as "Harvey Milk Day" in California finally achieved success after years of lobbying. A bill establishing "Harvey Milk Day" passed the legislature in 2008, but was vetoed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger on the grounds that Milk was a "local" figure rather than one of state-wide significance.

Despite this setback, supporters of the holiday persisted, seeing it as a means of recognizing the slain leader's contributions to gay rights in California. The legislature again passed the bill in 2009.

This time, however, conditions were different. Schwarzenegger's contention that Milk was only a figure of local significance had been rendered untenable by the success of Gus van Sant's film biography, the bestowal of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and Milk's induction into the California Hall of Fame. The governor signed the bill on October 12, 2009, the day after the National Equality March in Washington, D. C.

The first celebrations of "Harvey Milk Day" occurred on May 22, 2010.

Gay organizations and other groups throughout California use Harvey Milk Day as an opportunity to commemorate the values of inclusiveness, community organizing, volunteering, and activism that Milk embodied.

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