



Kight, Morris (1919-2003)

by Linda Rapp

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Activist Morris Kight was a determined and courageous--if sometimes eccentric--fighter for glbtq rights. He worked vigorously for decades in the struggle for equality.

Morris Kight was born in Comanche County in the heart of Texas on November 19, 1919. He grew up on the family farm. Kight recognized his sexual orientation as a youngster. He stated in a 1994 interview that he began exploring his sexuality while in high school and that he was "happy to say that [he] didn't have a trace of guilt feeling about that."

Kight went on to study at Texas Christian University, from which he graduated in 1941. During these years in Fort Worth he was, in his own words, "somewhat active as a gay person," although the social scene for gay men was extremely limited. He recalled "occasional gatherings" at people's homes. Discretion was essential because of the oppressive legal and social situation for gay men.

After graduation Kight moved to New Mexico. There he discovered "underground gay communities" in Albuquerque and Santa Fe. At the time, he recalled, Albuquerque had several gay bars to which police generally turned a blind eye. Kight described the gay scene in 1940s and 1950s New Mexico as "furtive"--necessarily so since men convicted under the state's sodomy law faced a prison term.

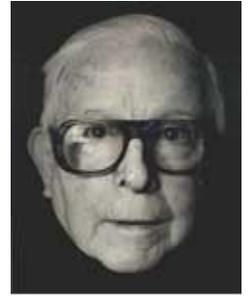
Kight married in 1950. The union, which lasted until 1955, produced two daughters. Once Kight became a gay rights activist he avoided mentioning his marriage to any but a few of his closest friends, apparently for fear that his credibility as a spokesman for gay rights would be diminished.

Kight moved to Los Angeles in 1958. He had worked with a theater group in Albuquerque in the early 1950s but was generally more interested in being a social activist than in earning a salary. Nevertheless, he needed some source of income. For four years he had a part-time job as a novelty vendor at Dodger Stadium during baseball games.

He also began holding semi-annual "garage sales" at which he sold antiques picked up on the cheap at thrift shops. In time, dealers and well-to-do buyers, including Liberace, became regular attenders of his sales.

In Los Angeles Kight found a much more vibrant gay community than those he had known in Texas or New Mexico. Kight became involved, opening his house for meetings to foster gay identity and pride, and helping arrested gay men secure lawyers so that they could get out of jail.

As the war in Vietnam escalated, Kight, a Gandhian pacifist, devoted an increasing amount of time to protests against it. He first became well known not for championing glbtq rights but for the founding in 1967 of the Dow Action Committee, an anti-war group protesting the chemical company's production of Agent Orange. For his efforts he was vilified as a Communist sympathizer, but he persisted. He encouraged gay men and lesbians to join him in the cause but met with a mixed response. Many were leery of the



FAGOTS STAY OUT!

Top: A portrait of Morris Kight by Stathis Orphanos.
Above: A sign from a West Hollywood restaurant that inspired a protest led by Morris Kight and Rev. Troy Perry.
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strong presence of Socialists in the organization, but others worked with Kight in demonstrations, sit-ins, leafleting campaigns, and other forms of non-violent actions.

To this point Kight, though a fixture in the underground gay community in Los Angeles, had not joined more visible homophile groups such as the Mattachine Society, which he considered elitist. In the wake of Stonewall, however, he became one of the founders of the Los Angeles branch of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in December 1969.

One of the Los Angeles GLF's first activities was a protest against a West Hollywood chili parlor called Barney's Beanery, which had a sign that read "Fagots [sic] Stay Out." Led by Kight and the Reverend Troy Perry of the Metropolitan Community Church, gay men and lesbians demonstrated outside the restaurant, demanding removal of the offensive sign.

When the owner, who had in fact never denied anyone service, refused to take down the sign--and indeed added more--Kight and other protesters began coming in, ordering a single item, and remaining for hours. Since the owner was losing money, he repeatedly called the Sheriff's Office to try to evict the protesters. After three months the owner relented and took down the signs, handing them over to Kight and others.

The victory was short-lived. Once the protesters and the news media had departed, the owner replaced the sign. It only came down for good in 1984 when Valerie Terrigno, the first lesbian mayor of West Hollywood, removed it herself as soon as the city council passed an anti-discrimination ordinance.

Kight was a firm believer in the importance of media attention, and he relished the spotlight, which is exactly where he put himself in 1970, only a few months after the Barney's Beanery demonstrations. GLF member Don Jackson had proposed that some two hundred gay men and lesbians should move to the tiny community of Alpine County, California, register to vote, and then take control of the local government.

Jackson's plan was to proceed quietly, but that was not Kight's style. In short order he and fellow GLF member Don Kilhefner were calling press conferences to announce the new "gay Mecca." The story received nationwide coverage but also drew a lot of hostility, and the plan never went forward. Kight's heavy-handed tactics caused a rift between him and some other leaders in the gay rights movement, but he never stopped working in the way that he thought best.

Another of Kight's early projects was the organization of Christopher Street West, a march held in Los Angeles on June 28, 1970, the first anniversary of the Stonewall uprising in New York. Los Angeles Police Commission officials attempted to block the event by denying a permit unless the organizers put up the exorbitant sum of 1.5 million dollars in security bonds. The Reverend Perry sought the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, which won a court order that allowed the parade to proceed and eliminated the onerous costs. Christopher Street West has evolved into one of the country's largest pride parades. Kight was a frequent participant over the years, last marching in Christopher Street West in 1999.

Kight was also instrumental in establishing the Gay Community Services Center (later renamed the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Community Services Center), which opened its doors in October 1971. The center was registered as a non-profit corporation, allowing donors to receive tax deductions for their contributions and permitting the center to apply for government grants. From distinctly modest beginnings it has grown to be the largest gay and lesbian services center in the world, offering a wide range of legal, medical, and social services. In his final years Kight cited the founding of the center as one of the achievements of which he was proudest.

In founding the Gay Community Services Center Kight was working within the system; nevertheless, his leftist politics and his occasionally outrageous tactics struck some in the glbtq rights movement as too radical and potentially detrimental to the goal of gaining acceptance for glbtq people in the wider society. One person holding this opinion was David Goodstein, who bought the gay newspaper *The Advocate* in 1975

and immediately began to transform it into a slick magazine. One of his first moves was to ban reporting on people whose activities he considered deleterious to the cause. Kight was chief among them.

Goodstein took things a step further, sending young reporter Randy Shilts to do an "exposé" on Kight. Shilts found no basis for a negative article on Kight, refused to write such a piece, and eventually left the magazine. Several years later Goodstein attempted to repair the breach by inviting Kight to participate in the Advocate Experience, a confrontational consciousness-raising group that he sponsored. Kight declined, saying, "I don't think I'd care to join a cult."

Kight never flagged in his efforts to empower glbtq people. In 1975 he founded the Stonewall Democratic Club to give glbtq people a stronger voice in politics.

Kight also spearheaded the boycott of the Coors Brewing Company to protest its discriminatory employment policies. After the company dropped the offensive practices and began donating money to glbtq organizations to lure back customers, Kight was among those who called for keeping the boycott in place because the Coors family's foundations continued to make major contributions to right-wing organizations inimical to glbtq rights.

When California State Senator John Briggs proposed an amendment to ban homosexual teachers from the public schools in 1978, Kight was one of many to join the fight against it. In the end the measure, opposed by a wide variety of groups, went down to a solid defeat, giving the young movement for equality a rare victory at the polls.

In the early 1980s Kight was appointed a member of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission, on which he served for twenty years, retiring in 2002. Among the projects he implemented during his tenure was the Crossroads Employment Agency, the first specifically created to assist gay men and lesbians.

Kight remained an active participant in the glbtq rights movement until the very end of his long life. On his eighty-third birthday in 2002 he appeared before the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to call for better services for people with HIV/AIDS. Another of his final projects was to have a corner in West Hollywood designated the Matthew Shepard Memorial Triangle in honor of the gay college student who was the victim of a savage homophobic murder.

Kight left a lasting legacy in the 3,000-piece Morris Kight Collection, which contains both fine art by gay men and lesbians and a variety of memorabilia including posters and photographs documenting the struggle for glbtq rights. Shortly before his death Kight donated this valuable resource to the ONE Institute.

Kight, who had suffered several strokes in his last years, was hospitalized in December 2002 because of various health problems including cancer and heart trouble. He spent his final weeks at the Carl Bean House, a hospice of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, which donated its services in recognition of Kight's many years of support for the organization.

Kight died peacefully in his sleep on January 19, 2003. He was survived by his companion of twenty-five years, Roy Zucheran.

A tireless worker but something of a maverick, Kight never achieved the leadership role in the glbtq rights movement that he undoubtedly would have wanted. As he grew older he was somewhat eclipsed by new generations of leaders who used different tactics to gain equal rights. Toward the end of his life, however, he was "rediscovered" by younger glbtq rights supporters, who appropriately honored him for the pioneering work on which they are now able to build.

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