



## Manford, Morty (1950-1992)

by Linda Rapp

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New York City activist Morty Manford was present at the Stonewall uprising in 1969. Already involved in the nascent gay liberation movement, he devoted himself to the effort for glbtq rights with renewed zeal after witnessing such evidence of oppression.

Morty Manford was a lifelong New Yorker, born September 17, 1950 in Flushing, Queens, where his mother was an elementary school teacher and his father a dentist.

At school Manford did extremely well academically and was well-liked by other students. His parents were therefore surprised when, at the age of fifteen, he asked to see a psychiatrist. The therapist scarcely addressed his homosexuality even though Manford was struggling to come to terms with his sexual orientation in a society where homophobia was routine.

Manford turned to a different psychiatrist, whom he found somewhat more helpful, although he was displeased that the doctor informed his parents about his homosexuality without his consent.

Jeanne Manford, who had already guessed the truth, was immediately accepting, but Jules Manford was initially concerned that "he hadn't raised [his son] properly." Once the family was able to speak openly and honestly together, however, and especially after Manford felt free to bring home gay friends to visit with him and his parents, Dr. Manford became supportive as well.

Manford graduated from Bayside High School in 1968 and enrolled at Columbia University. The previous spring he had read about the college's official recognition of the Student Homophile League, the country's first gay student organization, and was eager to join the group, whose struggle to gain recognition was an early victory for gay activism. He was not particularly impressed with the group, however, and he sought other venues in which to associate with other gay men.

As he recalled in an interview published in Eric Marcus's *Making History* (1992), "My gay life pretty much revolved around going to the bars, even though there was always the threat of bar raids . . . The Stonewall was my favorite place."

A regular patron, Manford was there on the night of the infamous police raid in June 1969. He was among the men whom the police ordered to leave the building, but, like many others, he remained outside on Christopher Street to watch as events unfolded. The ejected customers were joined by a growing crowd of curious passersby. Manford was still present when the melee began and the Tactical Police Force arrived, but he left soon afterward. He had observed the rioting rather than taking part; nevertheless, he called the experience "a very emotional turning point for me."

On the Fourth of July, Manford traveled to Philadelphia to walk in a picket line in front of Independence Hall in what was then an annual demonstration for gay and lesbian rights--the "Annual Reminder" organized in 1965 by Frank Kameny, Barbara Gittings, and other pioneering gay and lesbian activists. Back at home

that night, he began feeling despondent over a romantic relationship that had gone badly, and he attempted suicide by taking a large number of tranquilizers that his psychiatrist had prescribed. His parents found him and quickly got him to a hospital.

Although the disappointment in romance may have been the precipitating event, Manford told Marcus that the reasons for his suicide attempt were actually more complex: "I think that all of my own conflict [about accepting his sexual orientation] was starting to come to the surface . . . . The struggle was still going on."

He went on to note that he later met other young gay people who had also attempted suicide because of the societal stigma placed upon them. Such a sense of marginalization continues to plague many glbtq youth, and in response, a number of organizations in various countries have established support services and telephone help-lines to counsel young people in distress.

In the spring of 1970, Manford attended a meeting of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) and was inspired by the group's commitment to working to end discrimination against gay men and lesbians. He became a member of the Columbia branch of the GAA, which, he recalled, "tried to make demonstrations fun and campy, and enjoyable, as well as making sure they had a serious impact."

Shortly thereafter, Manford was arrested for the first time. He and a friend were sitting on some steps on Christopher Street when a police officer ordered them to move along. Believing that the command was directly related to their being in a gay enclave, the young men refused, and they were taken to jail. Allowed a couple of phone calls, they contacted Bella Abzug, then a candidate for congress, who had appeared at a GAA meeting to express her support for the cause of gay rights. Abzug sent a lawyer to represent them in court the next morning. The attorney successfully argued that the men had been arrested merely because they were gay, and the case was dismissed.

The incident was minor, but making the stand assertively was an important step for Manford. "If we had turned and walked away when the police told us to walk away, we wouldn't have felt right about ourselves," he recounted.

In 1971 Manford took a leave of absence from Columbia to work for gay and lesbian rights. His home base remained New York, but he, along with another GAA member, also went on an organizing tour through fifteen cities in the South, where they almost never found any glbtq associations but did encounter an interesting array of people, from "a couple of wonderful men down in New Orleans" to a "very nice, but kooky" man in Charlotte, North Carolina, who put together a potluck gathering attended by, among others, an eighty-year-old woman.

The experience opened Manford's eyes not only to the diversity of the glbtq community but also to the need for a visible presence in areas other than major urban centers like New York and Los Angeles. "It was so important to go into a place where nothing was happening yet," he stated, adding that "groups emerged very fast in some of those places" after the organizing tour. The GAA offered ongoing support for their efforts.

Manford continued leading demonstrations in New York in the quest for equal rights. These included several confrontations with the mayor, John Lindsay, after incidents of police brutality and harassment of gay men.

In April 1972, to protest homophobic comments in newspapers, the GAA staged a demonstration at the Inner Circle dinner and comedy show, an annual event hosted by the New York press for civic and business leaders. At intermission, a GAA member seized the microphone and spoke briefly while others distributed leaflets. A scuffle ensued, and seven GAA members, including Manford, were injured.

Michael Maye, the president of the Uniformed Fire Fighters Association, was identified as Manford's assailant and brought to trial. Witnesses who had attended the Inner Circle event testified that Maye had punched, kicked, and "ground his shoe into [Manford's] groin area a number of times" while Manford was already prostrate on an escalator that was carrying him downward. One witness stated that Manford "seemed to be semiconscious" at the time.

On the stand, Maye denied assaulting Manford. He described himself both as "temperamentally incapable of committing such violence" and as a former national Golden Gloves boxing champion and "professional combat soldier" who "could kill a man" if he attacked him in the way described.

In spite of the testimony of the eye-witnesses to the beating, Maye was acquitted in July 1972. Nevertheless, the publicity generated by the affair brought attention to the problems of gay bashing, police harassment, and government indifference to the mistreatment of homosexuals.

The Manfords were outraged by the attack on their son, and Jeanne Manford wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Post* decrying the fact that police officers had stood by and allowed it to happen. When the story was picked up by the *New York Times*, her principal asked her to be "more discreet" because parents were complaining. Jeanne Manford staunchly defended her right to speak freely, and the principal demurred.

Both Jeanne and Jules Manford began to speak to even wider audiences. They and their son were invited to appear on a television show in Boston shortly after the letter to the editor was published. Radio and television stations in other cities sought them out as well, and the Manfords--sometimes with their son, and sometimes by themselves--traveled to venues including New Orleans, Detroit, and Toronto to speak out against discrimination.

In June 1972 Jeanne Manford marched alongside her son in the Christopher Street Liberation Day parade, carrying a sign that read "Parents of Gays: Unite in Support of Our Children."

"No one else got the loud emotional cheers that she did," recalled Morty Manford proudly.

When young people along the parade route began rushing up to her, kissing her, and imploring her to talk to their parents, she realized the need for a support group for families. The opportunity to start one came a short while later when she mentioned the idea to a fellow panelist--a then-closeted Methodist minister--at a discussion sponsored by the Homosexual Community Counseling Service, and he offered the use of his church for meetings.

Jeanne and Jules Manford called the fledgling group Parents of Gays. Some twenty people attended the first meeting.

"It was very slow at the beginning," stated Jeanne Manford, noting that some subsequent meetings drew only three or four people, "but we always felt that if we helped one person, it was worth the effort."

Though the start may have been halting and the scope at first limited, the results of the Manfords' initiative have been enormous: Parents of Gays grew into PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), which, as of 2007 had some 500 chapters and more than 200,000 members and supporters.

Marty Manford resumed his collegiate studies at Columbia in 1976. He found the mood on campus changed--less questioning, less challenging--and sensed a similar direction in the glbtq rights movement, with an emphasis on "the idea of gay respectability . . . an antiactivist type of gay theology."

Manford felt that the approach to gaining equal rights was not an either-or proposition: "I believed then, and I believe now, that the movement needs both activists and establishment people," he told Marcus. "The activists make it possible for the more establishment-oriented gays to gain entrée. The activists break down barriers that it would take the more conservative types years to do, if they could do it at all."

After completing his degree at Columbia, Manford attended the Cardozo Law School at Yeshiva University. Upon graduation, he spent four years with the Legal Aid Society of New York representing indigent defendants before receiving an appointment as an assistant state attorney general in 1986.

When he was diagnosed with AIDS, Manford returned to the home of his mother, a widow since 1982, and died there on May 14, 1992.

Jeanne Manford continued to be a leader and the cherished matriarch of the Queens chapter of PFLAG, providing support and guidance to its members. She also worked tirelessly as an advocate, a role that she could not have envisioned for herself two decades before.

"I'm very shy," she said in her interview with Marcus. "I was not the type of person who belonged to organizations [prior to the Inner Circle incident]. I never tried to do anything. But I wasn't going to let anybody walk over Morty."

That love and commitment transformed her into an activist who insisted on meetings with political leaders to demand support for equal rights and funding for social services programs. Because of her determination, "she knocked down doors for us that may otherwise not have been knocked down," stated Ed Sedarbaum, the director of Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE).

Jeanne Manford moved to Minnesota in 1996 to help her daughter's family by caring for her great-granddaughter while her granddaughter pursued medical studies at the Mayo Clinic.

Since 1993 the Queens chapter of PFLAG that she founded has bestowed the Morty Manford Award, which "recognizes an individual or organization whose work on behalf of the lesbian and gay community of Queens best exemplifies the pioneering political spirit of the late Morty Manford, and who serves as a positive and visible role model for gay men and lesbians."

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PFLAG web site: [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)

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