



Slater, Don (1923-1997)

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An early leader in the struggle for glbtq rights, Los Angeles activist Don Slater was sometimes at odds with others in the movement but never wavered in his devotion to the cause.

Donald Slater lived most of his life in the environs of Los Angeles. He and his twin brother, Harvey, were born in Pasadena on August 21, 1923, but their parents, originally from Connecticut and later having sojourned in West Virginia, continued their peripatetic way of life, moving from one town to another in southern California as his father worked at a succession of jobs as a coach in YMCAs and Boys Clubs.

Slater graduated from Chaffey High School in Capistrano Beach in 1942 and, like many other young men of his age, joined the military in the wake of Pearl Harbor. He was inducted in February 1943 and, because he was already experienced in skiing, was sent to Camp Hale, Colorado for training as a ski trooper. His military service was short-lived, however; a bout of rheumatic fever led to his being discharged in October of the same year.

Taking advantage of an Army program that paid his tuition, Slater enrolled at the University of Southern California in February 1944. At around the same time he found the love of his life, Antonio ("Tony") Reyes. The pair met one night in Pershing Square in Los Angeles, where they were both cruising.

Decades later, Slater recalled the scene: "We kept skulking around in the underbrush of the square, and, AAGH!, bumping into each other. 'What! You again!' Finally we couldn't stop laughing, and we decided we must be meant for each other, and we never changed our minds."

A short while after getting together with Reyes, Slater brought him home to meet his family, to whom he came out at the same time. His mother and three siblings were dismayed, but his father, despite having converted to Mormonism and becoming deeply religious, was more accepting, saying, "I wish this were not so, but since it is, I'm pleased you have made such a wonderful choice in your partner." He made it clear that Reyes would always be welcome in their home. Thereafter, Reyes was included in all the Slaters' gatherings and, he recalled, was treated "as a member of the family."

In his years at USC, Slater became part of the Los Angeles "gay underground," frequenting rather sleazy Main Street bars, where he enjoyed watching drag performers. He was not a particularly diligent student but had nearly completed his degree in English literature in 1948 when he was again stricken with rheumatic fever. He received permission from the Army to postpone his final term.

During his time off and after he was on his feet again, Slater traveled extensively--but cheaply--working in the galley of a freighter. When the ship docked, Slater was able to visit port cities throughout Europe.

When the voyage was over, Slater returned to college and completed his bachelor's degree, specializing in the Victorian novel.

In the early 1950s Slater and Reyes attended several meetings of the Mattachine Society, but, he stated, they were disappointed by the organization and did not join. Instead, they became part of an affiliated group that founded ONE, Incorporated. Among the association's goals, as enumerated in its Articles of Incorporation, were "to publish a magazine dealing primarily with homosexuality from the scientific, historical, and critical point of view, . . . to promote among the general public an interest [in], knowledge and understanding of the problems of variation, . . . [and] to sponsor research and promote the integration into society of persons whose behavior and inclinations vary from current moral and social standards."

The Articles were adopted on November 15, 1952 and officially signed by Reyes, Dale Jennings, and Martin Block on behalf of the group.

The first issue of *ONE Magazine*--24 pages long--rolled off the presses in January 1953. Its contents included an article on harassment by police, other news stories, several book notices, a poem, and a letter to readers asking for their support.

Before *ONE* could receive support, it needed to develop a readership base, and since news dealers were reluctant to stock it, ONE members took on the sales job themselves, making the rounds of gay bars and encouraging patrons to spend a quarter for the magazine.

From the early days, there were women on the ONE staff, including art director Eve Ellore and Ann Carll Reid, the editor from February 1954 until 1958. Lesbian readers complained that the initial issues were dominated by pieces by and about gay men, however, and so the February 1954 number, entitled "The Feminine Viewpoint," was written entirely by and about women. A column of the same name appeared frequently thereafter.

A lawyer advised against including fiction in *ONE* so that the magazine could not "be accused of catering to the perverted." Nevertheless, Slater put the story "But They'll Outgrow It" by David Freeman in the July 1953 issue, and trouble ensued.

The August 1953 issue was seized by the United States Post Office, but a lawyer was able to get the copies released three weeks later. The apparent victory was only a temporary reprieve, however; in October 1954 Postmaster Otto K. Olesen confiscated another issue, declaring it obscene because of its inclusion of what Joseph Hansen, Slater's biographer (and also the author of a highly successful series of mystery novels featuring a gay detective), called "a limp lesbian love-story and some crude comic verses."

The legal battle was much more protracted this time. After adverse decisions in a U. S. District Court and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, the case was accepted by the U. S. Supreme Court. In January 1958 the justices, without requiring oral arguments, unanimously reversed the lower courts. The decision meant that gay or lesbian content was not, in and of itself, sufficient grounds for declaring a publication obscene and that gay and lesbian magazines (unless they were pornographic) could be sent through the mail.

A threat from the outside had been removed, but ONE became beset by internal strife. In 1965 Slater found himself at loggerheads with W. Dorr Legg, another of the founding members.

Legg wanted to make ONE's mission primarily educational, offering classes and lectures. Slater preferred to keep the emphasis on the magazine, which was able to reach, enlighten, and give hope to many people throughout the country, while attendance at Legg's courses and events at the Los Angeles center was fairly modest. Their disagreements led to a power struggle between the two men for control of the organization.

When Legg, the Chairman of the Board of ONE, replaced the other members of the Board of Directors with people of his own choice--a move that Slater believed contrary to the by-laws of the corporation--Slater

retaliated by arranging for the removal of all of the contents of ONE's offices and its transportation to a space that he had rented in a factory building. The midnight operation, carried out by Slater, Reyes, Slater's aide at the magazine Billy Glover, and a moving van owner and his crew, took only six hours to complete, as ONE did not have a large amount of assets. Among them, however, was a prize item--the only copy of the list of subscribers to the magazine.

Six months later, and after a series of lawsuits and counter-suits, Slater emerged with possession of all the property stored in the factory, and Legg held the right to the exclusive use of the name ONE, ending a confusing situation with two completely different magazines appearing under the same title.

"Tangents," a news feature supplemented by wry commentary from Jim Kepner (writing as Del McIntire), had been the most popular feature of *ONE Magazine*, and it was the name that Slater, Hansen, Glover, and Ross Ingersoll chose for their new magazine.

Lesbians were well represented in *Tangents*. Hansen's lesbian wife, Jane Hansen (writing as Jane Race), regularly penned articles for "The Feminine Viewpoint" column, revived from *ONE*. Their daughter, Barbara (writing as Carol Harris), contributed women's fiction, as did Barbara Grier (writing as Gene Damon), who was also indefatigable as a reviewer of books of interest to the glbtq community.

Although Slater was generally not much given to public demonstrations, on Armed Forces Day, May 21, 1966, he organized a motorcade through Los Angeles and Hollywood in protest of the discriminatory policies of the United States military with respect to homosexuals. Activist Harry Hay and his life partner John Burnside made signs for the cars in the raucous parade. Joseph and Jane Hansen--"with [their] lovers and kids . . . packed into whatever junkyard jalopy [they] owned at the time"--also took part, as did California State University-Northridge professor Vern Bullough, who was working with the ACLU to decriminalize homosexual conduct. The group, recalled Hansen, included "a lot of respectable protesters," among them "clergymen [and] professionals, with respectable cars."

Slater was persistent in his quest for justice for gay and lesbian veterans denied honorable discharge and ruled ineligible for pensions. Though rarely successful, he was tireless in supporting gay veterans, some of whom had served valiantly in the fiercest battles of World War II.

When the youth movement erupted in the late 1960s, Slater embraced it, festooning the cover of an issue of *Tangents* with pictures of forty protest buttons advocating glbtq rights. In his editorial Slater optimistically wrote that "these buttons say openly and flatly what yesterday's youngsters only dared whisper The buttons indicate a change in attitude toward Western sexual hypocrisy by a whole generation." He went on to express the hope that these young people "as mature men and women will make up an America a whole lot less harrowing for homosexuals to live in."

Slater was less than impressed with other manifestations of the burgeoning gay rights movement, notably the founding of the Metropolitan Community Church by the Reverend Troy Perry. Slater rejected organized religion for its condemnation of homosexuality and felt that Perry and other people of faith ought to demand changes in policy in their own churches "instead [of] . . . accept[ing] their judgment of us as loathsome monsters, who must creep off and pray with our own kind, forever despised and rejected."

Slater had always hoped to use journalism to spark a dialogue between homosexuals and heterosexuals. However, the subscribers to *Tangents* were overwhelmingly gay, and with the arrival of publications specifically targeted to a gay readership such as *The Advocate* (originally a bi-weekly tabloid before it emerged as a powerhouse of the gay press), subscriptions to *Tangents* declined, and eventually the magazine folded.

Slater carried on, working at the Homosexual Information Center (HIC) in Los Angeles until a heart ailment forced him into the hospital for a valve implant in 1979. In the process of surgery he became infected with hepatitis B and nearly died.

He was able to resume working, but in 1983, upon leaving the HIC office, he was mugged and severely beaten in the parking lot. After a long recovery in the hospital, he and Reyes retired to a cabin in the mountains of Colorado, where they could enjoy time together, surrounded by their beloved pets and the natural beauty of the place.

Warned by doctors of the need for further heart surgery but fearing another infection, Slater put off additional medical procedures. He suffered a serious heart attack in December 1996. Too frail to survive another operation, he languished until Valentine's Day 1997, when he died in the loving company of his partner and old friends.

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