



Vincenz, Lilli (b. 1937)

by Linda Rapp

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Lilli Vincenz is a longtime advocate for glbtq rights, having commenced her activism even before Stonewall. In 2013 she donated a collection of approximately ten thousand documents--including print, photo, and video records--to the Library of Congress, providing scholars researching the early days of the movement for glbtq equality a rare and invaluable resource.

A native of Germany, born in Hamburg on September 26, 1937, Vincenz came to the United States with her parents as a child. She recognized her lesbianism early on, but, she stated in an interview with Kathy Belge of About, "[i]t became painful after a while to realize that I was gay and I didn't know anyone else who was gay. I was extremely lonely."

Vincenz told Jack Nichols of *Gay Today* that "[t]he German word 'Lebenskünstler' was used quite often in my family and means someone who knows how to live, who has mastered the art of living." She decided "to become a college teacher to help people learn the art of living through literature," and, in pursuit of that goal, earned a bachelor's degree in French and German at Douglass College in 1959 and a master's degree in English at Columbia University in 1960. She did not, however, seek a job in academia, but rather worked for a year as an editor at the Prentice-Hall publishing company in New York City.

While living there, Vincenz sought to connect with other lesbians and also contemplated a career change. She recounted to Belge, "I remember walking around the Village and looking for a gay bar and I couldn't find one. . . . Then I heard about Provincetown and that there were gay people there. . . . I . . . met some gay women at . . . a very nice little bar with a piano and people would sing, and it was very convivial. . . . I found out that some women they knew were in the Army. And that made me think that I wanted to join the Army for two reasons. One, I knew gay women would be there. But I also wanted to find out if I should become a therapist."

Vincenz enlisted in the Women's Army Corps. In 1963, when she was nine months into her service and working at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C., her roommate outed her as a lesbian, and she was given an administrative discharge under honorable conditions.

After leaving the Army, Vincenz remained in the nation's capital and quickly joined the Mattachine Society of Washington (MSW), mainly, she explained to Belge, because "[i]t's the only [homophile organization] I could find" in the city. (She was aware of the Daughters of Bilitis in New York, but they did not have a



Lilli Vincenz.
YouTube video still,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kE117Ly8VLo>

branch in Washington.) In addition, she declared herself "very impressed" by the founder of the MSW, Frank Kameny, whom she lauded as "a tutor . . . so focused and so brilliant."

Vincenz described the era to Nichols as "an exhilarating time," but it was also a challenging one. Homosexuality was still considered a disease by the psychiatric community, and the number of people advocating for glbtq rights was relatively small. Vincenz joined them, taking on a variety of roles.

Writing pseudonymously as Lily Hansen, Vincenz became the editor of and a contributor to *The Homosexual Citizen*, a small magazine--usually just twenty pages or so--published by the MSW from January 1966 until May 1967, when she quit after Kameny and some other members of the executive board rejected an article that Vincenz had already accepted without giving her a chance to speak about her choice. The article in question was about astrology. To Kameny, whose academic training was in astronomy, the subject was anathema. Vincenz thought that readers might find it amusing.

Earlier, Vincenz had taken a stand for the visibility of glbtq people by appearing on a program on the Washington, D.C. television station WOOK with Kameny and Nichols, both of whom the host of the show had previously insulted on the air. Nichols recalled that the host had, however, "bent over backwards being polite to [Vincenz]" on the March 2, 1967 broadcast.

She had previously, in January 1966, become the first woman willing to pose for a full-face portrait on the cover of the lesbian magazine *The Ladder*. Earlier images had obscured the identity of the women by showing them from the back or hiding their faces with sunglasses.

Vincenz was also taking part in pickets for glbtq rights. She participated in a demonstration in front of the White House in April 1965 to protest the Cuban government's internment of gay men in work camps. On July 4 of the same year she marched in a picket in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The protesters dressed primly--blouses and skirts for women, suits and ties for men. The messages on their signs were vetted by organizers to preclude anything that might be too inflammatory.

Vincenz participated in the four Independence Day pickets that ensued, the last of them coming just days after Stonewall, a watershed moment in glbtq history in the United States.

"The whole notion of gay people publicly expressing their sentiments in that fashion was beyond conceptualization until we started doing it," Kameny stated to Eils Lotozo of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "If we had not persisted, there would have been no Stonewall."

But there was Stonewall and, with it, an empowerment and increased visibility for glbtq people. In 1971 Vincenz became an active member of the campaign to elect Kameny to the United States Congress as a non-voting delegate from the District of Columbia. Kameny was not successful in his bid for election even though, as Vincenz related to Nichols, "the Mattachine Society of Washington telephone rang off the hook" with calls from gay voters. The callers, stated Vincenz, included "[m]any women [who] wanted to meet others, and my phone number was the only one available for giving out."

The level of interest from queer women prompted Vincenz and her partner at the time to make their home

the venue for a Gay Women's Open House, held regularly on Wednesday nights from 1971 to 1978.

During those same years Vincenz began pursuing another academic degree, this time in psychology, after a friend, Dr. George Weinberg, the author of *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (1972), told her that he thought that she would do well as a therapist for glbtq people. Vincenz earned a master's degree from George Mason University in 1976 and entered into practice. In 1990 she added a Ph.D. in human development and psychology from the University of Maryland to her credentials.

In psychology Vincenz had found her vocation. She stated to Nichols, "The real joy has been working with gay and bisexual women and men and several gay-friendly people. . . . I find it a privilege to work with gay people, who are, in general, so much more courageous, innovative, and open to new ideas than the average straight person.

"Many of their wounds have been sustained in the pursuit of and validation of who they are and of not wanting to hide their identities or settle for less. I am grateful to be able to help and to witness their empowerment."

As an extension of her practice, Vincenz, along with her partner, Nancy Ruth Davis, founded the Community for Creative Self-Development (CCSD) in 1992. The CCSD offered classes, workshops, and conferences to help glbtq people and allies achieve their potential creatively, psychologically, and spiritually.

Of her own spirituality Vincenz stated to Nichols, "My approach to religion has always been a positive one, although a somewhat unorthodox one. Baptized a Lutheran, I was confirmed in the Christian Community, an offshoot of anthroposophy and an eclectic mix of Eastern and Western religions."

She noted that, although she no longer attends church, spirituality remains important to her. "The spirituality my partner and I practice is based on our individual relationships with God, work with guardian angels, past lives, spirit release, and practical applications of wisdom from a higher reality that is prudently considered."

The CCSD ceased operations in 2004, but Vincenz and Davis have maintained contact and held reunions with participants.

Vincenz and Davis met in 1984 after Vincenz placed a personal ad in the *Washingtonian*. Davis sensed a kindred spirit and responded.

The two were united in a commitment ceremony in Key West, Florida on December 27, 1986. Vincenz and Davis have yet to be able to marry in Virginia, where they reside.

Vincenz has remained engaged in the struggle for glbtq rights. In May 2009 she attended the National Equality Rally in Philadelphia, the site of some of her own earliest efforts as an activist. On that occasion she told Kathy Matheson of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that she was encouraged by the dedication of a new

group of young people to work for equality, stating, "I just feel ecstatic about the younger generation and what they're doing. There's a groundswell of people who finally feel empowered, that they can make a difference."

Vincenz's continuing support of glbtq rights brought her full-circle to the beginnings of her participation in the movement, as she became involved in projects documenting its history.

In 1968 she made a seven-minute film, *The Second Largest Minority*, with footage that she had shot at a Philadelphia demonstration. She also made an eleven-and-a-half-minute film showing images from New York's first gay pride parade in 1970. Her recordings were later incorporated into the documentary films *Before Stonewall* (1984, directed by Robert Rosenberg and Greta Schiller), *After Stonewall* (1999, directed by John Scagliotti), *Out of the Past* (1998, directed by Jeff Dupre), and *Gay Pioneers* (2004, directed by Glenn Holstein).

In 2013 Vincenz continued her commitment to documenting the history of the glbtq rights movement by donating an important collection to the Library of Congress. The gift filled twelve boxes.

Among the items that she contributed were films, which delighted Mike Mashon, the head of the moving images department at the Library of Congress, who stated to Monica Hesse of the *Washington Post* that "any films from the beginnings of the gay rights movement are really precious to us. This is not something that was well documented on film." The library had not previously had any other film records of the events in their collection.

Vincenz's donation consisted of about 10,000 items, including photographs, pamphlets, reports of research, correspondence, and her diaries.

Hesse commented that "[t]here is something poignant about one woman collecting the ephemera of a movement whose members were often avoiding documentation. In the 1960s, being gay was thought by some to be a moral offense, as well as grounds for being fired. People who had the same artifacts as she did might have thrown them out for fear of being exposed."

As to why she kept the records, Vincenz told Hesse, "It's just that I knew I had to do this. I had to. It was so important to me." This echoes her response to Lotozo about why she became active in the movement for glbtq rights in the first place: "Sometime you are the only person who can do something at a certain time. It's the old question, 'If not I, who?'"

Because of the work of Vincenz and other pioneers for glbtq rights, a vibrant community has evolved. Because of her documentation of those early days, generations to come will know of the hardships, the exhilaration, and the truth of the struggle.

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