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Vern Bullough, Ph.D. In Memoriam

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ABSTRACT. Vern Bullough was a major scholar of sexuality and an early activist for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights.

Vern Bullough started life as a good Mormon boy in Salt Lake City and ended it as one of the world's most prominent sexologists. With over 100 articles (including his paper in the very first issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality*) and nearly 50 books to his credit, he was a leading scholar and human rights activist. His literary contributions provided major histories of homosexuality, crossdressing, and transgenderism, and his speeches on sexuality were presented in all 50 states and many countries around the world. All of this was a result of his life-long love of Bonnie Uckerman, a high school classmate whom he married in 1947. Although Bonnie was also raised as Mormon, her family went through a major crisis when her mother left her father and started a relationship with another woman. This incidence of lesbianism in her family forced Bonnie, and also her new husband Vern, to reevaluate their entire attitudes toward their religion and sexual variance. They left the Mormon Church because of its racist, sexist, and heterosexual policies and began dual careers in nursing and history.

After graduating from the University of Utah in 1951, Vern went on to receive his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1954, with a dissertation

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on the history of medicine in Medieval Europe. He then began teaching at Youngstown University, but in 1959 became a professor of history at what is today California State University, Northridge. Bonnie became a prominent professor and scholar of nursing. After writing books on the history of medicine and nursing—a dozen of them as husband-wife co-authors—Vern became prominent in the study of sex when he published a history of prostitution, in 1964.

When he arrived in California, Vern became an activist in the Southern California chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). He was involved in fair housing issues, medical discrimination, abortion rights, decriminalization of drugs, and the rights of disabled people. He also worked closely with ONE, Inc., the pioneering homosexual rights organization in Los Angeles. Vern and ONE's director W. Dorr Legg convinced the Southern California ACLU to start supporting legal rights for homosexuals. They then, along with activists in San Francisco and New York, convinced the national ACLU to begin taking gay rights court cases. Their example shows the influence that a few individuals can exert on changing history by committed action. After 1963, the ACLU became a major institutional supporter of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GBLT) rights.

In 1966–1967 Vern won a Fulbright Professorship and taught at Anis Shams University in Egypt. When he returned from the Mideast he was elected President of the Faculty at California State University; he was also President of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. As Vern continued to publish more books, ranging in subject from women's rights and birth control to crossdressing, he became a leading scholar in the burgeoning field of sexology, and was elected President of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex. He also continued his activism in the Los Angeles Council on Religion and the Homosexual. Along with Los Angeles homosexual rights pioneers Don Slater and Harry Hay, the Bulloughs participated in the historic 1966 motorcade in Los Angeles protesting discrimination against homosexuals by the United States armed forces. They were also charter members of the Los Angeles chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

Over the next decade Vern, W. Dorr Legg, and Jim Kepner collaborated to gather the most massive collection of information on homosexuality ever compiled. In 1976 their multi-volume *Annotated Bibliography of Homosexuality* was published under the auspices of ONE Institute (Los Angeles, CA) and with the help of the Institute for the Study of Human

Resources (Los Angeles, CA). It represented a milestone in the development of what later became known as Gay and Lesbian Studies and helped to legitimate and encourage the academic study of homosexuality. Also in 1976, the University of Chicago Press published Vern's magnum opus, *Sexual Variance in Society and History*. This volume covered many areas of the world, spanning ancient times to the modern era, and had a massive impact on a new generation of scholars. Besides his own books, Vern served as editor of an important series of books on sexuality studies for Haworth Press (Binghamton, NY).

Vern was the founding director of the Center for Sex Research at California State University, Northridge, and with a series of path-breaking conferences made it a leading institution in the field of sexology. He was active in many organizations and, among others, assisted pioneer activist Virginia Prince in her campaign for transgender rights. When Gregory Sprague and I founded the Committee on Lesbian and Gay History at the American Historical Association annual meetings in 1979, Vern played a crucial role in the initial meetings.

In 1980, Vern was chosen as Dean of the Faculty of Natural and Social Sciences at the State University of New York, Buffalo. In 1993, he retired and returned to Los Angeles when he and Bonnie became professors at the University of Southern California. Bonnie died in 1996, and although Vern was distraught he continued teaching at the University of Southern California until 2003. Eventually he remarried his second wife, English professor Gwen Brewer.

I was honored to serve with Vern on the Board of Directors of the Institute for the Study of Human Resources, as we awarded grants to many researchers in GLBT studies. Although ill with cancer, he continued to work on his publishing until the final weeks of his life. I spoke with him several times in those final weeks, and rather than avoiding the subject of death I am fortunate that I took those opportunities to verbalize how important he had been as a mentor to me. I also was glad to tell him how much the students in my Transgender Studies class liked his book *Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender*, which I assigned as a required reading for the class. We talked about our memories of our work at ONE Institute—he since 1960 and me since 1979—and about his book, *Before Stonewall*, for which I wrote a blurb on the cover. He had a completely realistic attitude toward his impending death, and as a committed secular humanist did not feel fearful or sad at all. He felt grateful that he had been able to live so long, to age 77, and proud that he had been able to accomplish so much in his life.

He died peacefully on June 21, 2006, being cared for lovingly by Gwen Brewer.

His legacy lives on not only in his many books published, but also in the Vern and Bonnie Bullough Collection on Sex and Gender in the library at California State University, Northridge. Vern and Bonnie had two children, one of whom was killed at age 13 by a Muslim extremist when they were visiting Jerusalem. Thinking that the world was overpopulated, instead of reproducing they adopted three hard to place non-White children, one of whom is a lesbian and one of whom is a gay man.

For more information on the life of Vern Bullough, visit the Web site <http://www.vernbullough.com>.