

Response of Walter L. Williams, to the charges made by Don Kilhefner, in his essay *Elite Capture in the Los Angeles LGBTQ Community (And Everywhere Else)*. Published online by the New York LGBTQ History Project, 2023.

In a recent essay Don Kilhefner makes valid points that many LGBTQ organizations have experienced “elite capture” as queer activists have gained a foothold in institutions that previously opposed our efforts for sexual liberation. Don Kilhefner and Morris Kight made some important contributions toward liberation in the early 1970s, when they founded the first Gay Community Services Center in the United States. They also utilized radical tactics to disrupt speeches by homophobic psychologists and pressured the American Psychological Association to begin holding sessions in which queer people themselves spoke about their lives.

What he does not say is that just as important as his tactic being an outside agitator was the pressure coming from inside those conservative institutions, pushed by prominent psychologists and psychiatrists at major universities. Foremost among those were Professor Evelyn Hooker of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and Professors Merritt Thompson, Judd Marmor and Gerald Davison, all from the University of Southern California (USC). It was the combination of both outside agitators and principled individuals within the academic establishment that together were most effective in producing change. [For more analysis of the most effective tactics to use in confronting prejudice, see my book, *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. ]

In his essay Don Kilhefner complains that ONE LGBTQ Archives has been taken over by an academic “elite capture.” I know about this subject because I was president of the board of directors of ONE in the 1990s. A bit of my personal history:

In the early 1980s I was teaching Indigenous American history at the UCLA American Indian Studies Center. I built a solid academic record by publishing two books on *Southeastern Indians* and on *Indian Leadership*, plus I pioneered a radical revision of American diplomatic history by publishing articles in scholarly journals, which proved that the U.S. government became an imperialist power by its policies treating Indigenous Americans as colonial subjects. I was a radical activist working within academia, and I wore that title gladly.

Jim Kepner, one of the three founders of ONE Institute of Homophile Studies, was also a radical. Knowing of my experience working in archives, Jim asked me to join the board of directors of his community-based National Gay Archives. In 1984 I was elected as president of that board, whereupon we changed the name to the International Gay and Lesbian Archives.

At the same time, progressive professors at USC knew of my work doing research on the respected role of Indigenous queer and transgender people in many tribes, and in 1984 they hired me away from UCLA. Don Kilhefner is correct that USC was a very conservative university at that time, but from the moment I arrived I worked to change that. I organized and taught one of the nation’s first college courses on LGBT Studies, and I served as faculty advisor helping

students to build a strong activist USC Gay Student Union. We sponsored queer film festivals and scholarship awards for graduate students doing research on LGBTQ subjects. I began a campaign to hire a professor doing research in lesbian studies.

Two years later, however, when I published my book *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Beacon Press), conservative professors in the anthropology department gained enough votes to fire me. That book, one of the first gay-positive anthropological books on homosexuality, was controversial. But it also won three national book awards, and garnered more publicity and sales than all my other books put together. It also led to me winning a prestigious Fulbright Scholar Award, to teach at Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia.

Faced with this evidence of my work's national importance, in a dramatic turn-around USC Provost Cornelius Pings reversed the decision of the anthropology faculty and ordered me rehired, with tenure.

After I returned from Indonesia in 1988, USC's new provost Lloyd Armstrong appointed me to chair a university-wide committee on Lesbian and Gay Issues on campus. I chose other faculty and staff who shared my radical perspective, and together we worked to make fundamental changes, such as granting benefits to same-sex partners of university faculty and staff, and gaining university support to establish the USC Lambda Alumni Association.

Meanwhile, W. Dorr Legg, the main founder of ONE, asked me to join his board of directors. I worked closely with Dorr, and I consider him and Jim Kepner to have been the two most important mentors in my life. I was committed to both ONE and the Archives, but I did not like to see them struggling to survive as separate community-based organizations. I began a campaign to persuade the two boards of directors to merge, and was surprised at the resistance from some directors. But both Jim Kepner and Dorr Legg strongly approved of this merger, as well as my attempts to persuade USC to offer a building to house both collections. In 1994 Dorr Legg and I published a book *Homophile Studies in Theory and Practice* (ONE Institute Press). Dorr considered this book to be the culmination of his life's work, and a few months later he died peacefully at age 89.

In my last conversation with Dorr, I pledged that I would devote my life to building ONE and the Archives to become bigger and better than ever before. With the help of a closeted worker in the USC Building Office, we located a building a few blocks north of campus that a USC department was vacating. Before anyone else could grab it, I managed to persuade both the Dean and the Head Librarian to turn this building over for the combined ONE Archives. When I gave a speech at Dorr's memorial service, I announced that USC would offer a large building but only if the boards of ONE and the Archives agreed to merge. Not wanting to waste the opportunity, we held a meeting of all directors immediately after the service. John O'Brien, the dedicated president of the Archives, suggested a formula which allowed each board to choose

five representatives, plus me as president since I was the only person who had been a board member of both organizations. Following a directive written by Dorr Legg before he died, I also was appointed to the board of directors of ONE's fundraising arm, the Institute for the Study of Human Resources.

Over the next few years, I spent most of my time on ONE Archives. I persuaded USC to provide a 14-unit apartment building as free housing for scholars coming to Los Angeles to do research at ONE. I turned over the largest apartment to Jim Kepner, who for the first time in his life did not have to worry about how he was going to afford paying rent. While he was there, crammed into his major private collection of books, he wrote his seminal book *Rough News, Daring Views* about the growth of gay journalism. I also provided free apartments for John O'Brien and ONE librarian Yolanda Retter, on condition that they quit their jobs to work full time at ONE. Yolanda also completed her Ph.D. dissertation on the history of lesbian organizing in Southern California.

Graduate students started coming to USC, specifically to work with me and other professors. With the help of these dedicated graduate students we organized a major international conference in Lesbian and Gay Studies. In 1996, with the help of Jim Kepner, I founded the *International Gay & Lesbian Review*, the first academic journal in any field to be published entirely online. Jim Kepner wrote many reviews of books. Over the next four years, as Editor I printed over a thousand reviews, in many academic disciplines.

This was a time of great accomplishments, but also of frustration. The building that USC provided was architecturally beautiful, but it was being used as a fraternity house, and required major renovations to make it suitable as a library and archives. I used my influence as a board member of ONE's Institute for the Study of Human Resources to gain their approval to pay for many of the renovations. I kept trying to persuade friends, and friends of friends, to donate both money and materials. A former student of mine, who was a librarian at a community college, donated an entire set of professional library bookshelves. Various USC departments which were digitizing their files gave us many unused file cabinets. We got donations of exhibit cases from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The USC Building Department did a magnificent job painting and renovating the walls, and making nice gardens surrounding the building. The biggest cash donor was former Mattachine President Hal Call, who sold an apartment building in San Francisco and donated \$50,000 his entire profit from the sale.

We held a major fundraising banquet honoring the lifetime achievements of Jim Kepner. I am so glad we did that, because months later Jim was diagnosed with colon cancer. He passed away at the age of 72. John O'Brien organized a grand memorial service, and speakers included Harry Hay and Hal Call, leaders of the pioneer Mattachine Society, and Del Martin and Phylis Lyon, founders of the pioneer Daughters of Bilitis. In my speech, I gave myself as an example of the

way Jim encouraged and inspired younger scholars to devote their work to developing LGBTQ Studies. Both Jim and Dorr deserve highest honors as founders of this field of study.

Finally, in 2001, we held the grand opening of ONE International Gay and Lesbian Archives. Hundreds of people showed up. Besides my books and articles, I consider my work to merge ONE's library and the International Gay and Lesbian Archives, and bringing it to USC to be one of the greatest accomplishments of my life. It is the largest collection of LGBTQ documents and materials in the world.

I cannot speak about what has happened with ONE Archives since 2001. I resigned from the board a several months after the grand opening. It was always my plan to leave after the building was opened, but the timetable moved up since I had started working with Dr. Wan Yan Hai on a campaign to reduce homophobia in China. In November 2001 I gave lectures at Beijing University, China's leading academic research center. In 2002 I went to the Republic of Korea, and gave similar lectures at Seoul National University and at the Korean Center for Sexual Minorities. From 2003 to 2009 I spent most of my time doing research in Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia, working on a book about the social acceptance of sexual and gender diversity in traditional Southeast Asian cultures. Sadly, I was never able to finish that book because almost all of my research notes were destroyed. But that is another story.

I have written this history to show that Don Kilhefner's condemnation about ONE is undeserved and severely distorted. Let me answer his specific charges.

1. He writes: "Elite Capture occurred and basically dissolved ONE as it had been known since 1953. ONE's financial and other assets were legally and officially bequeathed to the Williams Institute at the UCLA Law School."

Kilhefner is mistaken. It was not ONE, but the Institute for the Study of Human Resources that bequeathed its assets to the Williams Institute at UCLA. I had already left for China by the time this decision was made, but I heard that the directors felt that since they had given most of their money to ONE Archives at USC, they felt that the remainder should go to UCLA, where the Williams Institute was doing important work in the field of sexual orientation and the law. There was no "elite capture" since the board of directors were the same persons who had originally been part of ONE, and they were getting quite elderly and ready to retire. It is understandable that they felt the remaining money could be put to best use by an established institution at a major university.

2. Kilhefner next makes an outlandish claim, referring to: "ONE's Education Committee, controlled by a gaggle of University of Southern California gay academic elites,"

As I explained above, there was no "committee" but a combined board that was voted on and approved by both original boards of directors of ONE and of the Archives. And who, pray tell, was this "gaggle" of "academic elites"? For most of the time, I was the only professor who was pushing to persuade USC to provide the building for ONE. I

hobnobbed, wine and dined USC officials, cajoled, twisted arms, and made some enemies when I grabbed the building which others wanted for their own department. Space is at a premium in downtown Los Angeles, and there is always competition, especially for the 14,000 square foot two-story building with surrounding gardens and a large parking lot, that I managed to get for ONE Archives.

3. Though Kilhefner does not mention my name, he essentially charges that I “hijacked the name, and claimed the ONE library and archives as its own.”

This is a complete fabrication. Every member of the combined board had been longtime supporters of either ONE or the Archives. All of us were afraid of what would happen to these priceless objects of our history, once Dorr Legg and Jim Kepner were no longer able to care for them. I was the only board member who was a professor, and my motivation was not to “hijack” any name, but to provide for the longterm survival and care of the rare documents of our movement’s founding. Caring for a library, and especially archival collections, is not cheap. Maybe Kilhefner’s rhapsody for community-based organizations applies for neighborhood gatherings, but such lack of firm institutional support would be the deathknell for any large archives. When I first joined the Archives board, we struggled each month just to pay the rent and the utilities for the storefront that Jim Kepner rented. There was so little money that Jim had to give up his apartment and sleep on a cot in the damp basement below the archives. I never saw Don Kilhefner give any money to Jim during those desperate times. The lack of money disturbed me greatly, not only because there was a fire danger when Jim used an electric space heater and hotplate for his meals, but especially because living in that damp basement was terrible for Jim’s health.

4. Next, Kilhefner attacks USC, stereotyping it as “a supremely wealthy and politically conservative university, fought allowing a Gay Student Union on campus for decades, and is a leading U.S. university cheerleader for unbridled capitalism.”

What he says is at least somewhat true before 1980, but since the very day of my hiring in 1984 I pushed and shoved in every way I could, to change all that. I suffered for that, was fired, and then rehired when my book became such a success. My case helped to change USC. That hardly makes me “an academic elite.”

Kilhefner is either sadly uninformed about the large number of progressive and radical faculty who currently teach at USC, or he is deliberately attacking an enemy that existed in the past but is no longer accurate. Here is the reality: up until 2001, which is the time I know about, USC had devoted far more money and resources for LGBTQ Studies than any other university in the nation, and probably in the entire world.

5. Kilhefner concludes: "Today, the USC-ONE archives focuses almost entirely on Homophile and Neo-Homophile historical events and ... pretends that the Gay Liberation movement never happened."

As I said earlier, I was not involved with ONE Archives after I left for Asia in 2001, and though I am now back in California living happily in peaceful retirement, I sincerely doubt that the staff at ONE Archives "pretends that the Gay Liberation movement never happened." No professional archivist, librarian, or historian would pretend that any era of the past never happened. What I suspect is going on in Don Kilhefner's mind, in his denigration of ONE's leadership role in the Homophile Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, is that doing so makes his role as a sexual revolutionist in the 1970s all the more important.

I am a decade younger than Mr. Kilhefner, but I hope I never become such a complainer as he seems to be. Like him, I was also an activist. As a teenager growing up in Atlanta in the 1960s, I was inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King to put my body on the line and join several protests in the civil rights movement. In the early 1970s (while in the US Army) I got involved in the anti-war movement. The first gay pride parade I marched in was in 1978, in Chicago. Then, when I moved to Florida later that year, I participated in the protests against Anita Bryant's Save Our Children crusade. Her idea of 'saving children' involved firing all gay and lesbian teachers.

It was in Ohio, however, where I really became an activist. In 1979 I founded and edited southern Ohio's first gay newspaper, was the leader of the Greater Cincinnati Gay Coalition, and served as coordinator of the Southern Ohio contingent for the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. More about my life can be seen at the website <[walterwilliamsphd.org](http://walterwilliamsphd.org)>

As an activist, I can say that it is a real pity that any of our movement leaders feel the need to denigrate others in order to make themselves look better. In 1953, Jim Kepner joined the staff of ONE Magazine, and became one of its major writers. Never having much money, he made it his life mission to collect and save every bit of information he could find on homosexuality. In 1954 Dorr Legg led the activists at ONE in suing the United States Post Office for refusing to send ONE Magazine in the mail. Despite defeat after defeat he did not give up, but kept appealing the case until finally, in 1958, the United States Supreme Court handed down a decision in ONE's favor. That was the first gay rights victory in federal courts, and it provided the legal basis for every LGBTQ publication to follow. In that same year, Dorr published an article in ONE Magazine titled "I am Glad I am a Homosexual." Imagine the courage and internal fortitude it took to make such a statement in 1958.

For myself, I am glad that I moved to Los Angeles in 1980, and that I was fortunate enough to become involved with the likes of Jim Kepner and Dorr Legg. They changed my life, as they did so many others. I honor them both, as I also honor Don Kilhefner for the pathbreaking work he did in the 1970s. Please, we get enough criticism from

homophobes and other bigots as we go through life. There is no need to pile on additional slanders we inflict on each other. Enough.