

Source: Walter L. Williams, "Internet Publication for Gay and Lesbian Rights ," *Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States: A Documentary History*. Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2003, pp. 246-247.

Part of the progress of the gay and lesbian rights movement is due to the many lesbian and gay publishers that have emerged within the last four decades. With books, journals, magazines, and newspapers, those persons who feel isolated by their sexual minority status can read of others like themselves. With the internet explosion of the late 1990s, even more exposure for lesbian and gay writing has occurred. Electronic publications have had an enormous impact on spreading the message of gay and lesbian rights around the world. One of these internet sources is the International Gay & Lesbian Review, founded and edited by Walter L. Williams between 1996 and 2000, and published by ONE Institute Press. Under Williams' editorship, reviews of over a thousand books were electronically published, and available to researchers and readers all over the world. Books that dealt with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered rights were reviewed, including memoirs of activists, reports by gay rights organizations, queer theory books that apply themselves to political issues, debates over same-sex marriage, and books on overcoming heterosexism.

Source: Walter L. Williams, "Conclusion," *Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States: A Documentary History*. Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2003, pp.285-288.

The struggle for gay and lesbian rights demonstrates the power of small numbers of individuals to change the course of history. When Henry Gerber organized the first group of homosexuals for protection of individual rights in 1924, when Edythe Eyde took the initiative to type a lesbian newsletter in 1947, when Mattachine Society member Dale Jennings challenged

police entrapment in 1952, when original thinkers in Los Angeles founded ONE magazine in 1952 , when the editors sued the U.S. government for the right to send ONE in the mail, and when Jose Sarria ran for public office as an openly gay person in 1961, they each did something that had never been done before.

By taking the initiative, by organizing to do pioneering work on behalf of a despised minority, these selfless pioneers laid the basis for millions of people to be able to live their lives openly and with less oppression. In the early years of the movement, newsletters had to be mimeographed secretly in basement offices, closeted homosexuals had to be convinced to take action, letters to the editor had to be written, phone banks had to be called, protest marches had to be organized, demonstrations had to be sparked, politicians and media officials and clergy and bureaucrats had to be lobbied, lawsuits had to be filed in court, and—most importantly—people had to come out of the closet to their relatives, friends and co-workers.

A small number of radical activists had to do what they did, to question the very basics of social values, in order for large numbers of people to be able to live their lives in the mundane ways that heterosexuals take for granted. To be left alone without harassment by police or interfering neighbors, to legally marry, to be able to adopt or retain custody of one's children, to serve in the armed forces, to have a house with a white picket fence in the suburbs; these are far from being revolutionary stances. And yet, ironically, a revolution was necessary in order for sexual minorities to enjoy these decidedly mundane aspects of everyday life. That is little different from the role of activists who led the American Revolution in 1776, and who enshrined the principles of individual freedom and liberty into the Bill of Rights in 1791.

The original patriots of 1776 knew, from bitter experience, how government could infringe upon the many details of their intimate daily life. Under the British colonial system they

did not feel free to speak and write their opinions, assemble with their peers, choose their own religious values without coercion by others, feel secure in the privacy of their own home, and in other ways pleasantly and fully live their own life as they saw fit. The history of all the struggles for freedom in the United States, from 1775 to the present, has focused on the details of intimate behavior. The last two centuries have witnessed a gradually expanded idea of freedom, from the abolition of slavery and women's legal subordination, to the right of privacy, and protection from discrimination on the basis of race, sex, and religious non-conformity. The right for people to be left alone, to live their life as they themselves choose, is a basic tenet in the political ideology of the United States of America.

The fact that it has required such bitter struggles to accomplish these mundane rights, from a civil war over slavery that resulted in the deaths of over 600,000 Americans, to a protest movement lasting seventy years before women could vote, is testament to the powerful forces that exist against equality within the population of the United States. Many Americans are not committed to the idea of liberty for all. The fact that certain groups have had to struggle for many years to gain equal rights shows that liberty cannot be taken for granted.

One reason the Founders of the American Revolution attached such importance to things like the separation of church and state was because they had seen first hand, in the colonial era, the disastrous results that occurred when Christian religious zealots had control over the body politic. They rejected the notion that one church—any church—could outlaw or persecute those who did not participate in that church. Though the vast majority of Americans were Protestant Christians, the Founders required tolerance for Catholics, Jews, atheists, and other religious non-conformists. It is supremely ironic that the Catholic Church and the Mormons, two minority religious groups which have experienced much intolerance and prejudice in the past, overcame

the prejudice against their own groups only to emerge at the forefront of the effort to deny a similar tolerance to homosexuals. They seem not to have learned an important lesson of American history, that if we expect others to respect our own right to be unique and different, we need to respect the rights of others who are different from us. The flame of liberty is flickering; for it to exist for one, it has to be guaranteed for all.

The main contribution of the struggle for gay and lesbian rights to political ideology is the notion that the right to love is of central importance to human liberty. The history of other social struggles in the United States indicates that justice is not something that happens immediately. It requires many years of challenge, reaction, disagreement, and conflict. The historical record also shows, however, that ultimately the struggles for individual rights result in an expansion of the idea of freedom. Just as with the other freedoms of intimate behavior that are stated in the Bill of Rights, this right to love is part of a larger trend toward respect for individual freedom. These accomplishments—in support of life, liberty, and the pursuit of personal happiness—are the most important gifts the United States of America has given to the modern world.

Given the reality that decades of struggle are necessary to secure the blessings of liberty, the movement for gay and lesbian rights has made amazing progress during its half century of existence in the United States. In 1950, homosexuality was universally condemned by all segments of American society. Churches unanimously considered it a sin, psychiatrists considered it a mental illness, the law considered it a crime, and society considered it a shameful practice. Many homosexuals internalized this hatred, and hid their inclinations from their families and co-workers. Because so many people were leading hidden lives, it was common for young people to grow up thinking that they were the only person in the world to have same-sex

attractions. If a person's same-sex feeling did become known, it was treated as a scandal, or at best, as a dirty little secret. People were fired from their jobs, lost their homes, ostracized by their families, beaten up, imprisoned, mutilated by brain surgery, or killed. Under such pressures, many were literally driven insane, suffered depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, or committed suicide.

Fifty years later, few young people in the United States could think they were the only person in the world with same-sex feelings. Openly gay teachers, business owners, doctors, entertainers, government officials, neighbors, relatives, and friends were a part of the mosaic of U.S. society. Knowing a person involved in a same-sex relationship became a commonplace experience for many Americans. Despite the thousands of people lost to AIDS in the 1980s, the gay and lesbian community continued to grow. Bisexual, transgendered and intersex persons, or people who simply refused to attach a label to their gender and sexuality, were inspired by the gay and lesbian rights movement to come out of their own closets. Visibility emerged in many aspects of life, from the mass media to the local neighborhood association. The more the opposition tried to crush the movement for personal liberation, the more stubborn and diverse its growth became. While discrimination was far from eliminated, those who engaged in discrimination were put on the defensive. Battles that once took place in the major cities were beginning to take place in small towns. Lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people gained respect for standing up for their right to be treated as equal members of society. Liberation became a positive, even a celebratory, aspect of life in the United States at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Though the debate over sexual liberation will surely continue in the new century, the story of the struggle for gay and lesbian rights will be seen as an important part of the great

movement for human rights that engulfed the United States in the last half of the twentieth century. The activists represented in this book are an integral part of that history.