Progress for Pride

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 28 June 2023 09:03

http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/lgbtq-pride-flag-s5.jpg

Senator Smith looks back on the history of the LGBTQ+ community's fight for equality under the law.

BRUNSWICK, WI - We are all familiar with Thomas Jefferson's famous words from the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

These words, famous as they are, were aspirational when Jefferson wrote them. At that time, slavery was legal and accepted in America and women were not allowed to vote or participate in the economy as freely as men. Words mean nothing without the weight of law behind them.

Doing a little research into the difference between rights and law reminded me how fragile our way of life really is. So many fellow Americans have had to struggle to change laws so they could participate in society the way most of us take for granted. As we wrap up Pride Month, I want to take a look at the long history of the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer+) rights movement in America and Wisconsin.

In 1924 activist Henry Gerber organized the Society for Human Rights in Chicago. Due to political pressures the society did not last long, but it is known as the oldest documented

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American gay rights organization on record in America. But early attempts to change perceptions and access the same rights as anyone else were thwarted by stigmas attached to sexual behaviors that seemed foreign to heterosexual adults.

The same "red scare" tactics used by Joe McCarthy in the 1950s were adapted to persecute the LGBT population. If anyone was outed as gay they could lose their job or their apartment. President Eisenhower even banned gay individuals from working for the federal government or its private contracting companies through executive order. It's hard to believe that such discrimination could ever have been acceptable and legal in the United States.

Moving from the 1950s into the 1960s, the world remained an unwelcoming place for LGBTQ+ individuals. For years police harassed gay men and women because laws on the books criminalized their life choices. Engaging in "gay" behavior in public (kissing, dancing or even just holding hands with someone of the same sex) was still illegal.

To find refuge, LGBTQ+ individuals flocked to gay bars and clubs where they could express themselves openly and socialize without worry. However, authorities penalized and shut down establishments that served alcohol to known or even suspected LGBTQ+ individuals, arguing that the mere gathering of homosexuals was "disorderly."

When police raided the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village the night of June 28, 1969 and began hauling patrons out to paddy wagons, it sparked an uprising . Police were caught off-guard; they had not met so much resistance in the past. But these decent citizens who were only able to be open about who they were in places like the Stonewall Inn had enough. Protests and violent clashes lasted for 6 days. It was this tipping point that sparked a groundswell of activism in the gay rights movement across the nation and the world.

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