My Uncle and the Gay Activists Alliance

My Shocking Discovery

For a long period of my life, I was completely unaware of my uncle’s sexual preference of men. My uncle has had a boyfriend longer than I’ve been born, 42 years to be exact, but I just thought of him as my other uncle. I was too young and immature to ever realize that they were partners and as I matured, I began to put the pieces together. Not until recently did I discover the truth about my uncle’s past. My uncle, Phil Raia, was not only a strong believer in gay rights, but also a relatively successful gay activist. He joined an organization known as the Gay Activists Alliance and was a part of a small group known as “The Rockefeller 5.” After hearing all about my uncle’s courageous acts with the Gay Activists Alliance, I’ve been very curious to know more. Specifically speaking, I wanted to know my uncle’s role in the GAA and how big of an impact the GAA has had on gay rights today.
The Stonewall Riots

June 28, 1969 was just an average night for the folks in New York City’s Greenwich Village. The usual’s were enjoying their favorite drinks at the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar located on Christopher Street, when another police raid occurred. Police raids of gay bars were common in NYC at that time, but this one was different. As the police proceeded to raid the bar, people began to panic and fear they would be arrested. In the novel, “Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution,” David Carter included chapters that were spoken from different point of views. One witness, Morty Manford, described his reaction to the raid: “I was anxious. Everybody was, not knowing whether we were going to be arrested or what was happening next…It was a nervous mood that set over the place.”

The first aggressive act occurred outside the club as the police were arresting the employees of the bar as well as the transvestites. A transvestite hit a police officer with her purse when she was shoved by one of them and that resulted in the officer clubbing the transvestite. This hateful act led to a series of violent demonstrations and outbreaks that are known today as the Stonewall riots. At that time the world had no idea a revolution had been sparked. Homosexuals had taken enough neglect over the years and they finally took a stand that day. Martin Boyce, a participant in the Stonewall riots, recollects the surreal event with a sense of pride and accomplishment: “Not directly, but Tommy Schmidt (Stonewall riot participant), I’m sure, could see the beauty of shattered glass and...
certain kind of fag decorations being blown in the wind, by the window. It was obvious, at least to me, that a lot of people really were gay and, you know, this was our street” (Carter). A gay revolution had begun and there was no way of stopping it.

The Gay Activists Alliance

The Gay Activists Alliance was a militant, non-violent organization that formed in December of 1969, only a few months after the Stonewall Riots. Also known as the GAA, this organization was developed by Jim Owles, Marty Robinson, Arthur Evans, Arthur Bell, and a few other gay activists. According to the New York Public Library’s records of the Gay Activists Alliance, Jim Owles, the GAA’s first president, said their ultimate goal was to “secure basic human rights, dignity, and freedom for all gay people.” They stood by this goal until the day the organization died.

All the individuals who started the GAA strongly disagreed with the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), an organization formed soon after the Stonewall riots, and wanted to involve politics into the fight for gay rights. On the website titled, “Gay Activists Alliance,” Lindsay Branson spoke of the differences between the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance. Unlike the GLF, the GAA developed a constitution that no member was allowed to change and established membership requirements as well as elected officers whose duties were outlined in the constitution. In order to attract the public and individuals of all backgrounds, the GAA
developed a political philosophy like no other organization and that was to be a single-issue organization.

One of their most famous types of protests were zaps. Zaps were political tactics used for the purpose of publicly exposing politicians in order to force them to take a stand on gay rights. Zaps included large non-violent demonstrations, sit-ins, disruption meetings, and more (“Gay Activists Alliance”). Marc Rubin, author of the article “GAA Must Be Restored to History,” stated that there were many notable actions the GAA took after the Stonewall riots and these include “invading the New York City Clerk after he refused to issue a marriage license to two men, zapping the American Psychiatric Association in a successful attempt to remove homosexuality from its listing of psychiatric disorders, participating in a sit-in at Governor Rockefeller’s office in an effort to push for a State law, zapping CBS and ABC News to protest against their anti-gay tone, and demonstrating a protest at Times Square against police harassment of gays and transvestites.” These were only a few of the many actions the GAA took in an effort to make a change in the world.

**My Uncle’s Role in the GAA and Gay Liberation**

Phil Raia is one of the most courageous men I’ve ever met. When adversity and hardship arises, he is the first man to take charge. He has one very unique quality that is like no other and that is gay pride. Not many individuals are brave enough to express their homosexuality in public, let alone be proud of it. Phil Raia has no problem with expressing his views, which is why he is one of the most inspirational individuals in my life. It’s only an added benefit that he’s a part of my family.
I recently discovered that he played a bigger role in the GAA and gay liberation than I had previously thought. One of my most shocking discoveries was the fact that my uncle was at the Stonewall Inn during the famous riots. In fact, he only lived a block and a half away from the popular gay bar in a small one-bedroom apartment. On occasion, he would go out to the Stonewall Inn to enjoy a couple drinks with his friends. In my interview with Phil Raia, he told me all about the night of the riots and how “an angry mob gathered outside the bar and started to hurl objects and threats at the police.”

After the riots, my uncle decided to take part in the fight for gay rights. “My first exposure to such radical thinking was the Gay Liberation Front,” said Raia, “I began attending their meetings, dances, and demonstrations.” Unfortunately, the GLF wasn’t the right organization for my uncle for he turned to the Gay Activists Alliance and realized they were better suited for him. Soon after the creation of the GAA, my uncle became the leader of the Pleasure and Fundraising Committee, which grew to be one of the largest committee’s in the organization. “We raised funds for the GAA through the sale of t-shirts, buttons, and planning out various social activities,” Raia proudly stated.

My uncle also participated in many protests, rallies, petition drives, sit-ins and especially zaps. One of the zaps he participated in involved the New York City Mayor speaking on television about issues in the city. The Mayor was on the topic of people abandoning cars when my uncle shouted out, “what about abandoned homosexuals!” He was then ushered out of the audience by security, but that was nothing new to him. In fact, he was arrested more than once due to his participation in certain zaps and protests.

Having such little success with the City Counsel and Mayor led the GAA to stage protests and zaps towards Governor John D. Rockefeller. “We marched into his offices,”
said Raia, “and staged a sit-in agreeing not to leave until we got answers to our demands.” My uncle and the four other GAA members, later known as “The Rockefeller 5,” staged this sit-in with such courage and bravery that they were later arrested. This had little to no effect on these five courageous gentlemen for they continued to fight for gay rights despite such adversity.

After playing such a large role in the Gay Activists Alliance, my uncle received a lot of recognition for his achievements. In 2012, he was invited to speak to an audience about his experiences. He concluded his presentation with a very inspiring quote that I will never forget. “We can not fall victim to the guilt and homophobia that society has laid on us,” Raia proudly states, “And equally important, we cannot internalize the sexism and homophobia toward others in our community or toward ourselves. Once we are at peace with ourselves, general society will begin to reach out and embrace us.” This one quote says it all and to hear it from my uncle makes it all the better.
Gay Rights Before the GAA

Before 1969, the idea of homosexuals having equal rights was preposterous. Now there may have been some underground or private discussions of this idea, but it was never publicized. For years, homosexuals were treated unfairly to the extent where they had no rights. In many cases, individuals would be fired from their jobs if they revealed their sexual orientation as homosexual. In fact, President Eisenhower issued an executive order in the early fifties that barred homosexuals from all federal occupations. On top of that, homosexuals who fought in World War II were severely punished for revealing their sexual preference or even showing any homosexual tendencies.

Before the Gay Activists Alliance there was no “coming out” or “being out” because most homosexuals hid their sexual preference from the world. They were fearful of what the outcome would be if they were to openly reveal their sexual orientation and some were even embarrassed because of the stigma behind homosexuals. Homosexuality was illegal in all states except Illinois at that time and so homosexuals were forced to use gay bars as somewhat of a social haven. This can easily be compared to the black churches that were used a social havens for African-Americans before the civil rights movement. One of the worst types of discrimination against homosexuals before the GAA was listing homosexuality as a mental disorder. Homosexuals were horribly mistreated at mental hospitals during that time and some were given “treatments” to “cure” the so-called “illness.”

Gay Rights After the GAA

After the Stonewall riots, the Gay Activists Alliance established an entirely new road to gay liberation and ultimately led the way. With many successful protests and
demonstrations, the GAA was able to establish a firm presence in New York City as a successful gay organization. In 1969 there were only two gay organizations in the United States. By 1973 there were almost eight hundred gay/lesbian organizations. “The changes were far-reaching. Over the next two decades, half the states decriminalized homosexual behavior, and police harassment was sharply contained. Many large cities included sexual orientation in their civil rights statutes as well (“Milestones in the Gay Rights Movement”).

On top of that, the ban that President Eisenhower set on the employment of homosexuals in all federal jobs was eliminated in 1975 and many religious denominations began to accept homosexuals. “The lesbian and gay world was no longer an underground subculture but, in larger cities especially, a well-organized community, with business, political clubs, social service agencies, community centers, and religious congregations bringing people together (“Milestones in the Gay Rights Movement”).

Gay rights have come a long way since the Stonewall riots and today they’re finally being recognized. Since 2003, all states have legalized homosexuality and gay marriage is legal in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, and the District of Columbia. Today, homosexuals have the right to adoption as well as the right to join the military. Although there is still discrimination against homosexuals, hate crime laws have been enacted on the basis of sexual orientation and gays continue to receive more
and more rights. Ever since the GAA formed in 1969, gay rights have increased immensely.

**America Changes for the Better**

Although discrimination against homosexuals is still present, it’s not nearly as bad as it used to be. Actually, today’s Gay Civil Rights movement is largely supported by heterosexuals and the number of supporters continues to grow. The majority of Americans today believe Equality and Civil Rights for all, including gay men and women. With the help of my uncle, Phil Raia, the Gay Activists Alliance was able to
establish a new road for future homosexual activists; a road that leads to equality and rights for all homosexuals.
Works Cited


Raia, Phil. Telephone Interview. 19 Oct. 2014