

# LGBTQAA: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Asexual, and Alcoholism

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## Alcohol and Activism in Queer History

In 1961, José Sarria rallied gay people to riot and avoid arrest on Halloween for dressing in drag at the Black Cat, a gay drag bar on Montgomery Street in San Francisco. Sarria was a waiter and performer at the bar. He founded the League for Civil Education, which was committed to eliminating laws prohibiting alcohol from being served to gay people, in 1960.<sup>1</sup> In addition to rallying the crowd on the Halloween of 1961, he led large groups of patrons to serenade the jail across the street despite strict laws against dressing in drag.<sup>2</sup> After the Halloween arrests, he convinced gay men who were arrested to plead not guilty as a protest to anti-sodomy and anti-drag laws, forcing cases to trial and overwhelming the legal system with the amount of additional work that had to be done as a result. Because of the increasing amount of work that police and prosecutors had to do to find more evidence against and actually prosecute those arrested, police received orders to arrest fewer people dressing in drag.<sup>3</sup>

In 1966, The Mattachine Society held a “sip-in,” demanding to be served at the Los Angeles bar, Julius, despite being gay. Dick Leitsch, a former chairman of the Mattachine Society, explained that the “whole thing ended up in court, and the court decided well, yes, the Constitution says that people have the right to peacefully assemble and the state can't take that right away from you. And so the Liquor Authority can't prevent gay people from congregating in bars.”<sup>4</sup> This was one of the first rights that queer people in the United States were granted.

On New Year's Eve of 1967, twelve plain clothed police officers entered the Black Cat Tavern, a gay bar in Los Angeles. When the clock struck midnight and same-sex couples began to kiss, the officers began to beat the patrons of the bar. Sixteen patrons were laid face down on the sidewalk outside the bar and arrested.<sup>5</sup> In the following two days, two hundred queer people, organized by the group Personal Rights in Defense and Education (PRIDE), gathered around the bar and rioted.<sup>6</sup>

On June 28, 1969, plain clothed police entered the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar operated by the mafia in New York City, expecting their usual payoff when patrons of the bar decided resist

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<sup>1</sup> “Jose Sarria, Gay Advocate and Performer, Dies at 90,” accessed January 28, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/us/jose-sarria-gay-advocate-and-performer-dies-at-90.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “Jose Sarria, Gay Political Pioneer, Dies,” accessed January 28, 2015, <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Jos-Julio-Sarria-gay-political-pioneer-dies-4747650.php>.

<sup>3</sup> “The Gay Rights Movement First Started in California, Two Decades Before Stonewall,” accessed January 28, 2015, [http://sfist.com/2014/06/27/the\\_gay\\_rights\\_fight\\_started\\_in\\_cal.php](http://sfist.com/2014/06/27/the_gay_rights_fight_started_in_cal.php).

<sup>4</sup> “Remembering a 1966 ‘Sip-In’ for Gay Rights,” accessed January 28, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91993823>.

<sup>5</sup> “Press Release regarding the Raid of the Black Cat Bar New Year's Eve, 1966,” accessed January 28, 2015, <http://www.tangentgroup.org/history/BlackCat.html>.

<sup>6</sup> “Speaking Out,” accessed January 28, 2015, [http://www.johnrechy.com/so\\_adel.htm](http://www.johnrechy.com/so_adel.htm).

arrest. The Stonewall Inn was a small bar. It was often described as a dive, but it was one of the very few places that society's outcasts in New York could go to socialize and find a sense of community. The gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, transgender people, drag queens, homeless LGBTQ+ youth, and sex workers were tired of being exploited. They rioted. This spurred a six day long violent protest which is often referenced as the beginning of the gay rights movement. The bar was the one place that society's outcasts could come together, either to drink so much that they forgot about their oppression or to drink so much that they could complain about their oppressors freely. It was a place where they could numb themselves.

In the LGBTQ+ community, rioters and activists operating out of bars often are, and should be, looked up to for their actions. They had one space in which they could exist. They used the sense of community to build and demand more rights. Their endeavors, though accessorized by alcohol, were noble and effective.

### Alcohol Abuse in Today's Queer Community

The LGBTQ+ movement in the United States has come a long way since the Mattachine Society and Stonewall. The primary groups that defined the LGBTQ+ community in the 1960s and 1970s were over the age of twenty because coming out was so dangerous for LGBTQ+ youth. Now more than ever before, the LGBTQ+ community includes people of all age groups. Despite this progress, many of the same issues that have historically tormented LGBTQ+ people continue to plague LGBTQ+ teenagers. Unfortunately, alcohol's role in the LGBTQ+ community and LGBTQ+ history is glamorized and romanticized by teenagers. Substance abuse is one of the most widespread issues for LGBTQ+ youth. It is estimated that LGBTQ+ youth drink twice as much as heterosexual youth and that twenty five percent of LGBTQ+ youth abuse alcohol.<sup>7</sup> The CDC found that gay and lesbian people are more likely to continue heavy drinking into adulthood than straight people.<sup>8</sup>

Part of this drinking is still the tragedy of the outsider. Some of it is the exact same kind of drinking that happened in the 1960s. I want to clarify: This is not the kind of substance abuse I am about to criticize. I am talking about the middle-class, suburban high school queer person.

LGBTQ+ pride events rarely occur without a heavy presence of alcohol. In 2013, I attended the Chicago Gay Pride Parade for the first time. I was shocked to find that nearly everyone there, straight or queer, young or old, was drinking. My friends and I were some of the only sober people there. I quickly learned that the event was not about coming together as a community in support of LGBTQ+ people, it was about getting drunk. An event that should be about heightening social awareness was about sinking into a lower state of consciousness. I

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<sup>7</sup>“Why The Gay And Transgender Population Experiences Higher Rates of Substance Abuse,” accessed January 28, 2015, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/report/2012/03/09/11228/why-the-gay-and-transgender-population-experiences-higher-rates-of-substance-use/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Center for Disease Control Issues,” accessed January 28, 2015, [http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2014/14\\_0126.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2014/14_0126.htm).

noticed that older attendees might have a beer in their hands, but they were not out of control. The younger attendees, however, had water bottles full of vodka and could barely control themselves. The younger LGBTQ+ community is inseparable from alcohol.

We<sup>9</sup> constantly hear the message that it gets better. We know it is going to get better, for our privileged group within the community especially, but often times LGBTQ+ youth resort to alcohol as a means to get through high school. Our parents are abusive or homophobic regardless of our privilege within the community, the difference between us and a less wealthy LGBTQ+ high schooler of color who is poor is that we experience the affects differently. It is very rare that one of us gets kicked out of our homes and is forced into homelessness. We see successful LGBTQ+ adults with a similar background to us and know that we will one day become them, but until then, we are stuck in a strange position. America has improved for LGBTQ+ adults, but because of the parental mentality that tolerates LGBTQ+ adults and not LGBTQ+ youth, America is still difficult to navigate for us. We are regularly reminded by parents, teachers, and the media that even ten years ago, the United States was a worse place for LGBTQ+ people and that we must be thankful that we are living in such a progressive time where same-sex marriage is legal in thirty-six states.<sup>10</sup> However, this sends us the message that our dissatisfaction with society is invalid and should not be acted on. This message prevents focus on other LGBTQ+ issues that are more pressing than marriage equality. It fuels an individual internal dissatisfaction with ourselves. This behavior causes hopelessness and passivity among LGBTQ+ youth. We are taught that for the first eighteen years of our life, we have to accept discrimination because it could be worse. We are taught that we have no choice but to not care about the way we are treated or else we are being selfish. Our differences from the general population are highlighted by these parental behaviors and by the social dynamic of high school, but we are taught to be complacent. Similar to the outcasted patrons of the Stonewall Inn, LGBTQ+ youth turn to alcohol to deal with the stressors in their lives and to find community.

I am part of a Facebook group, Gay North Shore Teens, which is composed of three hundred LGBTQ+ teenagers from the Chicagoland area. The description says that “GNST is a safe, open community that seeks to offer resources and social opportunities for LGBT+ youth in north-suburban Chicago.” Despite the comforting and well-intended description, there is constant talk of parties and alcohol. One teen posts, “Yo young adults what are the gay clubs/bars in Chicago that you can get into w/out a fake?” The events that are hosted by members of the group are called “gaytherings.” They’re the typical house party, but with exclusively LGBTQ+ people. Over the summer, I attended a gaythering with my friend as her designated driver. We got there about half an hour after the party started.

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<sup>9</sup> As a queer, white, middle-class high school student, I want to acknowledge that the following is written with my privilege in mind. When I use first person plural pronouns (e.g., “we,” “us,” or “our”), I am referring to myself as a queer, middle-class, suburban high schooler. My intent is to critique the usage of alcohol within this group of people specifically.

<sup>10</sup> “States,” accessed January 28, 2015, <http://www.freedomtomarry.org/states/>.

Needless to say, it wasn't long before there were handles of vodka on the coffee table, beers in the kitchen, people smoking joints in the backyard and cigarettes on the porch. And of course, there was pink everywhere: pink glitter, pink sequin vests, pink cups, boys in pink underwear. It was a party hosted by white, gay, cisgender males even though that was not necessarily the demographic of the majority of attendees. There was an emphasis on flamboyancy. By ten, nearly everyone there was drunk or high. I walked inside the living room after checking on my friend, who was on her eighth cigarette in a row despite never having her first cigarette earlier that evening. That's where I met Connor and Alex, two transgender guys who were completely hammered. Alex walked over to me, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Connor, look at this kid, he's like a little me. You trans bro?" I nodded and he continued, "Wait, dude, I bet I could beat you in an arm wrestling contest." Even though I was sober and everyone around me was drunk, for the first time, I felt a part of the larger social LGBTQ+ community. It was nice to be in a place where I could talk about things other than LGBTQ+ issues without the fear of being judged for being queer. There was no pressure because of my gender or sexuality and I didn't have to worry about providing anyone with support.

But at the same time, gaytherings aren't free of the toxic social dynamic of high school. There are cliques, bullying, and exclusion. As I poured myself a glass of coke, I noticed a transgender girl sitting on the side of the porch alone. She approached me, likely because I too seemed a little out of place. She was drunk, but it seemed like she was drunk in a different way than most other people there. It appeared as though she was holding back tears when she slurred together the words, "I can't fucking handle this things." When I asked why she was there if she hated the parties, she put her hand on my shoulder to balance herself and replied that "it's either this or complete isolation for us, you know what I mean? I'll either drink alone here and feel like a normal awkward social outcast or I'll drink alone at home and feel like an even weirder one." I nodded, somewhat hesitantly. I wanted so badly for this to not be the only community. I didn't want to face the fact that the place I went to for acceptance was toxic. I didn't want to acknowledge that as a group, repression and irresponsibility is our only coping mechanism. As she spoke to me, though, the reality of our community hit me.

Recently, I was talking to the leader of Pride, a support group for LGBTQ+ high schoolers, about the decreasing rates of attendance. This is a group that has helped me in times of emotional distress and has been one of the sole sources of acceptance for other teens that I know. Unfortunately, funding for this program is constantly endangered because of the low attendance. The leader of the group confided in me that she didn't know what to do. She was worried that she could no longer provide what LGBTQ+ teens needed or that they didn't want emotional support anymore. She said, "I think all they want is a party and since I can't legally provide alcohol, they won't come here anymore." With all the older youth who are already out and have moved past some of their early struggles with being LGBTQ+ no longer attending the program, there are few people to give advice to the one or two questioning or closeted kids who show up every week seeking the support of their peers. We have abandoned our own and fallen into a

hypocrisy of leaving groups intended to create an emotionally supportive community, like Pride, in order to seek a community with the presence of alcohol which allows us to address our problems in an unhealthy, unmonitored environment.

### Creating a Sober Space for Queer Youth: A Sober Approach to Activism

As nice as the freeing feeling of comradeship can be, we need the pressure on us. We need to constantly feel the weight of our responsibility to each other bearing down on us. I felt guilty partaking in it knowing that these parties are part of the reason that questioning or closeted kids at Pride were not receiving the advice and support they need. It's not that they are held at the same time as Pride or that attending one prevents attending the other in any way shape or form. When members of the LGBTQ+ community find a quick fix for community in alcohol and drugs, they fail to work toward the creation of a sober community capable of creating real emotional support for those who need it.

Though there are parallels between queer youth and Stonewall, we are not going to rebel. We are not being directly exploited the way that LGBTQ+ people were in the 1960s. The LGBTQ+ community in general is not as close of a community as it was in the 1960s because of increased acceptance and that has changed the nature of alcohol's role in the community. We cannot use the history of LGBTQ+ people to justify or romanticize substance abuse in our community. Right now, reform will not happen through a bunch of queer, white, middle-class teens in the suburbs drunk rioting and it definitely will not happen through a bunch of queer, white, middle-class teens in the suburbs drunk and sitting around. Queer, middle-class, suburban youth can only reform through sober and conscious activism because the reality is that if we maintain a community surrounding drinking, alcoholism will haunt more and more LGBTQ+ youth into adulthood and it won't get better for us the way we think we know it will. It is imperative that the party scene does not remain the only scene.

We cannot complacently drift into willful ignorance and unconsciousness the way we have been. As some of the most privileged people of the LGBTQ+ community, we have the responsibility not only to save ourselves by reforming the community, but also lay the groundwork for a well-structured, tightly-knit community that can support those who are struggling more than we are. Only when we are sober-minded can we focus on improving the quality of life of the rest of the LGBTQ+ community. We, the middle-class, white, queer, suburban teenagers, need to focus less on throwing pink parties and more on writing with pink ink. We must be critical of others and ourselves in a productive and thoughtful way. This must be the next stage of queer activism or else the community will disintegrate.

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