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Alicia Mayen

The Effects of Collegiate Gay Straight Alliances in the 1980s and 1990s

The word “homosexual” comes from the late nineteenth century German psychologist Karoly Maria Benkert.¹ The term refers to people who are sexually attracted to people of the same sex.² Homosexuals (hereby referred to as “gay” people) existed in the United States for many years, eventually coming into the public eye in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1920s and 1930s, openly gay characters appeared in Broadway plays, and partook in events known as drag balls.³ While psychologist Evelyn Hooker observed that many gay neighborhoods existed in the 1950s,⁴ there were no gay or lesbian organizations until the emergence of the Mattachine Society, in 1953.⁵ During that time, however, no official organizations existed for gay and lesbian students on college campuses. The organizations, which advocates and activists later referred to as Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), did not emerge on college campuses until the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁶ GSAs came in response to the start of the Gay Liberation Movement, and to the riots at the Stonewall Inn, in 1969.⁷ Today GSAs can be found on many college and university campuses nationwide, including on the campus of Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC).

Examining the actions of Gay Straight Alliances at SIU, in conjunction with historical events and trends, sheds light upon the impact that GSAs have had on the local LGBT communities they serve.⁸ Using a local collegiate GSA, Saluki Rainbow Network at SIU (and its

previous iterations), this study highlights the effects of collegiate GSAs on their local communities. These effects include the building of a community, and an increased public awareness concerning health issues, such as HIV/AIDS. Due to a lack of records from other decades, the focus of this paper is the unfolding of these changes during the 1980s and 1990s. In order to better understand the effects of GSAs during this time period, one must first understand that they emerged out of the Gay Liberation Movement and the 1969 Stonewall events (a series of riots between gay civilians and police).⁹

Contrary to popular belief, the Gay Liberation Movement did not begin with the events at Stonewall. The movement, though slightly different than the post-Stonewall movement, began when Harry Hay established the Mattachine Society in San Francisco.¹⁰ Hay, a Communist Party member, established the group in the 1950s using the party itself as a model for the Mattachine Society.¹¹ Using a multi-tiered model, members of the Society viewed themselves as an oppressed minority group, and sought ways to voice those feelings in their biweekly meetings.¹² These meetings were popular in San Francisco, despite rumors of bar raids, and what former member Konrad Stevens described as "... [fears of] the government getting a list of names and [expecting] that cops would come barging in and arrest everybody."¹³ Here, Stevens echoes a fear that many gay men during that time had, as many felt that they were under attack by the government. While the government did not openly persecute gays and lesbians prior to 1950, American communists or suspected communists were, due to the Cold War. During this time, the House Un-American Activities committee (HUAC) targeted many people, such as leftists in Hollywood.¹⁴ By 1950, the push against communism in the United States finally reached the gay community. Many people saw the actions and identities of "others" such as homosexuals as morally deviant, and the government deemed them dangerous, as a result.¹⁵ Despite that fact,

membership in the Mattachine Society continued to grow, as both gay men and lesbian women founded chapters in Berkeley and Oakland.¹⁶ Around the mid-1950s, the Society grew into a significantly more public foundation, which in combination with Hay's communist background, led to a change in leadership and an eventual decline in membership.¹⁷

In 1956, Hal Call became the president of the society, and by 1961 he decentralized the society so that all of its chapters became separate organizations within the State of California.¹⁸ Decentralization led to the collapse of the Mattachine Society, leaving behind the Daughters of Bilitus, a social group for lesbian women, founded in 1951.¹⁹ These organizations never had extremely large memberships over their lifespans, each organization only having a few hundred members,²⁰ and they were not as radical as the later liberation movement.²¹ But they sowed ideological seeds within gay and lesbian communities in California and across the United States, laying the foundation for later movements by demonstrating that gays and lesbians could come together and make sure that "unjust laws would crumble."²² Activists built Gay Straight Alliances, including the first iteration of Saluki Rainbow Network, on this foundation, and the movement spawned by the riots at Stonewall.²³ In fact, the Mattachine Society served as the inspiration for the first student gay-rights organization.²⁴ The other spark, the Stonewall riots, inspired the first gay straight alliances.

The events that occurred at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York, took place between late June and early July 1969.²⁵ Stonewall Inn, prior to June 1969, was a mafia-run gay bar that saw hundreds of patrons each night.²⁶ To Martin Boyce and Dick Leitsch, who are former frequenters of Stonewall Inn, the bar was "like a watering hole in the savannah," as many considered gay bars the social centers of gay life during that time.²⁷ For many, gay bars like the Stonewall Inn were a sanctuary. Despite the presence of societies such as

the Mattachine and Daughters of Bilitus, homosexual men and women faced persecution during the 1950s and 1960s. Homosexuality became criminalized (Illinois became the first state to decriminalize it in 1962)²⁸ and medicalized, with many states sending homosexual individuals to mental institutions for being “sexual psychopaths.”²⁹

During the 1960s, governmental officials, such as New York City’s mayor, came under significant pressure to crack down on the homosexuals in the city. This led to numerous police raids on gay bars during that time, which in turn led to many arrests.³⁰ In an interview featured in David Carter’s Documentary *Stonewall Uprising*, law professor William Eskridge stated, “at the peak, as many as five hundred people per year were arrested for the crimes against nature, and between three thousand and five thousand five hundred people per year arrested for various solicitation or loitering crimes.”³¹ Many of these solicitation arrests were for the solicitation of sex and alcohol.³² Loitering crimes included frequenting the Mafia-run Stonewall Inn.³³ In other words, police arrested between three thousand and five thousand five hundred people in New York City each year for being homosexual, or for going to gay bars such as the Stonewall Inn.

Undoubtedly, this caused tensions between police and the gay and lesbian community, especially because police entrapped people prior to arresting them, or raided gay bars when they were full of people.³⁴ Stonewall Inn had been raided several times during this period, however the raid in June 1969 ended up differently than the previous raids. Instead of a routine bust, one patron stated that this police raid was different, as “you could feel the electricity going through people. You could actually feel it. People were getting really, really pissed and uptight.”³⁵ The crowd was much livelier that night, and refused to vacate the bar peacefully as they did other times. The tipping point, according to Lucian Truscott, a local newspaper reporter who was there that night, was when “A rather tough lesbian was busted in the bar and when she came out of the

bar she was fighting the cops and trying to get away. And the harder she fought, the more the cops were beating her up and the madder the crowd got.”³⁶ The crowd, though already quite rowdy, reached the point of no return as the police beat the woman.

However, Sylvia Rivera, another Stonewall patron, stated that an African American transgender woman named Marsha P. Johnson,³⁷ as well as drag queens such as Zazu Nova Queen of Sex, started the scuffle.³⁸ Author David Carter affirms this, stating that the riots began after Marsha P. Johnson threw a shot glass into a mirror at the club while shouting, “I got my civil rights!”³⁹ People soon referred to this event as: “... [The] shot glass heard round the world.”⁴⁰ After the shot glass incident, other patrons, including Puerto Rican transgender woman Sylvia Rivera, joined Johnson.⁴¹ In addition to the Stonewall Inn’s gay patrons, many other African American and Latina drag queens and transgender individuals followed Rivera and Johnson’s lead, and participated in the rioting.⁴²

As the night went on, many people reported that some individuals threw pennies at police,⁴³ while others verbally attacked the police calling out phrases like “gay power” and “faggot cops.”⁴⁴ Eventually, the raid turned into physical violence, with drag queens knocking police out with their heels, and other patrons kicking police.⁴⁵ Soon, other rioters tried to get inside the Stonewall Inn after a number of police officers barricaded themselves inside.⁴⁶ According to John O’Brien, a Stonewall patron, “Our goal was to hurt those police. I wanted to kill those cops for the anger I had in me. And the cops got that. And they were lucky that door was closed, they were very lucky.”⁴⁷ It is evident that chronic mistreatment had fed up patrons like O’Brien. Enough anger and resentment turned to violence within them. As the crowd grew violence escalated. The tactical police arrived, and forced the crowd back from Stonewall Inn. The police’s strategy did not work for long, as the patrons of Stonewall eventually surrounded

them on all sides.⁴⁸ Crowds mocked the police singing: “We are the Stonewall girls. We wear our hair in curls. We wear no underwear. We shave our pubic hair. ... We wear our dungarees. Above our nelly knees!”⁴⁹ In response, the tactical police charged the singers, beating them down until eventually the crowd dispersed.

The following night, however, the Stonewall Inn opened again, with supporters such as the Black Panthers and anti-Vietnam protesters joining in the riot. Once again, the police arrived on the scene.⁵⁰ Lucian Truscott, also there the second night, related the crowd’s mentality stating, “They think that they could disperse us last night and keep us from doing what we want to do, being on the street saying I’m gay and I’m proud? Just let’s see if they can.”⁵¹ Building on the energy from the previous night, the confident crowd did not want police to silence or jail them for being gay, or for being proud of their homosexuality. Their words echoed those of the people in the Mattachine and Daughters of Bilitus Societies, only with a more radical and intense presence. After the riots, Danny Garvin, a patron of the bar stated that gay people “became a people.” Continuing, he recalled, “We didn’t necessarily know where we were going yet, you know, what organizations we were going to be or how things would go, but we became something I, as a person, could all of a sudden grab onto.”⁵² Right after the riots, not everyone knew what would come for those in the LGB community. All they knew was that they felt a connection with others like them and felt that for the first time in a while, there was something tangible in the community to hold on to. Stonewall, in essence, changed the direction of the gay liberation movement,⁵³ making it focused on pride and community.⁵⁴

Author John D’emilio wrote:

Gay liberation propelled hundreds of men and women to act ... but two decades of work by homophile activists had made the individuals who were ready to respond. At the time of the Stonewall riot ... homosexuality had already ceased

being an invisible phenomenon and gay men and lesbian women more easily participated in the collective life of gay subculture.⁵⁵

In other words, after Stonewall, people in the gay liberation movement were ready to respond and advocate for change as they participated in the LGB community. Readiness and anger that came from the Stonewall riots led many people, especially college students, to join and officially organize and create a community. It is at that time that many of the GSAs that exist on college and university campuses today came into being.

In April 1964, Columbia College (New York) recognized the first collegiate GSA in the United States as an official student organization: the Student Homophile League of Columbia College.⁵⁶ Though established prior to the Stonewall Riots, its main goal became a means to serve as “a vehicle for students of all orientations to combat homophobia.”⁵⁷ Between 1969 and 1970, other similar organizations, some more radical than others, appeared on the campuses of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, San Francisco State University, Rutgers University, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Boston University, University of Minnesota, and the City College of New York.⁵⁸ Some of these organizations were quieter in their activism prior to the Stonewall Riots.⁵⁹ A large number of GSAs formed after Stonewall as a response to a changing political climate, as well as to the need for equality and action against homophobia.⁶⁰ Duke University’s first GSA, the Duke Gay Alliance, first formed in the fall of 1972, stating in a campus newspaper that “The changes since the 1969 Stonewall Riot are epochal; with Harvard, Princeton, MIT, etc., etc., in the van on campus gay liberation, could Duke be far behind?”⁶¹ Importantly, the organization made it clear that it formed not as a direct result of the Stonewall riots, but because of the larger gay liberation movement on college campuses. Within the Midwest, the University of Michigan established a chapter of the Gay Liberation Front on its campus in March 1970, in order to combat stereotypes of gay people, fight homophobia, and

combat the mental illness model of homosexuality.⁶² The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign founded a chapter of the Gay Liberation Front in August 1972.⁶³

On April 14 1971, activists founded the Gay Liberation Organization (GLO) at Southern Illinois University's Carbondale campus.⁶⁴ The organization, inspired by the fiery community at Stonewall and organized in order to create a place to support gay men, became the Saluki Rainbow Network many years later.⁶⁵ Founded by John Taylor, James Wright and five others,⁶⁶ this particular organization is one of the oldest GSAs in the United States.⁶⁷ Later on in the 1970s, GLO changed its name to Gay Peoples' Union (GPU), and when more women joined the organization, Gay People's Union changed its name to Gay and Lesbian Peoples' Union (GLPU).⁶⁸ In the 1980s, Gay and Lesbian Peoples' Union sponsored speeches in the free forum areas of SIUC's campus, created a support hotline known as the Pride Line, and became more of an AIDS advocacy and awareness group.⁶⁹

In the 1990's Gay and Lesbian Peoples' Union changed its name to Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Friends (GLBF), and then fell into a brief period of inactivity before emerging in 1993 with a renewed commitment to the campus LGB community. In 1999, Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Friends changed its name to Saluki Rainbow Network (SRN), in order to become more inclusive.⁷⁰ During the 1980s and 1990s, SRN (and its previous iterations) partook in many activities both on campus and in the Carbondale community at large. Using primary sources from the SRN office (including phone logs and early websites), as well as secondary materials, in conjunction with outside sources on LGBT history, one can examine the effects of the SRN on the local LGB community during this time period.⁷¹ Those effects include the building of a community, and increasing public awareness of health issues, such as HIV/AIDS.

While reading a book on LGBT history for this project, a flier dropped from the pages. Reading “Gay and Lesbian Peoples’ Union.” The untitled flier presents information on what the organization does. Included in the list are women’s and men’s support groups, a speaker’s bureau, and social events.⁷² The words “you are not alone!” fill the bottom portion of the flier.⁷³ The words “you are not alone” in the context of being printed by Gay and Lesbian Peoples’ Union informs the reader that they are not the only LGB person on SIUC’s campus. Backed up by a list of activities by the organization, such as maintaining support groups and the holding of social events, the flier sends the message that there is a community of LGB students on campus within GLPU. This is one of the effects the Saluki Rainbow Network (or GLPU, as it was called in the 1980s) had on the LGB community during this period: the building of a LGB community on campus, with other LGB college students. According to the Daily Egyptian article “Saluki Rainbow Network Celebrates 33rd Year,” GLPU had “plentiful” amounts of social activities for the LGB community during the 1980s, and became one of the original sponsors of the “Take Back the Night” march, which protested violence against women.⁷⁴ Gay and Lesbian Peoples’ Union not only hosted events for the LGB community, but also participated in events that promoted the wellbeing of women in the community.

Other events held by Saluki Rainbow Network and its previous iterations included weekly meetings⁷⁵ and yearly Gay Awareness weeks. Organizers filled one of those weeks, from April 7-14, 1991, with activities for the community. For example, the flier advertises events such as workshops on building bridges between LGB and heterosexual communities, as well as a semiformal dance.⁷⁶ Those events, while more social in nature than many of the other workshops and panels listed during that week, sought to bring not only people within the LGB community together, but people from the heterosexual community, as well. While there is no record of how

successful events such as the ones held during 1991's Gay Awareness Week were, organizers meant for the events to help establish and bring together a community of LGB and pro-LGB people.

Weekly meetings also helped to build and foster a community on SIU campus. Upon examination of the Pride Line phone records from the late 1980s and 1990s, one finds that many of the people who called the phone line were looking for friends, or some sort of community to belong to. Line workers recommended that all callers come to Saluki Rainbow Network meetings. In records from fall 1997, eight phone calls that semester mentioned the weekly Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Friends meetings to the caller explicitly stated by the line worker. On September 16, 1997, line worker Aaron wrote that the caller was "talking about loneliness and would try to make the meeting."⁷⁷ Informed of the GLBF meeting, the caller said that he would try to attend. We don't know for sure if the caller indeed attended that GLBF meeting, but it is clear that the Saluki Rainbow Network offered him the opportunity to become a part of a community of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals on campus. In another instance, on February 1, 1988, line worker Bill wrote that a gay male graduate student was looking for information on this support group, and was "looking forward to joining again."⁷⁸ The graduate student, having previously been in support groups for gay men, certainly found the support that he needed in the group, and would have found himself in a community of people like himself. Other Prideline records demonstrate the interest of people in attending these weekly meetings, even if they were afraid,⁷⁹ because they wanted to meet people similar to themselves.⁸⁰ Through Pride line records such as these, it is evident that Saluki Rainbow Network and its predecessors actively worked to build a community of LGB people at SIU. At the same time, this organization also wanted to build a community of LGB people that extended beyond the SIU campus.

During its history, Saluki Rainbow Network and its predecessors held many events that aimed to build a larger LGB community by either working with other collegiate GSAs, or other local Southern Illinois LGB groups. One particularly important event that SRN (then GLBF) hosted and participated in with other collegiate GSAs was the 1995 Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay College Conference (MBLGCC), which is a college conference held yearly for college students in the LGB community from the Midwest and beyond.⁸¹ The goals of the third annual MBLGCC (now MBLGTACC, or Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender and Asexual College Conference) were to provide information on “topics such as networking, outreach, forming pride weeks, dealing with college administrators, legal rights, AIDS/HIV on campus, legal rights, [and] group organization,” as well as to gather for entertainment and keynote speakers. The conference sought to bring together at least five hundred LGB college students from across the United States⁸² in order to build “queer success in the Midwest,” the theme of the conference.⁸³ In fact, the conference brought three-hundred college students to SIU from across thirty states.⁸⁴

While the number of students that actually attended the conference was smaller than the expected number, the conference succeeded in bringing LGB college students together. In bringing these students together, they were able to build a community that extended beyond SIU. Conference organizers gave students the chance to gather together to learn about issues relevant to their lives, and to get to know each other by participating in the conference events. Other GSAs across the country spent time building a larger collegiate LGB community during this period as well, either by coming to the 1995 Midwest Bisexual Lesbian and Gay College Conference, or by grouping up with other GSAs, such as Duke University, which hosted the Southeastern Conference for LGB College Groups, in 1998. Duke University was also a member

of the statewide North Carolina Federation of Campus Gay and Lesbian Organizations during that time.⁸⁵ It is evident that both Duke University's GSA and the different iterations of Saluki Rainbow Network both actively worked to build a community, not only on their own respective campuses, but also within the nationwide collegiate LGB community.

Organizations such as Saluki Rainbow Network built a community of students, both on and off campus, during the 1980s and 1990s. In the 25th anniversary booklet for Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Friends, one finds a large sampling of what the community looked like during that time. Filled with images of groups of people smiling and laughing as they posed for the camera,⁸⁶ the centerfold demonstrates that this organization succeeded in building a community. Holding events such as "Take Back the Night," students who organized and attended Gay Awareness Weeks, meetings of the MBLGACC, and Saluki Rainbow Network built a community of LGB students on campus. Upon building this community, SRN and its previous iterations worked to increase awareness and knowledge about the things that affected those in the LGB community during the 1980s and 1990s, including health issues such as HIV/AIDS.

An American Red Cross Manual from the 1990s remains in the current Saluki Rainbow Network office. While outdated, the manual covers the basic information a person would need to have in order to teach a course on HIV/AIDS.⁸⁷ It covers pedagogical approaches on how to teach HIV/AIDS through differentiated means of instruction, such as via lecture or simulation.⁸⁸ The manual would prepare any individual to talk about the disease. During the 1980s and 1990s, Saluki Rainbow Network ensured that those in the LGB community had the information that they needed about HIV/AIDS, thus allowing them sufficient information on this health issue. This service was absolutely necessary at that time, as the AIDS epidemic had become a global health crisis during the 1990s.⁸⁹

At the time, many people, especially gay men, contracted the disease. As researchers discovered HIV/AIDS in 1981,⁹⁰ not many people had adequate information on it. In fact, Gay Lesbian Bisexuals and Friends received numerous phone calls in the late 1980s and early 1990s regarding HIV/AIDS. Many of the phone calls involved the caller asking what AIDS was, and how people contracted it. For example, a caller in 1988 wanted to know “how AIDS was contracted, and how safe anal and oral sex were.”⁹¹ Phone line workers during that time provided information to callers, and even referred them to other services, such as the then Wellness Center or the Jackson County Health Department.⁹² Other callers talked about being worried about their friends, because their friend had contracted HIV/AIDS. One caller from 1993 stated that his friend had AIDS and was dying.⁹³ Another caller stated, “my best friend just died of AIDS. I don’t know what AIDS is.”⁹⁴ Even though those types of calls, where a friend of an HIV/AIDS positive individual would call in, were infrequent during this time, it certainly makes a statement about how much the rest of SIU’s campus knew about Saluki Rainbow Network’s (then GLBF) knowledge of HIV/AIDS. The campus at large had a good idea about how much the organization knew, as it often partook in events that would raise awareness about HIV/AIDS.

During the 1980’s, Gay Lesbian Peoples’ Union held a “die in” in the middle of the Student Center in order to “dramatize the effects on the gay community of the AIDS epidemic.”⁹⁵ During events such as this one, students outside the LGB community were able to see and learn about HIV/AIDS, in addition to finding out about what the organization knew about the disease. Given the information that the organization provided to those within the LGB community and beyond, as well as the informational events it held, Saluki Rainbow Network played a role in making the community more knowledgeable about this particular health issue. On other campuses, such as that of Duke University, similar actions took place.⁹⁶ One of the

effects of college GSAs, especially Saluki Rainbow Network, was that the community increased knowledge and information about HIV/AIDS. While this organization contributed to the community in other ways as well during the 1980s and 1990s, this was perhaps one of its most significant contributions.

Owing their beginning to early societies, such as the Mattachine and the Daughters of Bilitus, as well as to the riots at Stonewall, most collegiate Gay Straight Alliances emerged during the 1970s. Those groups, once established, provided support and information for their community during the 1980s and 1990s. GSAs such as Saluki Rainbow Network and its previous iterations built communities where they did not previously exist. They also provided the people with information on health issues, such as HIV/AIDS. Those actions significantly impacted the community by enabling its members to come together as a more knowledgeable body. There are still many avenues for further studies on Saluki Rainbow Network and other collegiate GSAs. While available evidence and current research on this topic are quite limited, it is clear that GSAs significantly impacted those they worked with during the 1980s and 1990s. What is more, SIU still feels the full impact of SRN to this day. Saluki Rainbow Network continues to follow in the footsteps of its predecessors in community building, and serving as a point of reference for issues that affect the LGBT community.

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- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ People did not use the abbreviation LGBT until the late 1980s or early 1990s, see Michelle A. Marzullo, "LGBT/Queer Sexuality, History of, North America," *The International Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality* (2015): 650. As LGB is the correct initialism for the period discussed in this paper, references to what is now known as the LGBT community will be referred to as the LGB community.
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- ¹³ Ibid., 29.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 24.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 25.
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- ¹⁷ Ibid., 73-86.
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- ⁴⁹ Dubermin, *Stonewall*, 201.
- ⁵⁰ Carter, *Stonewall Uprising*.
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- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ D'emilo, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 249.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
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- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
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