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Above: Participants at first Baltimore Gay Pride celebration hold "Baltimore Gay Love" balloons at Mt. Vernon Square, 1975.



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the activists

The Activists:

The early days of the LGBTQ+ Movement in Baltimore

a gay lit history zine number six



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People in our community rarely get an opportunity to learn our history, so I want it to be as available as I can make it. I also want to make it fun, a lot of this history is really ridiculous in a sort of melodramatic, campy way.

If you want to get into the nitty-gritty, if you want nuance, and you don't mind reading something a little more serious and dry, you should check out my website at www.mdhistory.gay, it has longer, boringer, more academic articles I adapt these from. If you like it, please let me know! If you don't, well, you can't say I didn't warn you

If you have questions about these stories or queer history in general, I can be reached through my history Instagram:

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Celebrating the passage of the Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights Bill at the Hippo, 1988. At front are Richard Oloizia (left), Ann Gordon (center), and Goldie Mason (right).

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This zine is about the formation of some of Baltimore's earliest LGBTQ+ activist and community organizations. Our local history is unique in a lot of ways, some good, some bad. Baltimore was late to the game, for one. Our first stable gay rights organization didn't form until 1975, well after similar groups existed in most other East Coast cities.

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But we were also significantly more diverse than the rest of the gay movement at the time, and benefited tremendously from a wealth of Black leadership that organizations in other cities lacked. The lesbian community was significantly more organized than in many places. And many of the bitter ideological splits that tore apart organizations in other cities either passed Baltimore by or played out with much less damage.

To understand what happened here, we need to zoom out for a moment and look at what was happening nationally.

In 1968, there were somewhere between one and two dozen organizations advocating for gay rights in America. The most visible LGBTQ+ organized political action was a yearly protest in Philadelphia where several



I used to ask these folks what lessons they would have for today's activists. I got a lot of different answers, most of which you can hear online. But these days, I feel like those questions miss the point. The main lesson to take away is this: these activists succeeded because they saw the problems their communities faced and mobilized those same communities to solve them. We face new problems today, and our community is different, larger, and more diverse than ever. We can take lessons from the past, but it's up to us to adapt them to the struggles of today and the modern LGBTQ+ community. Instead of lessons, I think they can remind us that our greatest strength is each other and our communities, and that building and mobilizing those communities is how we fight back.

So that's where it started, the LGBTQ+ movement in Baltimore. There are far more stories to be told about what's happened since. We haven't even gotten into the HIV/AIDS years. Those are stories that someone else may tell, or that I may want to tell later. But this is a series of zines where I've tried to show how queer and trans people have lived in Maryland long before modern language

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year-long tradition of Black LGBTQ+ leadership, one that continues to this day. It's clear that the best successes of the early movement in Baltimore have been in building and supporting Black leaders and activists in a deeply segregated, majority-Black city. This tradition continues in numerous organizations today, and needs to be celebrated and supported.

Baltimore activists also tended to be well-chiller? There was real skepticism toward rigid separatism or ideological purists. There was a willingness to work together despite disagreements or conflict that's been a source of pride for several people I've talked to. That's obviously not to say that there wasn't drama and conflict, there was plenty.

I've asked why this was to about 7 different people involved in these groups, and gotten 7 different answers. Some said it's Baltimore's working-class heritage, others the culture of the mid-Atlantic, and Paulette just told me, "I've been trying to figure that one out for forty years." I like a recent explanation I heard: that people in Baltimore just don't take themselves so goddamn seriously. Whatever the reason, it's a lovely part of their legacy and of our community's history.

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The shortest answer is Stonewall. The sight of hundreds of queer and trans folks, mostly kids, fighting back against the cops *and winning* certainly inspired people and led to a new, more confrontational sort of queer politics embodied in groups like the Gay Liberation Front. A core part of this was a shift from demands for privacy to the idea that LGBTQ+ people should be able to publicly live as they wish, and a call for queers to liberate *themselves* by "coming out" and living openly. That last part proved particularly effective.

But Stonewall wasn't the whole story. What was really happening was a generational shift. Earlier gay activists had drawn heavily from labor and civil rights movements, framing their arguments around privacy, citizenship, and respectability.

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Meanwhile, the women's liberation movement was bringing tens of thousands of young women together to connect about their shared experiences of gendered oppression. As they did this, many lesbians began to recognize each other and started becoming more visible in the movement. The mainstream women's movement wasn't thrilled—in 1969 Betty Friedan, then the head of the National Organization of Women, infamously described lesbians in the movement as “the lavender menace.”

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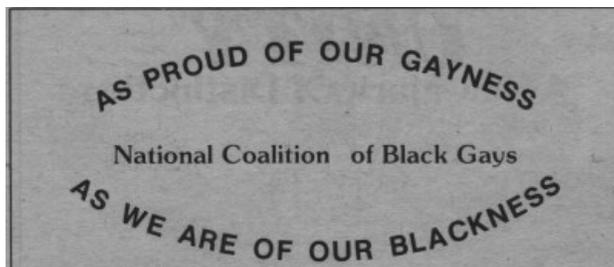
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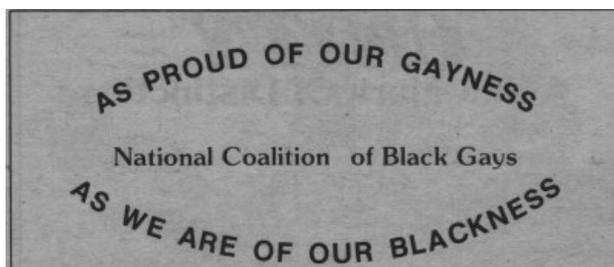


This is an extremely abridged version of the stories of these three groups and the incredible people who helped build them. There are many more individuals and groups who aren't in here because that's like a lot of work and it would be 100 pages long and I don't want to pay that much for paper and you can't make me.

There's plenty of lessons and things left to say about the movement for queer and trans rights in Baltimore. A lot of them aren't positive—things have hardly been smooth for the community center since its founding. But there are positive lessons, and two things deserve mention:

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Ultimately, the decimation of the Black middle class under Reagan and the horrible toll of the AIDS epidemic meant the organization's funding base had disappeared by the late 1980s, and it dissolved in the early 1990s. In its wake, however, were the hundreds of Black queer activists in cities across America who had built their own confidence as organizers and leaders with the group.

And that's how a group of activists in Baltimore and DC formed the first ever national organization for Black LGBTQ+ people and created a much-needed voice for some of the most underrepresented members of the community. It was a groundbreaking thing, to be willing to challenge homophobia in the Black community *and* racism in the gay community, and assert

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So what did all of this look like in Baltimore?..

First Starts:

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In 1972, Baltimore's first two openly queer organizations formed: the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), a church for and by LGBTQ+ people, and Diana Press, a collectively run lesbian publishing and printing house.

The MCC was especially important for many Black gays and lesbians, for whom faith and community were deeply intertwined. Many Black LGBTQ+ leaders were involved with the church, including Rev. Delores Barry and Elder Louis Hughes. Religious institutions offered many Black activists a space to build themselves and each other up as leaders.



Diana Press reflected a growing lesbian community centered in Waverly and Charles Village, which like other cities was emerging from Baltimore's women's liberation scene. The city was a hub for socialist feminism, home to the influential magazine *Women: A Journal of Liberation* and the Women's Union of

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The Coalition was one of the first, if not the very first, queer organization to mention bisexuals and trans people in their founding documents. Trans folks took active roles, such as Tammy Carnes Ball, who was the president of the Baltimore chapter of the Coalition.

The Coalition rejected the single-issue politics of the major gay rights groups, maintaining that the rights of Black LGBTQ+ people couldn't be protected without combating racism and sexism, fighting for prisoners and immigrants rights, economic transformation, and an end to US imperialism. They set up letter exchanges with Black LGBTQ+ prisoners and championed the cause of Simon Nkodi, a gay South African activist who was jailed for organizing against the Apartheid regime.

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In both DC and Baltimore, the Coalition worked to combat discrimination in gay bars, primarily focused on practices around carding. Particularly before photos were on Maryland licenses, Black and female patrons at certain bars would be told that they needed two or more forms of identification before getting admitted or served, while white male patrons were not. This could be egregious—Louis Hughes recalls trying to bring his 60-year-old mother to the Hippo once and being told she needed a second form of ID to verify that she was old enough to drink.

To prove the issue to the city and potentially courts, they worked with the Baltimore chapter of Black and White Men Together, a group for men in or interested in interracial relationships. Taking on two bars in Waverly, the Office (located in the current home of Red Emma's) and the Porthole, a number of times they got several couples together and sent in white

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Within these spaces, queer women began organizing explicitly lesbian projects. Diana Press came first, followed in 1974 by the Lesbian Community Center, which ran a phone line, published a calendar and newsletter, and hosted women's dances.

But the "gay/straight split" that rocked women's organizations in so many cities never quite manifested the same way here. This was in part because of the socialist politics of these groups. While the tensions between straight women and lesbians were just as present in Baltimore as elsewhere, a shared commitment to socialist politics and the needs of women workers pushed activists to work through tensions rather than walk away. As a result, lesbians shaped and had a visible and powerful influence in things like *Women: A Journal of Liberation*.

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The Baltimore Gay Alliance

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In 1972, Joseph Carroll, a part-owner of an after-hours gay club, attempted to start a chapter of the Gay Activist Alliance (a less radical offshoot of GLF). He was probably not the best person to be doing this for a few reasons. Like his possible connections to drug traffickers. And formerly being a leader of the neo-Nazi National States Rights Party. And being convicted of inciting a race riot in 1966. Anyway, a few months after he started the GAA, he was found dead in the trunk of his car, likely killed by the son of a gay bar owner, likely over heroin. And that was the end of the GAA.

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The day of the march, participants marched through the predominantly Black Shaw neighborhood before meeting the main procession, and were surprised at the positive reception they got. In the conference's wake, dozens of groups for LGBTQ+ people of color came together and the Coalition started growing beyond Baltimore and DC, with chapters forming in Detroit, Minneapolis, Atlanta, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

The Coalition recognized their importance in advocating for anti-discrimination protections, particularly in majority Black cities like Baltimore and DC, to dispel the idea that gay rights were a 'white thing,' and sent speakers to say as much in hearings. They helped queer students form gay student groups at

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So they made one.

Initially known as the Baltimore-DC Coalition of Black Gay Men and Women, the group became the National Coalition of Black Gays—later the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays—the first national organization of its kind.

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They say that the third time's the charm.

In 1975, flyers appeared at Leon's and other gay bars advertising a meeting to create a new gay political group. This time it wasn't a collective of flaky gay hippies or a reformed neo-Nazi/drug trafficker. Instead it was held exactly where you would expect to find such a meeting: the house of a heterosexual ex-nun from Philadelphia. Her name was Shawn Dougherty, and she had reached out to prominent Philly gay activist Mark Segal and asked his support to create a "straights for gays" group (a la PFLAG). He responded by suggesting, "lets try a 'gays for gays' group first."



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In 1975, flyers appeared at Leon's and other gay bars advertising a meeting to create a new gay political group. This time it wasn't a collective of flaky gay hippies or a reformed neo-Nazi/drug trafficker. Instead it was held exactly where you would expect to find such a meeting: the house of a heterosexual ex-nun from Philadelphia. Her name was Shawn Dougherty, and she had reached out to prominent Philly gay activist Mark Segal and asked his support to create a "straights for gays" group (a la PFLAG). He responded by suggesting, "lets try a 'gays for gays' group first."

About a dozen people attended, and got to work. After that first meeting, they met for three years afterward in activist Dana Rethmeyer's apartment at 928 N Charles St. What's important to know about this—it literally has come up in every interview I've done with people who were there—is that it was really, really, really small. At first people were crowded onto Dana's bed due to lack of seating. Eventually, as the group grew, the bed was propped up against the wall to make more room on the floor.

There's one other thing that comes up in every interview I've done with anyone who was there is the sense of excitement, of exhilaration, and of pure joy that people felt coming out of these meetings. People often get rightfully excited by the political legacy of gay liberation—its alignment with the Black Panthers, anti-capitalism, and critique of patriarchy—that they forget how powerful the personal and emotional aspect of liberation was. These activists weren't just starting an organization—they were imagining a future where they could live openly in Baltimore without shame and lifting a huge weight and burden from their future.

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After the anti-discrimination ordinance was passed, activists quickly pivoted towards getting a similar measure passed at the state level. Together with activists from across Maryland, they fought for another decade to get the state on board. Once again, they faced open hostility and condescension. State politicians would turn their chairs and face the wall when queer people testified at hearings. Maryland finally passed protections in 2001.

The organization that came out of these efforts reorganized as Equality Maryland, and in 2016, merged with the Free State Legal Project to create Free State Justice, our state's LGBTQ+ legal advocacy organization.

The Coalition:

BGA wasn't the only historically significant LGBTQ+ group to come out of Maryland in this era. In 1978, at the Columbia apartment of ABilly Jones-Hennin, Black queer activists from Baltimore and DC gathered, including Baltimore activists Louis Hughes, Rev. Delores Barry, and John Gee. These activists recognized that many in their communities would only feel comfortable working with groups or events that were clearly Black-identified.

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With much of the group's work now being done in the community center, the BGA itself turned toward anti-discrimination legislation. Three attempts were made, with failed attempts in 1980 and 1984, before finding success under newly elected mayor Kurt Shmoke in 1988. For years BGA activists and their broader coalition, called the Baltimore Justice Campaign, lobbied city counselors, published articles, attended hearings, and held protests.

They consciously pursued an "inside-outside" strategy to pressure lawmakers, allowing the more and less confrontational sides of the movement to build off each other. The "outside" group was the radicals, the guys in leather, and other "rabble rousers." The "inside" group were the more respectable activists, who would demand the same things as the outside group, but present themselves as the voices of reason to the politicians, saying, as activist Richard Oloizia once put it to me, "You want to deal with us because if you don't deal with us, then you get to deal with them. And they, as you can see, are much nastier and more confrontational."

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The activists named the organization, wrote up bylaws (of note here is Jim Becker, who was a law student and wrote most of the language), and elected a president: Paulette Young, a Black lesbian who had participated in the LCC and had experience in local civil rights, women's liberation, and anti-war movements. At a time when the gay and lesbian movement was well-known to be dominated by white men, the Baltimore Gay Alliance stood out with a wealth of Black leaders early on like Paulette, Louis Hughes, Silas White and Andre Powell, and lesbian activists such as Kathy Valentine, Gail Vivino, and Debbie Kachelries.



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munity that the BGA was organizing in was the predominantly white part of it. Tensions around some gay male activists' attitudes towards women came up frequently. But having a more diverse leadership meant that these tensions were generally better handled and less severe than they were in other cities.

The first few months of the BGA's existence were a whirlwind. Before their second meeting, they had started a 24/7 phone line to help queer people who didn't know anyone in the community or needed resources. It's important to note that both they and the earlier LCC did this as the very first order of business, because it was an essential service. Calls came from isolated queers in rural Maryland, people in crisis over their faith and their sexuality, lesbian mothers fighting custody battles in a hostile and openly homophobic court system, all needing resources and community support. This work mattered.

In those first few months, they started a newspaper and had a visible presence at public events. They organized the city's first Pride celebration, a small gathering around the Washington Monument in Mount Vernon Square where they released balloons

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