

How the Pride March Made History

Fifty years after the first march, prominent organizers and activists tell its story and talk about how it spread across the globe.

By David Kaufman

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This article is part of our latest Pride special report, featuring L.G.B.T.Q. voices on the challenges and possibilities of these troubled times.

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the first Pride march, which was held in New York City on June 28, 1970. The event — officially known as the Christopher Street Liberation Day March — was spearheaded by a group of activists that included Craig Rodwell, Fred Sargeant, Ellen Broidy, Linda Rhodes and Brenda Howard, for the first anniversary of the Stonewall uprising.

The march's route covered about 50 blocks and drew just a few thousand participants. Though the numbers were small, marches in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles that year eventually led to hundreds of Pride parades. We asked organizers, activists and participants to recollect the evolution of events around the world. Interviews have been condensed and edited for length and clarity.



Two pioneering transgender activists, Marsha P. Johnson, left, and Sylvia Rivera, holding sign, at the Christopher Street Liberation Day march in 1973. Leonard Fink Photographs, The LGBT Community Center National History Archive

Mark Segal

Early member of the Gay Liberation Front and marshal of the first Pride march

The Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day March was as revolutionary and chaotic as everything we did that first year after the Stonewall riots. The march was a reflection of us: out, loud and proud. We intended to march from Greenwich Village and up to Central Park. We didn't have a police permit, so no one knew exactly what would happen — no one knew the type of force that might greet us. So we held self-defense classes and learned how to protect ourselves. As a marshal, I especially had to know how to react and control the marchers if we were attacked. When we reached 23rd Street, I climbed up a pole, looked back and saw a crowd stretch all the way to

Christopher Street. Eventually we made it to Central Park, just like we had promised — and us activists transformed a movement from a few ragtag militants to thousand strong. As my friend Jerry Hoose used to say about that year, “we went from the shadows to sunlight.” Today, my original marshal’s badge is on display in the Smithsonian.

Karla Jay

Early member of the Gay Liberation Front and Radicalesbians and co-organizer of the first marches in New York and Los Angeles

It was a near miracle that the first Christopher Street West Parade in Los Angeles kicked off at all on June 28, 1970. Edward M. Davis, the police chief and a man of antiquated views and diction, told our organizing committee in early June that a L.G.B.T. march would “discommode the public” and that he’d have to allow “thieves and burglars” to parade next. He then slapped on several seemingly insurmountable impediments, such as million-dollar liability bonds. Legal or not, Davis could not stop a new militant identity on the rise. With last-minute court approval, on June 28 at 7 p.m., a motley group clocking in at exactly 1,169 folks stepped off joyously from Hollywood and Vine. Chanting gay liberation slogans, we wore Halloween costumes, our best drag, tie-dye T-shirts, or almost nothing. Homemade floats featured Vaseline jars and a crucified queer man. Amazons rode on horseback. Crowds 10 deep cheered as we raucously urged them to join us. For one day, we were victorious against the Ed Davises of the world, and no one seemed “discommoded” in the least.



ACT UP's float for Pride in New York in 1987 was designed to look like a concentration camp. Avram Finkelstein

John Kyper

Early member of Boston's Gay Liberation Front and an organizer of Boston's first Pride Parade

We held our first march in Boston in 1971 — a year after New York. The march began at a cabaret bar called Jacques — which is still there and still gay — and made three additional stops along the route where we read a series of demands. At the Boston Police Headquarters (then on Berkeley Street in the Back Bay) we demanded an end to police harassment and the threat of imprisonment; at the State House on Beacon Hill, we demanded our legal rights; at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral facing Boston Common, we demanded religious tolerance, and then we all headed to Boston Common itself where we held a small rally and a symbolic closet-bashing. Only about 200 showed up that first year and it just kept on growing bigger and bigger and bigger.

Leslie Scott Seale

L.G.B.T. activist

I grew up in Jersey City close to the PATH train and was lucky to find my first boyfriend in my high school sophomore homeroom class. He and I began to venture into Greenwich Village in the early 1970s and found our way to the second Pride March in 1971. The march, and era, felt new and exciting and helped us learn about ourselves at a time before cellphones and the internet — when L.G.B.T.s were mostly met with hatred and disgust. As we marched up to Central Park for speeches in the afternoon — before returning downtown to dance all night on Christopher Street — this early Pride truly felt like a blessing.



Pride in Paris in 1996. Francois Mori/Associated Press

Peter Tatchell

Co-founder of OutRage, a British L.G.B.T. activist group

The first Pride Parade in Britain took place in London in July 1972. I helped organize it, with other members of the Gay Liberation Front. In those days, most L.G.B.T.s were closeted and much of the public were ignorant or hostile. It was a gamble. The fear of arrest and violent attacks deterred many, and made us nervous. Not surprisingly, less than 1,000 people joined the march. But it felt revolutionary. Our chant of “gay is good” challenged the orthodoxy that gay was bad, mad and sad. The police hemmed us in. Some officers openly abused us. Bystanders shouted insults. A few threw coins and the police refused to arrest them. Some bystanders were supportive, but most gaped with disbelief that “faggots” would dare show their faces. It was scary but we were determined to be out and proud — and to demand our liberation.

Deacon Maccubbin

Former owner of Lambda Rising and organizer of Washington's first Pride events in 1975

The first Pride event in Washington, D.C., actually took place in my front yard on the corner of 20th Street and S Street in Dupont Circle. We were living just around the corner from Lambda Rising, the city's main L.G.B.T. bookstore and decided to hold a sort of block party that year. For weeks, we visited every business and resident on the street to get their permission, and all but one signed on. On Pride day, a local women's group hauled in some amplifiers and set up a portable stage. We'd advertised in D.C. bars along with *The Blade*, a local L.G.B.T. newspaper. Two dozen organizations set up tables and then we waited. Come start time, only 24 people had shown up and we worried no one else would arrive. Eventually, 2,000 people were clogging the street, including a fair number of journalists who we made sure didn't photograph the many closeted government workers in attendance. Within a few years, the event grew to three square blocks and 10,000 revelers, and eventually it moved to a nearby elementary school and was renamed the P Street Festival, which expanded Pride's reach to ultimately include the city's annual march and parade.



Pride in San Francisco in 2006. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

Jonathan Danilowitz

Co-organizer of Israel's first LGBT Pride Parade in 1979

More than 40 years after what turned out to be the first Pride parade not only in Israel but in the entire Middle East, my abiding memory is of a woman screeching at us in disgust. "How can they allow this nauseating spectacle?" she shouted. "What will happen to our children?" The "parade" was actually more of a public demonstration — in order to comply with police regulations concerning organized events, we had to sing as much as march. Only about 75 participants showed up that day, but the local media took it all in. They were even quite polite. Today, Tel Aviv's annual Pride parade is one of the country's great summer attractions — with an estimated 250,000 participants each year. Jerusalem soon followed suit with its own Pride parade in 2002 — while other, smaller Israeli cities began to mount Pride events later on. All of this gives the word "pride" tremendous new meaning for me — especially since it seems that "our children" survived very nicely, thank you.

Avram Finkelstein

Founding member of Silence=Death Collective and Act Up

I was a member of Act Up's march committee and we had discussed a number of things to make a statement about AIDS during the Pride March in 1987 — perhaps black T-shirts or black balloons. We ultimately embraced the idea of a float designed like a concentration camp. It was constructed in a day in the artist Mark Simon's studio in Williamsburg. The materials we used were relatively simple — gray plastic, wire and pieces of wood — so I was surprised at how imposing and frightening it felt. On the day of the march, some of our members posed as guards with masks and rubber gloves, others — some unable to walk, some with H.I.V. — sat on the float as “prisoners.” We began the march with 50 protesters, but as we made our way down Fifth Avenue so many people joined us that our contingent stretched four blocks long. Exactly at noon, in the middle of Fifth Avenue, we staged a “die-in” — a moment of silence as we lay in the street. In that instant, we stole Fifth Avenue from the city for our own purposes and needs and fury. As I looked around, surrounded by “dead” bodies, I knew we would never be silent again. And we weren't. The march marked a moment of transition for ACT UP and the following day's meeting was packed with hundreds of people.



Pride in Bangalore, India, in 2009. Jagadeesh Nv/EPA, via Shutterstock

Tommy Hom

L.G.B.T. activist, former board member and chair of Stonewall 50

I was 17 when I attended my first march back in 1984 — and have been to every one since then. Things were a lot smaller in the beginning, but by the time the 1990s came around, the parade grew massively as people became more comfortable with who they were and being visible. The parade especially grew during the 1990s when, despite the AIDS crisis, it began to feel far more diverse. Groups that might previously have been left behind — folks with disabilities, people of color — found their place in the parade amid increasing media attention. Perhaps the biggest addition to the event was the arrival of the Pride Fest and Dance Pier. Dancing along the water might seem frivolous, but we often forget that dancing was illegal in bars up until just a few years ago.

James Green

Professor of modern Latin American history at Brown University and co-organizer of Brazil's first Gay Pride march

I lived in São Paulo during the dictatorship of the late 1970s. I became a founding member of the Brazilian L.G.B.T. movement and participated in the country's first demonstration against police repression in 1980. It was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life. Earlier that year, when we thought how to commemorate Stonewall, we could hardly imagine the possibility of actually mobilizing 1,000 during the dictatorship. Fifteen years later, in Rio, L.G.B.T. groups hosted the 17th international conference of ILGA (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association), and the energy of the international delegates who attended and the excitement of hosting the gathering only added to the drama of the country's first actual successful parade. A few years before, members of Argentina's movement wore masks to shield their faces — and identities — during their parade in Buenos Aires. So we produced hundreds of colorful masks because we assumed that many of our people in Brazil would refuse to march openly. But on the day of the parade, 2,000 of us marched along the white sandy beaches of Avenida Atlântica in Copacabana — and no one wore a mask. The fear was gone.



Pride in Beersheeba, Israel, in 2017. Ariel Schalit/Associated Press

Chiké Frankie Edozien

Author of "Lives of Great Men: Living and Loving as an African Gay Man"

I came to the U.S. from Nigeria to study in 1989 but did not make my way to New York City until a few years later. But once there, I was lucky to find a community of other gay African immigrants. This was important because we were not always at ease with the general African immigrant communities in New York because of our sexuality, and as foreigners, we did not easily assimilate with our "cousins," the African-Americans. Our little group would meet regularly and eventually we gave ourselves a name, Uhuru-Wazobia, which means "approaching strength" in mixed Swahili and a blend of Nigerian languages. For years, we'd all attended Pride marches together for fun and support, but in 2005 a group within our group chose to march in the Pride Parade holding the Uhuru-Wazobia banner, the first time an African L.G.B.T. contingent had ever participated in the event. Years later, I may no longer be at every Pride parade, but Uhuru-Wazobia certainly still is.

Chris Frederick

Executive director of NYC Pride, 2009-19

New York's World Pride celebration was a decade in the making. In 2009, we began to focus on the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and put in a formal bid to hold World Pride here in 2015. Four years later, over five million people showed up from around the world to celebrate — including 100 pride groups from around the world. As I stood there and watched them all march, it felt like a homecoming of sorts because New York was where Pride was born and New York helped inspire so many movements across the globe. I probably didn't sleep for a month before World Pride, but with my mother by my side watching it all unfold, it felt truly life-changing.



Pride in Birmingham, England, last year. Jim Wood/SOPA Images, via LightRocket, via Getty Images

Yanzi Peng

Director of LGBT Rights Advocacy China and a grand marshal for Pride 2020

I feel honored, surprised and privileged to be one of the grand marshals of this year's parade because we are not allowed to have pride celebrations in China. Which is why I am so proud of all that the L.G.B.T. community has accomplished in my country. Along with launching the first legal campaign against conversion therapy in 2013, we've mounted nearly a dozen additional court actions advocating against employee discrimination, media censorship and H.I.V. discrimination, and for marriage equality. We help our community with legal aid and encourage them to take action to protect and advocate for their own rights. We have a network of more than 100 lawyers in our L.G.B.T.-friendly lawyers network and more than 150 journalists have joined our ally media network. Serving as grand marshal in the New York event helps China's L.G.B.T. community to be seen all over the world — even if we're rarely seen in China.

Rebekah Bruesehoff

13-year-old transgender activist in Sussex County, N.J., and speaker at Youth Pride 2019

We spend so much of our year fighting for our rights, and Pride events give a chance to reflect on all that we've already accomplished and recognize the work that allowed us to get to where we are today. I remember when I participated in the Pride parade in Warwick, N.Y., in 2018 how amazing it felt to be in a space of light and joy. After months of protesting President Trump's anti-transgender policies, the parade helped me realize that celebration can also be an act of resistance.

Correction: June 17, 2020

An earlier version of this article referred incompletely to organizers of the first Pride march. They included Craig Rodwell, Fred Sargeant, Ellen Broidy, Linda Rhodes and Brenda Howard; Ms. Howard was not the sole organizer. The article also omitted a word from the title of a book by Chiké Frankie Edozien. The title is “Lives of Great Men: Living and Loving as an African Gay Man,” not “Lives of Great: Living and Loving as an African Gay Man.”

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