

35 Years after the First National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights

By Leila J. Rupp

It's been thirty-five years since the First National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, making it an appropriate moment to evaluate where the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement is now. In 1979, just 10 years after Stonewall, 2 years after Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign, and 1 year after the murder of Harvey Milk, more than a hundred thousand people gathered in Washington to demand equal rights for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. I went to the 1979 march with my lover, now my legally wedded "wife" (although, as a feminist, I don't like to use that term, given the history of wives' domination by husbands). We stayed in the apartment of my first woman lover (the relationships still overlapping a bit) so it was a very 1970s event in the personal as well as political sense.

But that's another story. What really matters about the thirty-five years since that march is how far we've come and how far we have to go. We hear a great deal these days about what has changed: gay men and lesbians serving openly in the military, same-sex couples rushing to the altar, positive representations of queer people in the media. But the official demands of the march—passage of a comprehensive lesbian/gay rights bill in congress, issuance of a presidential executive order banning discrimination based on sexual orientation, repeal of all anti-lesbian/gay laws, an end to discrimination in lesbian mother and gay father custody cases, and protection of lesbian and gay youth—remain mostly unmet.

ENDA, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, if signed into law, might have satisfied the first demand. ENDA finally passed in the Senate last fall, but it is now losing the support of gay organizations because of the broad religious exemptions with the potential to gut the bill,

given the Supreme Court decision in the Hobby Lobby case. President Obama signed an executive order adding transsexuals to those federal employees already protected on the basis of sexual orientation, and banning discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual identity by companies with federal contracts, going somewhat beyond the second demand. As for the other three—well, anti-gay laws remain on the books, lesbian mothers and gay fathers still can't count on a fair deal, and no one has yet figured out how to "protect lesbian and gay youth from any laws which are used to discriminate against, oppress, and/or harass them in their homes, schools, jobs, and social environments," as the final march demand put it.

And that's the demand I've been thinking a lot about lately as a historian and California resident. Not so much about protecting students from oppressive laws, but about what, if anything, they know about Anita Bryant, Harvey Milk, Stonewall, and marches on Washington. California's Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Responsible (FAIR) Act, signed into law in 2011, is the nation's first legislation requiring public schools to teach about the contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans alongside those marginalized by gender, ethnicity, race, and disability. This in contrast to Tennessee, for example, where the state legislature has considered a Classroom Protection Act, known as the "Don't Say Gay Bill," which would prevent teachers from talking about sexual orientation and even require them to notify parents if they suspect children might be queer.

Given the bullying that goes on in the schools and the high rate of suicide of queer youth, does education matter? You bet it does. When four gay or bisexual students in the Anoka-Hennepin, Minnesota, school district committed suicide and the school district's gag order prevented staff from talking about issues of sexual orientation, the National Center for Lesbian Rights and the Southern Poverty Law Center, supported by the Justice Department, filed and

won a lawsuit against the school district. The suit cited a California climate study that showed that *any* mention of queer people or issues increased student safety and improved the climate for queer students. Robert King, a teacher at Palisades Charter High School in southern California, tells a story about the impact of including LGBT content as part of one day's lecture on civil rights movements. He was talking about Stonewall when a student, Jack Davis, raised his hand and came out to the class. His classmates applauded, got up out of their seats, and hugged him. In an essay published later, Davis wrote that he had been "looking for a way to come out to everyone," and the mention of Stonewall gave him the opportunity. Walking out of class, the "weight of the world seemingly lifted from my shoulders ... and I was ecstatic."

If the mere mention of Stonewall in part of one lecture on one day can mean so much, just think what a transformed curriculum, not just in California, but across the country, could do. That would go a very long way toward crossing at least one of the demands from 1979 off the list.

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