

1973 Pride,
Cincy

I am truly amazed how far the LGBT community has broken down barriers in Cincinnati and the nation. We are 7 years into the repeal of the local Cincinnati Article 12 and we are now in the last days of President Clinton's Don't Ask Don't Tell Policy. We all know about Stonewall and Harvey Milk, but what about those brave-hearted activists right here in the Queen City who paved the parkway for us? Who were they and how amazing must their struggle have been to fight for the basic rights we take for granted today?

I had heard about Cincinnati's past anecdotally from friends who are senior members of our community. My ears always perk up at parties when I hear these men and women talk about our past. As a history geek and author, I really wanted to dive in and explore the beginnings of our own community's gay past. I think it's incredibly important as the world becomes easier for us, that we never forget the struggles our predecessors faced. What I didn't know is that this journey would begin outside the country, on a summer fun trip to Montreal with my buddies Dave and Matt to celebrate the Festivale Diversite.

I met a friend, Ryan, at one of the events. He and I were talking about the current state of our community and how our gay forefathers had to deal with police harassment. I related a story I had heard about these riverboat parties on the Ohio in Cincinnati where all the passengers were thrown in jail overnight and their full names printed in the next morning's Cincinnati Enquirer as degenerates. He said this story sounded very familiar and he thought he knew some people who were a part of that.

Long story short, I was introduced to two men - Richard Jazwinski and Karl Owens, who were part of the original 40 men in March of 1973 who marched in Cincinnati's first Gay Pride Parade, fully police-permitted, with a rally on Fountain Square. Richard is now a professor in Queens, New York, and Karl, a professor in Berlin, Germany. Both were excited to be considered part of history and have opened up their photobooks and their hearts to tell me their story.

Richard relayed he was part of one of those groups the early '70s who were thrown in the slammer after Simon Leis' guys arrested them all on the riverboat for 'patronizing an unlicensed bar'. The charges were later dropped, but harassment continued, and it led them to start a group called Cincinnati Gay Community. They thought it seemed a more suitable name to Cincinnati at the time rather than a radical group name like the Gay Activist Alliance.

The first 'outing' of the CGC was in 1972, the year before the first Cincinnati Gay Pride Parade, when they marched in an anti-war protest as 'The Cincinnati Gay Community Against the War.' Richard was featured in a Cincinnati Enquirer Sunday Magazine about the CGC pictured with full beard and overalls on the cover.

The CGC contacted City Council Members, and local religious leaders to appeal for help and support. Some community leaders were not so supportive. Charterite City Councilwoman Bobbie Stern argued that she didn't want to change clothes in a dressing room next to a transvestite in downtown department stores. Councilman Jerry Springer never accepted the invitation to come to a meeting of the Community, but Republican Councilman Guy Guckenberger came and was sympathetic to the cause. Cincinnati's Catholic archbishop at the time, Joseph Bernadin, crafted a letter of support to City Council on behalf of the Cincinnati Gay Community. Wow – the local Catholic archbishop who would become a Cardinal and on the road for succession to Pope John Paul II, supported our community? I am always amazed where and in what form we find our Community's allies.

The meetings of the early CGC were held at St. John's Unitarian Church in Clifton, when David Sammons was pastor. The church also sponsored dances and socials for the Community.

There are so many great stories of Cincinnati gay and gay-allied heroes and heroines like Richard and Karl. We as a community can find out more by interviewing our senior brothers and sisters and learning more about their struggle.



Early Members of the Cincinnati Gay Community in Eden Park, Cincinnati, Ohio – Spring 1973.