

Pride and Recovery as Acts of Resistance

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Every June, LGBTQ+ communities all over the globe plan marches, rallies and events to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion in Greenwich Village, New York City, in 1969. Stonewall was by no means the first act of queer resistance, but it remains a watershed event in the evolution of the LGBTQ+ social and political movement that has heralded action around civil rights and public acceptance.

The Stonewall Inn was a mafia-owned gay bar that experienced frequent police raids and customer arrests. On June 28, 1969, the mostly working-class patrons, fed up with continual police harassment, fought back in protest. Following this initial skirmish, word of mouth circulated around the Village, and the original protesters were joined by scores of community sympathizers, culminating in several days of demonstrations.

Stonewall was a game-changer, ushering in a refreshed resistance and bolder activism and giving exposure to communities that had long operated as secret societies. As “coming out of the closet” became a community priority, mechanisms for organizing and building community served to create a grassroots infrastructure of social support, services, and advocacy. Since that time, the LGBTQ+ movement has achieved major milestones and accomplishments: Challenging oppressive laws and legislation, confronting stigma and discrimination in health care policy, changing hearts and minds around the world, and creating inclusive culture and community for all queer-identified people.

Last year’s Pride Month took on heightened proportions, as it marked the 50th anniversary of Stonewall. This was a big deal – no, a *huge* deal – as communities around the world planned cultural events, gallery and museum exhibits, and educational and commemorative activities, in addition to the usual events that take place annually. Many of these events focused on history, paying homage to the community elders – both living and dead – who took courageous action before Stonewall, during the actual rebellion and in the community-building activities that followed. This sort of historical celebration is tremendously important for younger generations who have inherited the benefits of historical struggle, without realizing the full extent of its significance.

In stark contrast to last year’s over-the-top activities, Pride in 2020 will be quieter on the surface, due to COVID-19 stay-at-home and social-distancing policies. Most Pride events will not entail a public display of marching in the streets but will, instead, be translated into the technological venues in which we now come together. And while we will miss the bonding that happens when we are physically present with one another, we will draw upon our collective genius of adaptability and resilience to create demonstrations of solidarity and celebration on social media and online platforms.

Pride Month holds special meaning for me, because I stopped using alcohol and other drugs on June 28, 1992. Although my recovery journey began a full two years before that, my sobriety date began on Pride Sunday in New York City. My personal pride as a gay man has been built on the foundation of my recovery, informing the way I choose to present myself in the world and the ways in which I engage with my fellow citizens. A quest for honesty, clarity, and humility – gained through a recovery practice of self-reflection – has helped me develop a strong sober queer identity, a belief in the power of my authenticity and the courage to step forward.

Prior to Stonewall, public “gay life” was largely illegal and took place “on the downlow”: in bars, nightclubs and house parties. At such venues, social life and community gatherings were hinged on the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. This legacy of community life is still current, as many individuals’ first entry into the LGBTQ+ community is through the portal of a bar or club and substance use constitutes a community norm. This legacy, combined with the trauma that many community members have experienced in their lives, points to a greater prevalence of substance use consequences – including chaotic use and addiction – than is witnessed in the greater population.

A flipside to this legacy is one with far more positive aspects. As LGBTQ+ communities have historically faced abuse and neglect from mainstream systems and services, we have created infrastructure to ensure that our members are in good care. This realization came to a zenith during the AIDS epidemic, when the response from government, the media and the public amounted to little more than blatant neglect, hostile indifference, and public shaming. Devastated but undaunted, LGBTQ+ communities secured a network of supports and services on the ground, while raising a storm of political protest and activism.

This work extended to areas where substance use was being addressed – from LGBTQ+-proficient addiction treatment and harm reduction to queer-identified mutual aid groups – to support recovery from addiction and ensure a strong, sustainable queer recovery community. I am proud to be a member of this community, standing on the backs of queer men and women who have forged the path before me. In countless ways, they have demonstrated what my life as a gay man in recovery can be and continue to support me in my journey.

Considering the advances of the past 50+ years, we need to be vigilant in ensuring our accomplishments are not dismantled. It is important to remember that there are people who would like to see queer people wiped off the face of the planet. Twenty years ago, I led a LGBTQ+ recovery advocacy group that defined recovery as “anything that manifests a desire to live.” The intention of that definition – informed at the time by the multitude of deaths we had witnessed through the AIDS epidemic, but just as relevant now – was to establish the idea of recovery as not just a personal decision, but also as a political act in defiance of death. With this sentiment in mind, I consider every queer person in recovery an activist and every experience of queer recovery as an act of resistance.