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March 2019; Buffalo-Niagara LGBTQ History Project Minutes

Buffalo-Niagara LGBTQ History Project

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Buffalo Niagara LGBTQ History Project

Mar. 20, 2019

Dramatis Personae: Adrienne, Ana, Dean, Jeff, Carol, Faith, Michael, Nissa, Lydia, Catherine, Cory, Brian, Megan, Jessica, Christy

Animal Collective: A Review

Earlier this month, on March 9, the History Project presented Animal Collective: Pets as LGBTQ Chosen Family--our first project of the year. Animal Collective was a zine collecting stories about the relationships between LGBTQ Buffalonians and their pets, an exhibition of pet memorabilia, and an animal rescue and adoption event. The group spent the first several minutes reviewing the event--what went well, and what we can do better for next time.

Things We Did Well	Things We Could Improve
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We got over \$500 in admissions and merch proceeds.• People liked that we had large print zines available.• General feeling that the event was "super awesome."• The venue, Raqs Solidarity, was a good space for the event.• There was some live music, but it didn't overwhelm the event.• Saturday from 3 to 7 was a good time slot for the event.• We had a consistent crowd for the entire four hours of the event.• We had positive feedback from people who shared their stories and memorabilia for the event. Participants felt that it was meaningful to see their stories and objects displayed alongside others' stories and memorabilia.• The event started off our year of programming with a bang.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We still wish there had been adoptable cats available (but that was on Pets Alive, not on us).• People liked that we had large print zines--and they wish we had had more.• The admissions and merch table was far away from the entrance to the venue, so a lot of people missed it.• There was some discussion about event publicity. Michael said he didn't even know that the event was taking place because he was not on Facebook. The group did, however, advertise outside of Facebook--including through a press release, submitting the event to community calendars and mailing lists, and putting posters up. We could, perhaps, make more use of our email list, and start thinking of less conventional ways to market our events.• For future events, we need to do more timetabling, and create more intermediate deadlines. In this project, we overestimated the amount of time it would take us to do some tasks (interviewing, memorabilia collection) and underestimated the amount of time

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The zine was not only a beautiful product to release at the event, but a product that will carry us through the rest of the year. 	<p>it would take us to do some other tasks (transcription, zine design, mounting memorabilia). This led to two weeks of desperate overwork immediately preceding the event.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The open mic portion of the event fell through—it only really amounted to Abigayle singing. There was some discussion over whether the problem was that we didn't do enough to make the open mic happen, or whether the project we planned had too many parts to it.
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Our general takeaways from the event were as follows:

- For the next event, we will do more timetabling/create more intermediate deadlines.
- Jessica will take over the email list from Adrienne.
- We will think of other ways to market our events.

We also spent a bit of time discussing the future of our zine. Megan reports that Rust Belt Books would like to sell a few copies of the zine, and agreed to follow up with Rust Belt for more details. Dean will talk to Gutter Pop Comics, who sells zines. Lydia works at West Side Stories, and will talk to their bosses about carrying a few copies. Adrienne will talk to Burning Books.

Fall Project

Although the primary purpose of this meeting was to start brainstorming our summer project, we had some technical difficulties that we had to work out before we could move to that portion of the meeting. So, while some members of the group tried to make the TV connect to Jeff's presentation, the rest of us began to discuss how to approach our fall project.

According to the plan we made at the end of 2018, we will complete a project in October, and the project will either cover the topic of trans masculinity, or LGBTQ Buffalonians and the psychiatric profession. Adrienne opened this topic by proposing that some volunteers in the group undertake some preliminary research on these topics, with the assumption that we might be better able to choose a topic if we knew the quantity or quality of information available about both topics.

Some highlights of this conversation:

- Some members wanted to know what kind of event/final product we intended to produce in the fall, and we spent some time reviewing the types of projects we had

produced in the past. Nissa made the argument that the results of our research, and the nature of the info we uncovered, should probably dictate the shape of our final project. She also argued that the group should not be too concerned with repeating a project type, since differences in the types of info we collect for each project will probably make projects of similar genres adequately different from one another.

- There seems to be a shift in interest away from the psychiatric profession, toward a focus on trans masculinity. Jeff, Dean, and Adrienne all expressed an interest in pursuing a project about trans masculinity. Catherine, who was the primary proponent of a project on the psychiatric profession, says she cannot be as intensely involved in the History Project going forward, and wonders whether that shift should influence what topic we pursue.
- That said, some members of the group wondered whether we should pursue either of these project topics at all. A significant portion of the group suggested that instead of conducting research on a fall project, we should spread our Stonewall/MSNF programming throughout the summer and fall, much the same way we did with our She Walked Here programming last year. Approaching the same topic from multiple different ways, these members suggested, would help us prevent burnout.
- Even among those who were potentially interested in conducting preliminary research for a possible fall project, many asserted that they were too busy at the moment to conduct the necessary research. Most said that the earliest they could consider conducting more research is May.

Given these points, we decided to wait until May to revisit the question of whether we should research our proposed topics, or spread out our Stonewall/MSNF programming over a period of several months.

Stonewall Project

We began our discussion of our June project with a presentation by Jeff, who gave us a history of the Mattachine Society of the Niagara Frontier (MSNF), a Buffalo-based gay rights organization that operated from 1969 to 1984, and the role Stonewall may or may not have played in advancing local gay rights activism.

It's impossible to give Jeff's presentation justice in these minutes, and Jeff has the presentation notes available for anyone who wants to view them in more detail. However, here are some general points from that presentation:

- Jeff's basic argument was that the Stonewall riots are more of a mythic beginning to the gay rights movement than an actual, concrete beginning. Furthermore, if one looks at gay liberation movements in a mid-sized industrial city like Buffalo, one sees that a lot of movement-building was happening in these cities parallel to the growth of the gay liberation movement in coastal cities, rather than behind those cities,

inspired by them.

- On a national scale, Stonewall was actually a midpoint for the growth of the gay rights movement, not its beginning. Prior to Stonewall, there were two kinds of gay rights activism taking place. One movement, the homophile movement, took place predominantly in coastal cities, and mostly captured the imaginations of middle-class gays. Probably the most famous homophile organization was the Mattachine Society. Founded in the early 1950s by Harry Hay, a card-carrying Communist who believed in the development and celebration of an autonomous gay culture, the Mattachine Society was quickly taken over by assimilationists who kicked Hay out (he went on to found the Radical Faeries). As Madeline Davis and Liz Kennedy wrote in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, working class bar culture was also a culture of resistance that preceded Stonewall—though it's not usually recognized as a form of activism.
- The Mattachine Society of the Niagara Frontier (MSNF) was founded in 1969, and though it bears the name of a homophile organization, it actually operated more as a gay liberation organization. It can trace its origins back to both bar culture and the homophile movement. Jeff traces the origins of MSNF back to 1959, when Nelson Rockefeller was elected governor of New York. Upon election, Rockefeller immediately began a campaign against police corruption, which led to an upswing in bar raids and closures. For a period of two years before the founding of MSNF, there were no gay bars in Buffalo.
- More immediately, MSNF was founded shortly after the owner of a local juice bar invited Frank Kameny, a member of the Mattachine Society in Washington DC, to Buffalo. By this time, a number of Mattachine members, including Kameny, were getting fed up with the assimilationist bent of the homophile movement, and were advocating a more straightforwardly pro-gay ideological stance, as well as more militant forms of activism. Kameny came to Buffalo in December 1969 and encouraged gay activists to create an organization. The second meeting of MSNF took place in January 1970, and the organization incorporated in May 1970.
- Early MSNF meetings took place at a bar called The Avenue. Located at 70 Delaware Avenue, The Avenue was more or less where the City Court building is now, right next to the holding center. This made it vulnerable to raids. Eventually, meetings shifted to the UU church on Elmwood.
- The MSNF was in operation during the same period of time that the Rust Belt went through the process of deindustrialization.
- MSNF was an overwhelmingly white organization. As far as Jeff has been able to determine, there was only one Black person who became deeply involved in MSNF: Claude Gary, a big leatherman who loved to make people uncomfortable by kissing his (white) partner in public, but who lost his home and his job for being in a same-sex, interracial relationship. Ann Hubbard, in an interview with Madeline Davis,

once explained that Black people never joined MSNF because they were never asked to participate.

- MSNF was not the only gay liberationist organization in Buffalo. The group Radicalesbians formed in 1970, and UB had a branch of the Gay Liberation Front.
- MSNF played a role in the Robert Upplinger case, which fought anti-solicitation laws and gay entrapment.

With this information as a background, we began to brainstorm what we wanted our next event to look like. Here are some of the preliminary ideas we came up with:

- Jeff's presentation included a model of thinking about gay activism that homophile activist Dorr Legg created, titled "The Four Horsemen of the Gay Apocalypse." Dean really liked this model, and suggested that we have four days of events, using the Four Horsemen of the Gay Apocalypse as a narrative frame. Cory suggested that we present our programming over the four days that the Stonewall riots took place.
- Catherine really enjoyed Jeff's presentation, and suggested that something similar should be part of our programming. Christy said that a traditional lecture would be a good idea, but Jeff expressed the desire not to give a lecture all by himself. If there is something lecture-esque in our programming, he would like multiple History Project members to present it.
- Several members (particularly Carol and Jessica) expressed an interest in creating a project that is aimed at youth. Possible connection points: GLYS, MOCHA, Planned Parenthood, school gay-straight alliances.
- Christy proposed that we create a poster display, similar to displays created by PBN in the past. We can kick off the display with a lecture, and then in the following months, the posters can tour schools, libraries, and other venues. This might be a good candidate for Humanities New York funding.
- Jessica suggested that we create a mini-conference, while Adrienne suggested something more akin to the week of events and workshops that the MSNF used to host during Pride week.
- Several people expressed interest in inviting the surviving members of the MSNF to participate in our event(s). Jeff wanted to talk to the surviving MSNF members, while Amanda proposed hosting a panel consisting of those members. Several of the MSNF members have since moved out of Buffalo, but Adrienne suggested that she look into procuring donations or a grant to bring those MSNF members back to Buffalo for the festivities.
- We got into a brief conversation about when to hold our event(s). While Cory (as mentioned earlier) is interested in holding our festivities at the same time as the

Stonewall riots took place, Carol pointed out that the week of June 22 is wide open, and might be more conducive to getting people involved.

- While we are interested in incorporating Jeff's research into whatever form our project takes, there are some topics Jeff has not been able to look into yet. These include the chapter of the Gay Liberation Front formed at UB, and any community organization spearheaded by people of color while the MSNF was being established. Several group members are interested in conducting research on these topics, and creating projects around them.
- Jeff mentioned that several founding members of the MSNF (including Liz Kennedy's partner, Bobbi Prebis) first learned about community organizing through their involvement in the labor movement. Adrienne suggested that we could create some sort of project or presentation on the role of organized labor in the formation of a local gay rights movement. Since Adrienne works with the Coalition for Economic Justice, which partners with labor unions, she could potentially use her connections there to get some union locals involved in the project.
- Cory reminded the group that his workplace, Lockhouse Distillery, would be happy to play a role in helping us make this project a reality.

People who are interested in helping get the Stonewall/MSNF commemoration project off the ground should come to our first planning meeting on **Sunday, March 31 at 1pm**, at **Adrienne and Ana's house**. The meeting is also a brunch potluck, so bring something to eat or drink if you can. Let Adrienne or Ana know if you are interested in participating in this meeting, and they will give you the address.