

Happy Birthday and Thank You

25 years of political activism at the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus

by Clarence Burton Bagby

In June of 1975, four people came together to found what would become the oldest gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender civil rights organization in the South. They called it the Gay Political Caucus. It's difficult to fathom that there were only those four: Pokey Anderson, Bill Buie, Hugh Crell, and Keith McGee. Even in 1975, few activists in Houston would speak out publicly for fear of losing their jobs and their apartments. People were still being fired for being gay and lesbian, and it was still illegal in Houston for people to dress in the clothing of the opposite sex. The law even banned women from wearing fly-front pants.

Now called the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus, the caucus is celebrating 25 years of political organizing, a birthday on which it can proudly claim credit for the rise of the gay and lesbian community in Houston as an effective political block.

Just like the caucus itself, the founding four were not just flashes in the pan by any means. Anderson went on to serve on the national board of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force a few years later, and McGee was to play a leadership role with the Human Rights Campaign Fund. Crell stayed

involved with the caucus until his death, and Buie is still a member.

Ray Hill was also an early prime mover in the caucus. When the GPC was founded, Hill had already been out of the closet for almost a decade and was actively campaigning for gay civil rights in Houston and against the prevailing public concept of homosexuality

of Americans believed homosexuals should have equal rights in terms of job opportunities, according to the NGLTF Policy Institute. Only 27 percent of Americans favored hiring homosexuals as elementary school teachers.

"By 1975 we had come a long way, but still had a long way to go," said the late Gary Van Ooteghem in an interview a few years ago. Van Ooteghem was the first president of the caucus and later served as co-chair of the NGLTF national board. At the urging of NGLTF, United States Rep. Bella Abzug had just introduced the first gay rights bill in the U.S. Congress.

Back in Texas, state Rep. Craig Washington was being ridiculed on the floor of the Texas House of Representatives for his efforts to eliminate the homosexual sodomy law, Section 21.06 of the Texas Penal Code. After hearing of the raucous anti-homo-

sexual debate, Anderson met with a group of friends in her Montrose apartment and laid plans for the creation of the GPC.

So on a bright summer day in June 1975, media representatives gathered for a press conference. Four of Houston's leading homosexuals, Anderson and Hill, along with Jerry Miller and Rev. Robert Falls, announced the formation of the GPC under the blazing light



We've come a long way, baby:
L-r: Rev. Robert Falls (MCCR), Ray Hill, Jerry Miller, Pokey Anderson

as an illness. Only two years earlier, in 1973, the newly founded National Gay Task Force (later to become NGLTF) had successfully worked to change the American Psychiatric Association classification of homosexuality as a mental illness. Two-thirds of Americans in 1975 still said they believed that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex was always wrong, although a little over half

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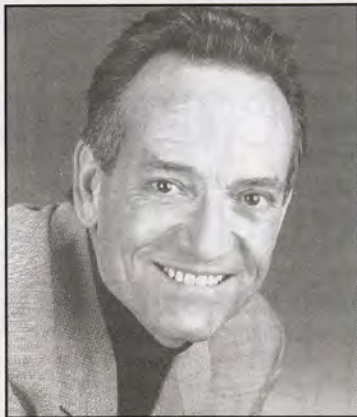
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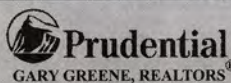
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of public scrutiny. Miller represented Integrity, Houston's most effective homosexual organization to date. Rev. Falls represented the alternative religious community as pastor of the newly formed Metropolitan Community Church of the Resurrection (now Resurrection MCC). Anderson represented Houston lesbians.

Hill, recently out of prison on a burglary conviction, represented no one in particular, but helped by lending his name recognition to the event. In his usual blunt manner, Hill said at the time, "Up until now, I was the only faggot with a face and name in town." This was indeed true, as for years Hill had been the only person willing to speak on record to the media and to advocate publicly for equal treatment of gays.

Miller quietly pointed out the changing times by stating, "In the '60s, if you were gay, you were a political radical. The community is more broad-based now."

The GPC's first candidate questionnaire included questions about the introduction of state legislation to outlaw employment discrim-

After hearing of the raucous anti-homosexual debate around the sodomy law, Pokey Anderson met with a group of friends in her Montrose apartment and laid plans for the creation of the Gay Political Caucus.

ination against gays and lesbians, repeal Section 21.06, and give gay and lesbian couples the right to file joint income tax returns.

Van Ooteghem didn't know the folks who had called the press conference and was in Washington, D.C., meeting with Leonard Matlovich at the time. Matlovich, an Air Force sergeant and Vietnam veteran who had received the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart, had voluntarily declared his homosexuality to his supervising officer and resisted discharge under an exclusion clause that allowed "outstanding" homosexuals to remain in the Air Force.

Van Ooteghem, then the Harris County Comptroller of the Currency, admired Matlovich's courage and later said, "Leonard Matlovich was my role model, and I hope I can be someone else's."

So, upon returning to Houston, Van Ooteghem told his boss Harsell Gray, Harris County treasurer, that he was planning to appear before Commissioners' Court to urge them to pass regulations protecting the civil rights of gays and lesbians. Gray told him that appointed personnel were not allowed to engage in political activities during business hours and asked him to sign a letter acknowledging these instructions. When Van Ooteghem refused, Gray fired him. "GVO," as he became known in the community, later said that Gray's stated reason for his firing was simply a cover for the real reason: Gray was afraid Commissioners' Court would cut his budget for having a highly paid homosexual on his staff.

So the next day, August 1, 1975, Van Ooteghem addressed Commissioners' Court, professing his own homosexuality and proposing a civil rights resolution. Less than a month later, he filed suit against the county for unfair dismissal. His suit was eventually successful and he received back pay.

"Gary has this great, high-paying job and was willing to sacrifice it to advance the cause," Hill said. "Because of his celebrity, we

recruited Gary to be the first president of the caucus."

In the following years, the caucus started to mature organizationally and to gain political clout as well. Mickey Leland, who as a state representative had supported Washington's 1975 effort to repeal Section 21.06, thanked the caucus for helping him win election to Barbara Jordan's congressional seat in 1978. Leland included the names of Hill, Steve Shiflett (caucus president), and Van Ooteghem in his newspaper advertisements. Mayor Jim McConn said at the time, "I think it [the gay and lesbian community] is becoming a viable political force."

The caucus became and remains the community's chief advocate with the police department. In 1978, Shiflett appeared before Houston City Council to protest that no one from the gay community had been appointed to serve on the newly created Houston Police Advisory Board. Later that year the committee was increased in size from 15 to 21, and Mayor McConn telephoned Shiflett for a recommendation. McConn agreed to Shiflett's recommendation of Patricia O'Kane and, as alternate, Rev. Chuck Larsen, pastor of MCCR.

When the group was reconstituted in 1986, Annise Parker (caucus president), working with then Police Chief Lee Brown and Mayor Kathy Whitmire, succeeded in gaining the caucus a permanent seat on the Houston Police Advisory Committee, a seat that the caucus retains to this day.

According to Hill, in 1984, Jerry Mays, Jack Jackson, and Shiflett offered a resolution at a caucus meeting to support City Council passage of an ordinance banning city employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. "The resolution never came to a vote because it was clear that we [the opponents] probably had the votes to defeat it," Hill said. "So in those reconciliatory times of the caucus, the resolution was tabled indefinitely." HGLPC had initially discussed at great length the idea of asking City Council for an ordinance. "I, among others, was really concerned, with AIDS over the horizon, that it would result in a referendum and that they would beat us to death with the 'gay plague' offense," said Hill. Mays, Marion Coleman (later a caucus trustee) and others had organized Community Political Action Committee (C-PAC) because of dissatisfaction with the caucus. As part of the payoff for C-PAC's support, City Council member Anthony Hall (the caucus had endorsed his opponent) sponsored the ordinance banning city employment discrimination. "The caucus was in a political box canyon," explains Hill. "Unable to oppose the ordinance, we dispatched Sue Lovell, caucus president, to City Hall to work on getting the votes, because Mayor Whitmire would not move forward without caucus support as well as assurance of a significant majority of the votes on Council.

"Members of the Klu Klux Klan and Black Ministers Association were outside City Hall arm-in-arm singing 'We Shall Overcome,'" said Hill. "It was quite a sight." Conservative Republican Steven Hotze made his political debut in Houston working for a referendum to repeal the ordinance. Holtze's group obtained the required signatures a month before the deadline.

Jerry Smith, then Houston city attorney, now a Reagan appointee to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, wrote wording that was intentionally confusing, according to several people involved at the time. It was easy to be confused: If you were for gay rights, were you supposed to be *for* the referendum or *against* it? Caucus-endorsed Democratic candidates were major contributors to the pro-referendum forces. "When the caucus appointed a Baptist minister from Beaumont to run the anti-referendum campaign, I was told to shut up and stay out of sight," said Hill. The only other item on the ballot was a Spring Branch school district vote, and so a large portion of the vote came from Spring Branch. Although the anti-gay referendum

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was defeated in all Montrose precincts and in several Third Ward precincts, still passed overwhelmingly. "It buried any illusion that the caucus had any discipline or strength to get out the vote at that time," said Hill.

Hill says he and Annise Parker opposed Lovell's re-election; Hill campaigned for president on the platform of a major activist

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initiative, Parker campaigned for a "lay-low and blend in" strategy, and Lovell ran to continue the status quo and give her a chance to redeem herself. "That was the election where nobody [no political candidates] came," says Hill. City Council member Eleanor Tinsley was the only opposed City Council candidate to screen for endorsement with the caucus in 1985. The caucus endorsed Council members Ernest McGowen Sr. and Judson Robinson Jr. over their own objections. The Straight Slate—headed by Hotze and Ed Young, Second Baptist Church pastor—did not elect

anybody to office. "So it was tit for tat, with the queers losing early in 1985 and the anti-queers losing later in the November 1985 city election," says Hill.

Parker was victorious in her 1986 bid for the caucus presidency and served two terms; she remains the only caucus president to have completed two consecutive terms as

president.

Hill ran successfully for caucus president in 1989 on the platform that the caucus needed a revival. "We boycotted Randall's Food Markets, who finally agreed to a written nondiscrimination policy in company employment," Hill says. "Caucus membership doubled; it was a very busy year."

For the caucus, the 1990s were filled with AIDS education efforts, while scores of members were lost to the disease.

After acrimonious battles over bisexual and transgender inclusion, the first trans-

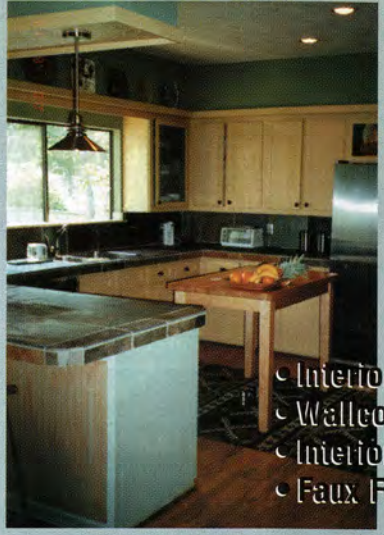
gender board member was appointed by the president in 1998, and a process was begun to change the mission statement so that it would be inclusive of the entire gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community. Two transgenders and one bisexual currently serve on the caucus board of trustees.

The Caucus Political Action Committee has endorsed 32 candidates for the upcoming November 7 election, a far cry from 1985's handful. Mayors and congresspeople now come to the Caucus PAC to interview for consideration for endorsement by the organization.

Twenty-five years later, the caucus remains a strong force working for freedom, justice, and equality as part of a broader social justice movement. For information, call 713/521-1000 or see www.hglpc.org.

Clarence Burton Bagby is a native Houstonian active in civic and political affairs, locally as well as nationally. He serves on the national executive board of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus board of trustees. He was president of the caucus in 1998 after serving as a caucus trustee for two years. He is the executive director of the Old West End Association.

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