

December 2019

Journalist Randy Alfred (right) and Ron Badgley (left), boyfriend of AIDS activist Bobbi Campbell, in a KSAN studio in December 1981.



“Standing in the Alley When the Truck Came Through”: Radio Journalism During the AIDS Crisis

by Mark Sawchuk

The emergence of HIV/AIDS in San Francisco in the early 1980s not only stymied the medical and scientific community; it also presented journalists with a difficult challenge, because so little information was available. Among those who covered the early days of the epidemic was San Francisco journalist Randy Alfred, who spent six years at the helm of *The Gay Life*, a public affairs radio show on KSAN-FM.

A friend of Harvey Milk, Alfred began contributing to the program in 1977 and became its producer in 1979. Before the show's cancellation in 1984, Alfred produced about 250 hours of recordings, including more than 30 hours dealing with HIV/AIDS. Alfred donated his [subject files and sound recordings](#) to the GLBT Historical Society in 1991; the recordings have been digitized by media consultant John Raines and are

available on our [website](#).

In honor of World AIDS Day on December 1, *History Happens* spoke with Alfred, a longtime supporter of the society, about his radio work covering the unfolding of the AIDS crisis.

How would you characterize the AIDS-related content of the radio segments you recorded over the six years you produced and hosted *The Gay Life*?

I'd identify three major themes. First, these programs cover the empirical unraveling of the scientific and medical mystery of HIV/AIDS. They also document the painful personal impact of the crisis on individuals and on the LGBTQ community. Finally, many segments cover the political ramifications in San Francisco, including the debate about closing the city's bathhouses and the allocation of city funds to respond to the serious public health threat.

Let's start with science. Your [January 1982 interview](#) with Dr. Marcus Conant and Dr. Paul Volberding of UCSF Medical School is a fascinating look at the early investigation of HIV/AIDS.

Yes, and listening to this interview again vividly reminded me of just how little we knew then. AIDS didn't have a name, and HIV was more than two years away from being discovered. This episode happened at a critical, if grim, moment. The number of diagnosed cases was still relatively small, but it was increasing rapidly in a pattern that suggested a transmissible agent that acted by suppressing the immune system. Scientific hopes were fading that it could be easily contained, because it looked very much like a virus.

What can you tell us about covering the personal dimensions of the crisis? The second half of the [same 1982 show](#) is an interview with Bobbi Campbell, who would famously go on to become the "AIDS poster boy," even making the cover of *Newsweek*.

Campbell bookends coverage of HIV/AIDS on *The Gay Life*, because I interviewed him in this hour and recorded and broadcast his memorial service in 1984, shortly before *The Gay Life* went off the air. He was aware in the first interview that his illness might prove to be fatal, and he was already writing a column, "Gay Cancer Journal," for the weekly San Francisco gay newspaper *The Sentinel*.

The interview demonstrates Bobbi's unusual willingness to talk about very private matters. He was a nurse studying for his master's degree to become a nurse practitioner specializing in gay health care. As he quips, "Hearing about the so-called gay cancers and gay pneumonias was right up my alley, I just wasn't expecting to be in the alley when the truck came through." (By the way, Bobbi took that photo of me and his partner Ron Badgley at the KSAN studio.)

The Gay Life also covered the political debates surrounding the city's response. You did a three-part series in 1984 ([April 29](#), [May 6](#), [May 13](#)) that focused on whether San Francisco should shutter bathhouses.

The interesting thing about the bathhouse discussion was that, in my view, it was too late. A year earlier, when the idea was first proposed, it might have been workable to make the bathhouses sites for safe-sex education. But by 1984 the situation had gotten much worse while some of the LGBTQ community's own media actively tried to suppress the closure debate.

NOTE: The entire run of *The Gay Life* is available on our [website](#) with a keyword search engine. In addition to interviews, many episodes feature news updates, debates and speakers from community events, hearings of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and programs organized by two local gay political clubs — the Harvey Milk and Alice B. Toklas Democratic clubs.

Mark Sawchuk is the communications manager at the GLBT Historical Society.

From the Executive Director Building for the Future



by Terry Beswick

San Francisco is recognized around the world as the heart of queer America, the city where so much of the modern LGBTQ rights movement began. The stories we have to tell are treasures with the power to heal, inspire and build bridges.

Our stories reach across generations and among diverse communities often divided by race, gender, sexuality, economics and nationality. So many of these stories have been collected and preserved by the GLBT Historical Society, which maintains one of the largest collections of LGBTQ historical materials in the world. We are proud of this work and proud to be standing on the shoulders of all those who came before us.

Today, more than ever, our young people need truth and they need hope. Young people need to know that when you gather together in righteousness, when you organize, when you act up and fight back, it is possible to change the world. They need to know that facts, evidence and critical thinking matter. These are among the lessons contained in our archival collections, documenting stories from the full spectrum of our rainbow community. Many of these stories are still waiting to be told, if only we had the space we need to tell them in all their richness and with all the dignity they merit.

Since 2011, we have operated a storefront museum in the Castro, where we greet more than 26,000 people each year. But the small space only allows us to display a tiny fraction of our extensive collections, even as the demand for our exhibitions and programs is growing. We are well

into the planning stages to create a new LGBTQ Museum and Research Center, which will be the first full-scale queer history museum in the United States and only the second in the world.

Our new museum project is about shining the light of truth. It is about joining our community together with our allies, to claim our own hallowed ground. It's about letting our stories breathe and give life and inspiration to young people to take on the challenges of today and encourage pride in and respect for our ancestors.

As we continue on this multiyear journey, I want to ask you to join us by [making a donation today](#). Up to \$50,000 in donations received by December 31 will be matched dollar-for-dollar by several generous donors, allowing you to double your impact.

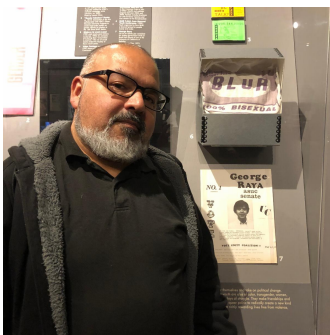
We are a community organization committed to preserving our history, because our stories won't be told unless we tell them. With your support, we can build towards the future and continue to share our history with people from around the world every day.

[Click here to double your impact by making a donation today.](#)

Terry Beswick is executive director of the GLBT Historical Society.

At the Museum

Discovering the Early Activism of George Raya



by Lito Sandoval

If you asked a member of the public to identify historic LGBTQ Latinx people, you might hear the names of José Sarria, the San Francisco cabaret performer, activist and founder of the Imperial Court; and Pedro Zamora, the AIDS educator, activist and television personality. And those are some very historic queer Latinos, but we need to

add George Raya to that list.

George Raya was the first person to be paid to lobby the California State Legislature to promote pro-LGBTQ legislation, but I didn't know that when I first met him as part of a 2014 retreat with the San Francisco Latino Democratic Club board in Sacramento. At the time, I just knew him as someone brought in to be a mentor for the day. He certainly wasn't there to brag about his exploits or experience, which in retrospect I wish he had.

Imagine my surprise at coming upon Raya on a visit to the GLBT Historical Society Museum. I was examining a flyer from 1973 that's on display as part of the "Queer Youth: Out and Active" section of the museum's long-term exhibition, "[Queer Past Becomes Present](#)." The flyer features none other than George Raya, then a student at the University of California at Berkeley, running for a position with the student

government. The homely, typewritten text states that Raya's platform included support for "affirmative action, women's rights, child care programs, intramurals, and enforcement of rent control."

My subsequent research revealed that one of Raya's early victories was helping Willie Brown, then a member of the California State Assembly, pass the Consenting Adult Sex Bill (AB 489), which repealed California's laws against sodomy and legalized sex between gays and lesbians. The landmark legislation was signed into law by California Governor Jerry Brown in 1975.

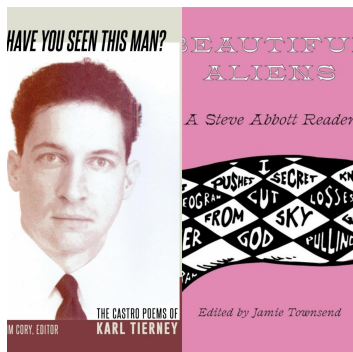
George Raya was a pioneering lobbyist and activist whose work has bettered our lives as queers in California. Now every time I visit the museum — as you can see in the photo above — I make sure to stop by the display with the flyer, smile and say, "Thank you, George!"

Lito Sandoval is a member of the GLBT Historical Society Board of Directors.

Upcoming Events

Author Talk

Enduring Struggle, Enduring Spirits: Lost Literary Lives



Sunday, December 1

3:30–5:00 p.m.

San Francisco Public Library

Latino/Hispanic Meeting Rooms, Lower Level

100 Larkin St., San Francisco

Free

A public reading cosponsored by the GLBT Historical Society in honor of World AIDS Day celebrates the lives of Steve Abbott and Karl

Tierney, two gifted Bay Area writers prominent in gay literary circles who were lost to AIDS. Editor Jamie Townsend will read from *Beautiful Aliens: A Steve Abbott Reader* (Nightboat Books, 2019) which brings together a three-decade cross-section of Abbott's work, including poetry, fiction, collage, comics, essays and autobiography. Tierney's work will be shared by Jim Cory, the editor of *Have You Seen This Man? The Castro Poems of Karl Tierney* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2019), a posthumous poetry collection that offers a time capsule of San Francisco in the 1980s and 1990s ranging from razor-sharp wit, observation and humor to hunger and fear. More information is available [here](#). Free and open to the public; no reservation required.

Author Talk

Becoming Eve: A Conversation With Abby Chava Stein

Tuesday, December 3



7:00–9:00 p.m.
California Institute of Integral Studies
Namaste Hall
1453 Mission Street, San Francisco
\$10 online | \$15 at the door

Author, educator and activist Abby Chava Stein will discuss her new book *Becoming Eve: My Journey From Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi to Transgender Woman* (Seal Press, 2019) at this program cosponsored by the GLBT Historical Society. She will share her remarkable journey of shedding one identity and growing into another, with its universally human moments of vulnerability, glory, frustration and revelation. The conversation will be led by Randi Reed, an LGBTQ inclusion and training specialist with [Keshet](#), a nonprofit that works for LGBTQ equality in all facets of Jewish life. Copies of *Becoming Eve* will be available for purchase and signing. For more information, click [here](#). GLBT Historical Society members receive a 20 percent discount off the admission price of advance tickets by entering the code “GLBT19” into the “Promo Code” box at checkout; tickets are available online [here](#).

[Author Talk & Story Time](#) [The Rainbow Flag: A Children’s History](#)



Friday, December 6
7:00–9:00 p.m.
The GLBT Historical Society Museum
4127 18th St., San Francisco
\$5 | Free for [members](#)

This evening of story time will introduce children to the rainbow flag, the most celebrated symbol of the LGBTQ community. Author Michelle Millar Fisher and illustrator Kat Kuang will read from their new children’s book, *The Rainbow Flag: Bright, Bold and Beautiful* (Museum of Modern Art, 2019), a story about artist Gilbert Baker and a group of friends who in 1978 created the colorful flag that would come to be a worldwide emblem of LGBTQ love and an icon of modern design. Fisher is a former curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where she helped acquire an example of the flag for the museum’s permanent collection. Copies of *The Rainbow Flag* will be available for purchase and signing. This program is being held in conjunction with the exhibition “[Performance, Protest and Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker](#),” currently on display at the GLBT Historical Society Museum. Tickets to the program are available online [here](#).

[Film Screening](#) [Still Beginning: Thirty Years of Day With\(out\) Art](#)

Thursday, December 12
7:00–9:00 p.m.
The GLBT Historical Society Museum



4127 18th St., San Francisco
\$5 | Free for [members](#)

This December marks the 30th anniversary of Day With(out) Art, an annual event that encourages artists and filmmakers as well as museums and other organizations to create programs, events and artwork that raise awareness of HIV/AIDS and commemorate those lost to the disease. Day With(out) Art is a project of [Visual AIDS](#), a New York-based nonprofit that uses art to fight AIDS by provoking dialog and supporting HIV-positive artists. To celebrate the occasion, the GLBT Historical Society is presenting “Still Beginning,” a program of seven new films commissioned by Visual AIDS that consider the continuing presence of HIV/AIDS in the LGBTQ community today while revisiting resonant cultural histories of AIDS-inspired art and activism from the past three decades. The short films range in subject from work against HIV stigma in New Orleans to public sex culture in Chicago, highlighting pioneering AIDS activism and staging intergenerational conversations. Tickets are available online [here](#).

[Workshop](#)

Beyond the Rainbow: Building Queer Symbologies



Thursday, January 2
7:00–9:00 p.m.
The GLBT Historical Society Museum
4127 18th St., San Francisco
\$5 | Free for [members](#)

This presentation and workshop explores the symbols that have represented the LGBTQ community before and after Gilbert Baker’s iconic, globally adopted rainbow flag.

Participants will learn about the history and evolution of queer symbols, including the flags that have been inspired by and developed since the rainbow flag debuted in 1978. In addition, participants will have an opportunity to invent and design their own flags and symbols using paper, textiles and other materials. This program takes place in conjunction with the exhibition “[Performance, Protest and Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker](#),” currently on display at the GLBT Historical Society Museum. Tickets to the program are available online [here](#).

Current Exhibitions

Community Gallery

[Performance, Protest & Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker](#)

Open through March 8, 2020

[More information](#)

Main Gallery

Queer Past Becomes Present

Long-term exhibition

More information



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Exhibitions & Programs

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San Francisco, CA 94114

(415) 621-1107

www.glbthistory.org/museum

Monday–Saturday: 11:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m.

Sunday: Noon–5:00 p.m.

Holiday Hours:

Limited hours on December 24 (11:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m., subject to

change). Closed on December 25.

Museum is open on December 31 and January 1, but hours are subject to change.

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www.glbthistory.org/archives

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CREDITS. FEATURE: Photo by Bobbi Campbell, courtesy Randy Alfred. **FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:** Photo of Terry Beswick by Gareth Gooch. **AT THE MUSEUM:** Lito Sandoval at the GLBT Historical Society Museum; photo by Mark Sawchuk. **UPCOMING EVENTS:** Author Talk: Cover of *Beautiful Aliens* courtesy Nightboat Books; cover of *Have You Seen This Man* courtesy Sibling Rivalry Press. Author Talk: Author Abby Chava Stein; photo courtesy Tawni Bannister. Author Talk and Story Time: Cover of *The Rainbow Flag: Bright, Bold and Beautiful* courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Film Screening: Shanti Avirgan, "Beat Goes On" (2019), commissioned for Visual AIDS's Day With(out) Art 2019; film still courtesy the artist. Workshop: A rainbow flag sewn by Gilbert Baker; photo courtesy the Gilbert Baker Estate.

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