

20th Anniversary/Reunion of Gay and Lesbian Liberation of Waterloo

by Jim Parrott, University of Waterloo

On the evening of March 23, 1991, Gay and Lesbian Liberation of Waterloo (GLLOW) celebrated the formation of the group 20 years ago on March 8, 1971 as Waterloo Universities's Gay Liberation Movement (WUGLM). The evening was both a reunion for former members and a recollection of its many exploits. About 60 returning and present members attended.

The anniversary celebration began with a spirited reunion during which returning members renewed acquaintances with old friends. Since many people had not seen one another for 10 years or more, as many people as possible were provided with identification badges to reduce misidentification. But even though some of the faces and bodies had shifted over the years, the personalities shone through. And the memories started flooding back. For many people, their years of involvement with GLLOW/WUGLM were among the peak experiences of their lives.

A large poster board display provided a 20-year retrospective of the group with posters, photos, and newspaper clippings, which helped us all remember the exhilaration of our involvement in GLLOW/WUGLM. There we read about the heady days of Gay Liberation, when in 1971, a group of gay friends organized the first meeting of WUGLM, whose goal was to respond to the needs of the gay and lesbian student and to break the silence regarding homosexuality within the university. The display also told about the numerous campus pubs sponsored by the group, and some of the hassles involved in setting up even larger dances off campus, long before local commercially-operated gay clubs were opened in Kitchener-Waterloo. An important means of establishing and maintaining a sense of community at the beginning, and at various times later was the creation of several publications and newsletters. Perhaps the most memorable of these publications was the Operation Socrates Handbook (1973), which consisted primarily of interviews with lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. This Handbook, once described (in a moment of paranoia) by the K-W Record as a sex manual, was a useful educational publication in its time. But the K-W Record and many of its letter writers evidently imagined that it was intended to convert thousands of gullible heterosexuals into homosexuals. ("Try it, you'll like it!") How things have changed! Nowadays we read in the pages of the Record about the powerful gay and lesbian community in Kitchener-Waterloo.

The poster display also told us about local television panels on which members sat, the gay phone-line, the many gay and lesbian conferences, the first regular radio shows ("Gay News and Views" and "Leaping Lesbians"), debates between members and letter writers in the media (Chevron, Imprint and K-W Record), theatrical performances sponsored by members, etc.

The organizers had also planned a panel discussion by members spanning the years from 1971 to the present. The aim was to have panelists discuss briefly the activities of the group during their period of involvement. Just before the panel discussion began, however, members

attending were having such a good time socializing that some panelists were concerned that the panel might cause a disruption. The panel went ahead anyway, and it turned out to be a high point of the evening, since it focussed people's thoughts on where we have come from and where we think we may be going.

The six panelists recalled the many political, educational and social activities over the past 20 years that helped us grow as individuals and strengthen us as a community. Towards the end of the hour-long panel discussion, members considered how the gay and lesbian experience was different now from what it was in the past. In general, panelists felt that at present there was more fighting against repression of lesbian and gay people than in the past. Furthermore, it was felt that same-sex orientation seems more acceptable than before. (A good measure of this acceptance is the fact that the questions and comments put to gay and lesbian speakers addressing college and university classrooms are considerably less asinine than they were in the early 1970's.) It was also felt that it is easier to come out today than 20 years ago, and that the process is now much faster. On the other hand, some panelists felt that it was dangerous to be complacent. For example, even today it is simply not possible for same-sex couples to behave in public as opposite-sex couples do, except in certain areas of Toronto, and other cities of North America that also have a gay/lesbian ghetto. After the panel discussion, attendees continued to renew acquaintances.

Plans have already begun on the 25th anniversary, an important feature of which is to produce a document tracing the history of the lesbian and gay community in Kitchener-Waterloo, a history in which the campus group played a prominent role. We are also establishing a database that will allow us to contact former members more easily for our next celebration. Former members who are interested in being notified of these celebrations are urged to send their names, addresses and phone numbers to GLOW, c/o Federation of Students, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G1. We want to see you at the next one!

As one of two people at the reunion who had attended the group's first meeting in 1971, I was happy to renew many old acquaintances, sad that some faces were missing, and pleased to see that my younger brothers and sisters in GLOW today are continuing to help liberate other gays and lesbians from the fear and loneliness so many still feel.

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1991, April 28.

Shawn Syms
Rites Magazine
Box 65, Station F
Toronto, Ontario M4Y 2L4.

Dear Mr. Syms,

Here is the article that Elaine Auerbach asked me to write on the 20th anniversary/reunion of GLOW. She tells me that you are expecting it.

If you have any problems with the article please contact me at:

(519) 884-████ (home; evening) OR (519) 885-1211 ext. █████ (work; daytime)

I am pleased that Rites magazine has taken an interest in the activities of GLOW.

Yours sincerely,

Jim Parrott.