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## Annual Equality Forum Commences Next Week

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Philadelphia's annual Equality Forum is next week.

The weeklong event welcomes thousands of people from the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

NBC 10's Aditi Roy talked with Equality Forum Executive Director Malcolm Lazin about his tireless pursuit for equality.

To many, Independence Hall is a symbol of the nation's birth. But to some it is also a symbol of the birth of a civil rights movement. On July 4, 1965, 40 people gathered in front of the historic site to fight for gay and lesbian civil rights.

"It got people to think about it. The first time people were out, open, and visible, and petitioning the government for equality for gays and lesbians, and that was revolutionary," Lazin said. "When you think about the way homophobia was institutionalized, it was remarkably courageous when 40 people stepped forward on July 4, 1965 to demonstrate on behalf of gay and lesbian civil rights."

"It was quite a different time when the 40 demonstrators rallied at Independence Hall. Back then, gays and lesbians couldn't work for the U.S. government, they couldn't serve in the military, they couldn't even congregate at a public bar," Lazin said.

"I was just finishing up college. I certainly, even at that time, didn't realize my own sexual orientation. So I was pretty much unaware of what was going on," he said.

But Lazin's own coming out was two decades away. Through the '70s and early '80s, he was married for 10 years and not quite sure of his sexuality.

"We did some marriage counseling, and some individual counseling, is really when I started to free myself up emotionally and started to become more aware of myself and my sexual orientation," Lazin said.

His own emancipation culminated with the birth of the equality forum in 1993. It was the ideal way for Lazin to combine his personal journey with his passion for politics.

"It was my coming to terms, and feeling like we're really at an interesting and defining moment in time in terms of gay civil rights. And that maybe this was an opportunity for me and others who were involved to make a difference," Lazin said.

The Equality Forum is now in its 16th year. Tens of thousands of people around the world travel to Philadelphia to attend the forum's panels, parties, and special events.

"Currently, there's no federal hate crimes protection. There's no federal workplace discrimination protection. Gays and lesbians are not allowed to serve openly in our military. There are relatively few states that either allow gays and lesbians to marry or engage in civil unions," Lazin said.

While the Equality Forum is thriving, Lazin said ultimately, his dream is that someday he won't need to have an equality forum.

But until then, he intends to work tirelessly to put himself out of business.

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