

## Philly: The city of Equality

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ON JULY 4, 1965, 40 men and women demonstrated on behalf of gay and lesbian rights in front of Independence Hall. It was the largest protest of its kind in history.

This was the first of four "annual reminders" held in Philadelphia - reminding the world that homosexuals were here - and it predated by four years the now iconic riots at the Stonewall Inn in New York City.

A historic marker on the north side of 6th and Chestnut streets testifies to the significance of these "reminders" to the gay-rights movement.

Philadelphia is once again at the center of that movement, as hundreds of rainbow flags line Center City streets trumpeting this year's Equality Forum.

The forum - the largest annual gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender forum in the world - begins today and runs through Sunday. The forum will host more than 60 discussions and dozens of parties and special events, beginning with a VIP kickoff at City Hall with Mayor Nutter delivering opening remarks.

On Saturday, New Mexico governor Bill Richardson receives the International Role Model award at a gala dinner at the National Constitution Center. The Wachovia Corp. will be awarded the International Business Leadership award.

"Gov. Richardson has been a long-standing friend of the gay community," said Malcolm Lazin, executive director of Equality Forum. "He has taken a proactive lead in terms of making sure that the gay community in New Mexico is protected in the workplace and in terms of a variety of other issues of equality."

On Sunday, the forum hosts the SundayOut! Street Festival, on Market Street in Old City, from 11 a.m. until 6 p.m. It is the largest GLBT street festival in the region.

Panels throughout the week will focus on a variety of GLBT issues, including politics, religion, business and visibility. The international focus of this year's forum is on gays and lesbians in the Muslim world. Lazin said that the organization chose this focus after Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told an audience at Columbia University that there were no homosexuals in Iran.

"There are tremendous challenges in the Middle East for gays and lesbians," Lazin said. "It's remarkably homophobic, and we wanted to bring attention to those concerns."

Author Michael Luongo will lead the May 1 panel, titled "Gays and Lesbians in the Muslim World." He said that Muslim homosexuals are often ostracized from their religious and sexual identities.

"A serious issue for gay Muslims is homophobia within Islam and Islamophobia within the gay community," Luongo said.

He added that homosexual laws vary from nation to nation, and are often a result of dishonest governments catering to radicalism.

"Religion has its place, but many of these governments are very corrupt," Luongo said. "If [the government] wants to show [its] Islamic devotion, it's easiest to target gay men."

Luongo added that there are many aspects of Islamic culture, like homosexuality, that simply are not discussed.

"The notion of gay rights and declaring yourself gay is a very Western thing," Luongo said. "Most people exist without really labeling themselves as anything. If enough people label themselves, then it becomes a movement and it disturbs the status quo."

Frank Kameny, 83, was one of the first to challenge the status quo in the United States as an organizer of Philadelphia's "annual reminders." He will speak as part of the national GLBT history panel on Wednesday. Known as one of the founding fathers of the gay civil-rights movement, Kameny coined the slogan "Gay is good" in the 1970s. He organized several small protests in Washington in the years leading up to the "annual reminders," but said that Philadelphia was the city that launched the movement.

"Gay activism was not in the air very much in those days," Kameny said. "People were unaware of what the issues were. By the time we got going in Philadelphia, the whole issue was coming to the forefront and increasing rapidly."

Thom Nickels, journalist and author of "Gay and Lesbian Philadelphia," is also part of the history panel. He said that witnesses to the "annual reminders" had strong reactions to the demonstrations.

"People were blown away by it," Nickels said. "To come out and dare to say that you were homosexual, right on the street, was unheard of. At the time, it must have impressed them as something out of a science-fiction movie."

Nickels said that Rittenhouse Square and Washington Square were popular gathering points for homosexuals living in the city, though it was not uncommon for undercover police to arrest suspected homosexuals.

Nickels also recalled attending a monthly lecture at the University of Pennsylvania titled "Gays at Penn." At one of these lectures, in 1975, members of MOVE took over the lecture and started ridiculing those in attendance.

Today, Lazin said that the Equality Forum's goal is education.

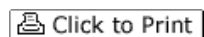
"Our focus is an educational focus," he said. "We want to educate and hopefully inspire people to become involved. The question is not whether or not we will achieve equality, but when. The Equality Forum's real mission is to accelerate that process."

Nickels said that the forum's expansion allows it to address virtually every issue facing the GLBT community.

"It's a major event in Philadelphia every year, and it brings huge exposure to the mainstream population," Nickels said. "It's like a buffet supper: You go for what interests you, and what you don't like, you let somebody else take." \*

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