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SURVIVAL IN THE BIBLE BELT: OKLAHOMAN QUEER POLITICS AND RELIGION IN  
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## Abstract

This work follows the story of Oklahoma's queer community in the 1980s through the lens of two community newspapers, *The Gayly Oklahoman* and *Herland Sister Resources*. The 1980s was an incredibly important decade for the queer community of Oklahoma. Gay-friendly religious organizations grew in number and size during this decade, and Oklahoman gay political organizations began to organize on a larger level than they had in previous years. Oklahoma's queer community did not experience growth and progress in the same way that the queer communities of other areas did. Oklahoma's queer community existed in a very conservative and Christian state, and that affected the way the community grew and adapted. Queer Oklahomans had to adapt to the conservative climate they lived in as a strategy of survival. For them, this meant investing more in organizations that are usually marked as conservative and being willing to work with the conservative forces in the state. This also meant that things that are usually considered markers of progress for gay communities did not always manifest themselves in the same way in Oklahoma. Despite the situation that queer Oklahomans found themselves in, they were able to navigate an unfavorable cultural climate and adapt to that climate. It was an ongoing process, but they did make progress throughout the 1980s, as seen through the way the community newspapers discuss the community.

## Introduction

In 1985, reporters from *The Advocate*, as well as from non-queer media outlets, took an interest in Oklahoma's gay community in the wake of the Supreme Court decision on the Helm Law.<sup>1</sup> Reporters from *The Advocate* called members of the gay community from across the state and asked to interview them. People were happy to work with them, and important gay rights organizations and major figures in Oklahoma's gay rights movement spoke with the editors of *The Advocate*. What they compiled from those interviews and their research was a picture of Oklahoma as one of, if not the most, antigay states in the country. The headline of the article and much of the article itself had a negative tone, though they did mention the progress Oklahomans had made and the improvements that were happening. The main problem identified by *The Advocate* was the community's lack of visibility. They did not have the ability to take on many important facets of the gay rights movement because people still feared losing their jobs if someone found out they were gay.<sup>2</sup> While the state of Oklahoma as a whole is painted by *The Advocate* this way, the queer community of Oklahoma was still present and active even if it was not in the same way that queer communities of more progressive areas were. To survive in a conservative state like Oklahoma, the queer community strategized and adapted. They invested more in institutions that usually are markers of conservatism, religious institutions were prominent in Oklahoma's queer culture in the 1980s, and gay Republicans were much more integrated with other queer political advocates than in other states where they usually formed their own institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> "Oklahoma: Repressive-Antigay! ...The Advocate," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, March 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>2</sup> "Oklahoma: Repressive-Antigay! ...The Advocate."

The 1980s was a time of major change for Oklahoma's queer community. During the 1970s, activists worked to push the community forward, particularly on college campuses. However, fear and homophobia remained major roadblocks for the community. At the end of the 1970s, the Oklahoma state government passed the Helm Bill.<sup>3</sup> The bill gave school districts the power to fire anyone who was engaging in "crimes against nature," which the authors of the bill intended to apply to queer teachers.<sup>4</sup> The bill easily passed the state House of Representatives and Senate, with Anita Bryant flying in from Florida to lend her support. Governor David Boren signed the bill quickly after it passed the Senate.<sup>5</sup> Over the next few years, the bill would be challenged in the courts, culminating in a Supreme Court decision that would bring attention to Oklahoma's queer community.<sup>6</sup>

The bill had passed Oklahoma's legislature fairly quickly, and it sparked a need for action amongst the queer community. Oklahomans for Human Rights (OHR) formed in response to the bill, and from there, more and more organizations would form and grow as the 1980s passed.<sup>7</sup> Out of Oklahoman for Human Rights came a newsletter. This newsletter became popular, and eventually, its editors split from OHR and created an independent publication.<sup>8</sup> They called it *The Gayly Oklahoman* after the well-known Oklahoma newspaper *The Daily Oklahoman*. They published the first issue of the newspaper in 1983, and its initial run lasted until 2006.<sup>9</sup> It quickly became the largest gay publication in the state and was distributed all over Oklahoma. Like many community newspapers, it became a place for organizations to advertise

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron Lee Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1889-2005" (PhD Dissertation, Oklahoma State University, 2006), 235.

<sup>4</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 238.

<sup>5</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 240-241.

<sup>6</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 250.

<sup>7</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 242.

<sup>8</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 259.

<sup>9</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 260.

their upcoming events, for people to write to the editors to express their thoughts, and for people to connect in a state where many community members were not out as queer. The pages of *The Gayly* illustrate how people made the best of their circumstances and worked to change them in ways that could work given those circumstances. Political activists could not be as bold as those in San Francisco, but they worked to make changes in their own ways. Gay religious organizations like the Metropolitan Community Church were incredibly integrated with *The Gayly*, and *The Gayly* supported them as they supported the paper.<sup>10</sup>

Gay white men were the primary readers of *The Gayly*, though the paper aspired to reach a diverse audience from across Oklahoma.<sup>11</sup> Early on, they had problems reaching queer women and asked for help from queer women who did read the paper to either give them advice on how to reach that audience better or offer the chance to contribute themselves to the paper.<sup>12</sup> Several women wrote into the paper fairly regularly, and more women began to write for the paper as time went on, but men did the bulk of the writing during the 1980s. Most of the people who wrote in the paper also identified with the queer community or implied that they were a member of the community. There were occasional letters from allies, but most main contributors and people who engaged regularly were queer.<sup>13</sup>

Herland Sister Resources was a feminist lesbian organization that primarily operated in Oklahoma City, though they sent their newsletter to other parts of the state.<sup>14</sup> The newsletter was called *Herland Sister Resources* in the 1980s, though they renamed it *Herland Voice* later.

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<sup>10</sup> "To Our Readers," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1983, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>11</sup> "Who Reads The Gayly...and Why?" *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1984, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>12</sup> "Letters," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, December 1984, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>13</sup> V.N.S., "Letters to the Editors," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1984, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>14</sup> "Letter to the Editor," *Herland Sister Resources*, July 1989, UCO-Herland Newsletter Archive.



*Herland* focused more on issues specifically concerning queer women, mainly lesbians, as readers sometimes accused them of not including bisexual women enough. *The Gayly* often suffered from a lack of engagement from queer women since, most of the time, they did not focus on women's issues, but *Herland* provided an alternative. There was still crossover between the two organizations as people from both were involved in other queer organizations around Oklahoma.<sup>15</sup> Particularly as the 1980s progressed, there was more engagement between the communities of queer men and queer women. The AIDS crisis played a major role here since women got more involved, as it became a bigger problem in Oklahoma. *Herland* never had the same reach that *The Gayly* did since it was much more specific about its audience, while *The Gayly* intended to reach all of Oklahoma's queer community as well as non-queer allies.

There are clear limitations to these sources. *The Gayly* provides a perspective that is mainly from white, gay men who lived in major Oklahoman cities. *Herland* also came from the perspective of queer women who lived primarily in the city. Oklahoma's queer population was much larger than what is reflected in these papers. The papers also reflect the community that its writers were aiming for. The writers may have decided not to include stories if those stories did not suit their goals for the community they created through the paper. However, even with these limitations, community newspapers still provide valuable insight into what was important to people and how people organized outside of the newspaper. There were many community members who did not engage with the queer community in public but some of their insights can be found in these papers, usually when they write in to the editors.

Chapter One focuses on religion and religious organizations that were involved with Oklahoma's queer community during the 1980s. The religious organizations and ideas in that are

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<sup>15</sup> "Political Caucus Update," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1989, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

discussed are either explicitly Christian or have their roots in Christianity. Oklahoma was home to chapters of the major gay-friendly churches from this decade, such as the Metropolitan Community Church, Dignity/Integrity, and Affirmation.<sup>16</sup> The community invested a lot in these organizations as well, and some saw them as a way to reach people who were not queer and not allies. These organizations put together or sponsored important community events, such as Pride Week, and maintained a constant presence in *The Gayly*.<sup>17</sup> Christianity was a powerful force in Oklahoma. Many members of the gay community had grown up surrounded by it, and that did not change when they reached adulthood. Many members of the community wrote into *The Gayly* about their experiences with Christianity in Oklahoma, both with gay-friendly organizations and with those who were not.<sup>18</sup> Religion found its way into articles that, on the surface, did not have much to do with religion, but because of the culture of Oklahoma, it found its way into what various authors wrote.<sup>19</sup> The queer community invested in religion and gay-friendly religious organizations, and in turn, those organizations gave back to and supported the community.

Chapter Two deals with politics and the queer community in Oklahoma. Both Democratic and Republican political officials in Oklahoma tended to lean conservative. While the Democratic party had members who were slowly starting to lean further left, even those politicians were still more conservative than left-leaning politicians in liberal areas.<sup>20</sup> This meant

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<sup>16</sup> "New MCC in Broken Arrow," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, September 1989, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Bishop "Gay Pride Week-Oasis," *The Gayly Oklahoman* June 1986. The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Leclerc, "Letter to the Editor," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, May 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>19</sup> Ken Johnson, "Looking Up," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, December 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>20</sup> Keith Smith, "Politically Speaking," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

that many politicians did not want to openly show support for any position that could be pro-gay rights. Those who were more open to gay rights spoke generally about being pro-civil rights instead of being specific about what that meant for them.<sup>21</sup> This created a political climate that was tough for pro-gay rights activists to achieve much. On top of that, there were political divides among the queer community to contend with. Gay Republicans existed all across the country, and in many cases, they separated from left-leaning gay rights organizations to push their own platforms and goals. In Oklahoma, this section of the queer community could not separate from the left-leaning activists in the community.<sup>22</sup> The queer community did not make up a large visible portion of the voting bloc in Oklahoma like it did in cities like San Francisco, so they required different strategies to achieve their goals. Liberal members of the community kept themselves open to working with Republican members of the community.<sup>23</sup> They were also willing to work with politicians from either party as long as those politicians were willing to listen to their concerns. This meant they occasionally gathered support from Republican politicians who leaned conservative. Particularly during the AIDS crisis, gay rights activists were able to strategize and garner support from people of both parties to pass laws concerning AIDS education.<sup>24</sup> Some of Oklahoma's AIDS education laws led the way for other states to pass similar laws, and it happened because of the work of liberal activists with the support of a conservative governor.

In the past, historical scholarship had tended to either ignore Oklahoma when discussing the queer community or write it off in the way activists from large progressive cities did in the

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<sup>21</sup> "Election Picks for '86," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>22</sup> Victor Gorin, "Letters of Response to the Oklahoma GOP or Why I Am No Longer a Gay Republican," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, May 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>23</sup> "Political Caucus Update."

<sup>24</sup> "State Republican Party Takes Anti-Gay Platform Bellmon Defies AIDS Education Plank," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, April 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

1980s. Historian Aaron Lee Bachhofer did not follow this trend with his 2006 work. In it, he studied the gay male population of Oklahoma City from the late nineteenth century up until 2005.<sup>25</sup> He argues that the subculture developed by gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City, while it was not the same as subcultures that developed in other cities, did not mean it was not there and that to assume it was not present just because of Oklahoma's reputation as a conservative state would be neglecting the stories of the people who created and lived within that subculture.<sup>26</sup> This thesis relies on his study for important context and framing of the gay community in Oklahoma, though it takes a much narrower focus in terms of time.

Bachhofer is not the only recent scholar to have studied gay rights and the gay community in Oklahoma; scholars like Carol Mason have written about the tensions between anti-gay activists and queer people who suffered because of homophobia in Oklahoma during the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> Other scholars have written about the ways that gay-friendly churches grew in major cities outside of Oklahoma and how they adapted to the growth of the gay community and gay rights movements in the 1970s. Heather White traces the founding of the Metropolitan Community Church in California in her book, as well as the way religious organizations interacted with the gay liberation movement.<sup>28</sup> Melissa M. Wilcox also covered the beginnings of MCC and its connections to the Civil Rights movement and other evangelical churches.<sup>29</sup>

Following the trend to treat the queer community in Oklahoma on its own terms, which Bachhofer began with his dissertation, this thesis takes a close look at the 1980s, in particular, as

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<sup>25</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 19.

<sup>26</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 27.

<sup>27</sup> Carol Mason, *Oklahoma: Lessons in Unqueering America* (Albany: State University of New York Press).

<sup>28</sup> Heather White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 141.

<sup>29</sup> Melissa M. Wilcox, "Of Markets and Missions: The Early History of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11, no. 1 (2001): 88.

an important time of growth for Oklahoma's queer community. The way growth is explored, however, differs from the way the field of queer history might normally view growth or progress. The community that developed in Oklahoma felt the influence of the conservative culture in their state. As a result of this, their progress looked different from the ways that growth is usually marked in queer communities. For example, visibility is usually an important marker of progress and change, but in this case, while community advocates did hope that one day everyone would be able to come out, they understood that was not a viable option for many.

The growth of gay political organizations in Oklahoma happened later than the founding of gay political organizations in major cities. Gay political organizations existed in the 1970s, particularly on college campuses but the number of organizations increased following the Helm Bill. This bill intended to remove queer teachers from schools. The Helm Bill was an important moment for queer history in Oklahoma since it helped spur more community members to action.<sup>30</sup> They were aware of the liberation movement happening in other parts of the country but did not get involved, partially because of fear and partially because many did not feel that affected yet.<sup>31</sup> Like the rest of the country, there were members of the community who identified more with the Republican Party despite the usual assumption that queer people tend to be Democrats. Clayton Howard wrote about this for a chapter in *Beyond the Politics of the Closet*, where he covered Log Cabin Republicans. His focus was on gay Republicans who lived in major cities, and he argued that they found it important to be "out" as both gay and Republican in order to attempt to influence both queer activists and Republicans.<sup>32</sup> In cities like Los Angeles and

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<sup>30</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 242.

<sup>31</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 235.

<sup>32</sup> Clayton Howard, "Gay and Conservative: An Early History of the Log Cabin Republicans," in *Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American State Since the 1970s*, edited by Jonathan Bell (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 141.

Chicago, gay Republicans often formed their own organizations as well, separate from left-leaning gay rights groups. Oklahoma's situation was different. While there were plenty of gay Republicans, they usually were not out and did not separate themselves from other groups of activists or other Republican groups.

The 1980s was a time of change for Oklahoma's queer community. They had not been as socially and politically active in the 1970s, and as a result of this, they appeared to be lagging behind other states in the eyes of other gay rights leaders. Publications like *The Advocate* labeled Oklahoma as the state that was most unfriendly to queer people.<sup>33</sup> Despite all of this, Oklahoma's queer community grew and became more active during this time. This growth in activity looked different from what people had come to expect when thinking about queer visibility and increasing activism. Being from a conservative state meant that queer Oklahomans invested more in institutions that people usually think of as being "conservative." They also had to pursue different strategies in their political activism because of the conservative majority among Oklahoma's politicians. While Oklahoman Democrats were starting to shift towards liberalism, plenty still identified as conservative Democrats, and those who did lean left were still far less liberal than other Democratic politicians. This meant activists had to adjust their strategies. While they borrowed from previous work done by other activists, they had to adjust to suit their situation. Throughout this time, *The Gayly* and *Herland Sister Resources* kept community members informed on what was happening and published the work done by activists and organizations to help support the community or fight for its rights. They provided a space for a group of people who were largely not out as gay to keep themselves informed and engaged in any way they could. This activism was especially important during this decade as the AIDS crisis

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<sup>33</sup> "Oklahoma: Repressive-Antigay! ...The Advocate."

hit Oklahoma. While the disease did not hit Oklahomans to the same extent as other states, they still felt a major impact in the community, often spurring people to further activism. People came together during this decade to meet as a community in spaces created by gay-friendly churches and to work together to fight for protections for the queer community and, later on, increase AIDS awareness.

## Chapter One

### Growth of Gay Churches in Oklahoma

On September 11, 1980, an Oklahoma resident wrote to their representative, “Concerning bill S. 2081, please vote against changing the word ‘sex’ to ‘sexual orientation.’ Please continue to uphold the Ten Commandments and the Bible’s instructions for living a Godly life.”<sup>34</sup> Four years later, another resident wrote to their representative, “I believe that is a shame and disgrace to this country that we have degraded to the point of allowing and putting in position for that presidency one who caters to and supports that which is an abomination unto God: homosexuals or sodomites.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it is unsurprising that many Oklahomans expressed their opposition to various bills that concerned gay rights while invoking God or the Bible. In Oklahoma, gay political organizations, gay media, and gay religious organizations began around the same time in the 1980s. This simultaneous formation, in an evangelically-dominated conservative state, meant that Oklahoma’s gay community invested themselves in gay-friendly religious organizations more than other places, and those organizations, in turn, were foundational in building gay institutions and community in Oklahoma.

In the 1980s, Oklahoma was a very religious state. People both inside and outside of the gay community noted the strong presence of who they referred to as “fundamentalist” Christians

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<sup>34</sup> Dr. and Mrs. David Kem to Mickey Edwards, September 11, 1980, folder 12, box 8, Mickey Edwards Collection, Carl Albert Center Congressional and Political Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.

<sup>35</sup> Norman Blevine to James Jones, September 8, 1984, folder 12, box 144, James R. Jones Collection, Carl Albert Center Congressional and Political Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK (hereafter Jones Collection).



in the state.<sup>36</sup> Thus, religion played an outsized role in the state's gay community. On the one hand, queer Oklahomans often wrote about the hurt and trauma they had experienced at the hands of the church when they were growing up in Oklahoma. Some gay adults sought only to get away from faith communities, but so many more sought to repair their relationship with God through new faith communities. They took groups formed in other places and in other eras and made them their own, shaped in a way that fit their needs in the 1980s.

Christianity was the dominant religion in Oklahoma. Many of the prominent faith organizations who published advertisements in the paper explained that they were open to people of all faith backgrounds but usually only listed a few Christian denominations as examples. Many writers who specifically wrote about the church or religion identified themselves as Christians. Writers who spoke generally about faith usually still rooted their thoughts and philosophy in Christian ideology. Therefore, whenever religion is mentioned in this chapter, the organization or people being discussed are usually either explicitly Christian or base their faith and ideology on Christianity.

Other scholars have detailed the origins of gay faith groups, first with the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in the 1960s. This church—which was created explicitly to support gay people-- was influenced by important moments in the decade, such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Stonewall Riots, and the growth of evangelical churches, according to historian Melissa Wilcox. Early leaders of MCC wrote about themselves in a way that placed gay people as one of the oppressed groups of people who could find salvation through God. MCC intended to include people of all faith backgrounds. Wilcox contends that MCC's organizational beliefs

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<sup>36</sup> Frank Leclerc, "Letter to the Editor," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, May 1985.

put it in a unique position, as it attempted to be both liberal and evangelical. However, Wilcox sees it as a hybrid organization that benefitted from both social justice movements' growth and evangelical religions' rise in the 1960s.<sup>37</sup> Over the course of the 1970s, the MCC founded churches in communities across the country.

Many other queer religious organizations started in the 1970s, as detailed by historian Heather White. White begins with the original Metropolitan Community Church in San Francisco and follows with the founding of groups like Dignity, a gay-friendly Catholic organization, and Affirmation, an organization of gay Methodists in the 1970s.<sup>38</sup> In these decades, gay activists also overlapped and intersected with queer religious organizations, and queer religious organizations mixed faith with politics. Gay-friendly churches grew alongside and with gay rights groups like the Gay Liberation Front. For too long, Heather White argues, many have assumed that secularism was the main force behind changes and innovations in ideas and beliefs about sexuality during the twentieth century. Religion, she says, was there too, shaping both gay rights and anti-gay belief systems.<sup>39</sup>

In Oklahoma, gay religious organizations grew up alongside other gay organizations. Oklahoma City's branch of the Metropolitan Community Church was founded in the 1970s and many of the other major faith organizations were started in Oklahoma in the 1980s. This coincided with the growth of other types of gay organizations. Gay religious organizations in Oklahoma grew up alongside gay political organizations too, but they charted a different path

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<sup>37</sup> Melissa M. Wilcox, "Of Markets and Missions: The Early History of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11, no. 1 (2001): 88-92.

<sup>38</sup> Heather White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 155, 141.

<sup>39</sup> White, *Reforming Sodom*, 140, 7, 5-6.

than their predecessors. Gay Oklahomans invested in these organizations, and as a result, they had more influence on the community.

Gay media organizations also played an important role in distributing information and acting as a space where people could share their thoughts and ideas about faith. *The Gayly Oklahoman*, first published in 1983, began as a newsletter for the organization Oklahomans for Human Rights (OHR) but quickly became the largest gay newspaper in the state. In the late 1980s, it even began to cover parts of Kansas. It, like many community newspapers, was a place for people—whether they were out or not—to discuss issues that were important to them, read about local events, and also get a sense of the larger gay community. *The Gayly* was primarily oriented around gay men, while *Herland Sister Resources*, a feminist lesbian publication begun in the mid-1980s, focused primarily on issues faced by women, usually specifically queer women. It did not have as strong of a focus on faith and religion as *The Gayly* did and was often more critical of religion. Together these publications reflect the perceptions, affiliations, and analyses of religion from a good number of lesbian and gay Oklahomans. In these public but queer forums, gay and lesbian people built community and debated faith and philosophy.

### Growth of the Queer Religious Community

In 1971, the first Metropolitan Community Church in Oklahoma opened in Oklahoma City. They offered commitment ceremonies and communions to the people of Oklahoma City.<sup>40</sup> In 1976, Tulsa opened its branch. It began with five people meeting at a member's home. In the early years, they were forced to move around quite a bit after they were banned from having services at The Oddfellows Hall and then banned from the Presbyterian Church. By 1979, the

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<sup>40</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 291-292.

congregation had grown to 25 members and had found a pastor to lead them. Over the first ten years of its existence, MCC Tulsa faced several challenges, such as a conflict with a local religious television station that refused to air MCC's content but was forced to because of the contract.<sup>41</sup> The influence of MCC Tulsa later led to another branch of MCC opening in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, a suburb of Tulsa. While this Oklahoman church faced many challenges, it continued to push forward and grow consistently throughout its first ten years as an organization.

Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) is Protestant-based, though Wilcox notes its roots are in evangelical Christianity. As an organization, it began as a gay-friendly church in Los Angeles and grew to have chapters all over the world.<sup>42</sup> There were three chapters in Oklahoma during the 1980s. The first was in Oklahoma City, the second in Tulsa, and the third in Broken Arrow.<sup>43</sup> The main goal of the Oklahoma branches of MCC was to offer support and a gay-friendly religious space for the community. They also held community events and invited people to join them, regardless of their faith background. MCC invested deeply in the community, and the community supported them.

Throughout the 1980s, MCC regularly worked on personal and public levels to make sure Oklahoma's gay community felt heard and supported. They advertised their many events in *The Gayly*.<sup>44</sup> They also hosted the Gay and Lesbian Awards, which drew in a lot of people from the community as a way to fundraise and honor people who were important to gay activism in

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<sup>41</sup> "10 Years in Tulsa- Eternity in Christ," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>42</sup> Wilcox, "Of Markets and Missions," 91.

<sup>43</sup> "New MCC in Broken Arrow," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, September 1989, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>44</sup> "MCC Presents Gospel Trio, Seminar," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, September 1989, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

Oklahoma.<sup>45</sup> At this time, a lot of the events they hosted did not center much around faith or religion but rather the community itself, whether that be the work done by queer activists, queer artists, or people in healthcare. They were open to people of all faith backgrounds, and many events, like the awards or other meetings, reflected that.

Oklahoma City Catholics founded a chapter of Dignity, a national organization catering to gay Catholics, in the Fall of 1982.<sup>46</sup> This group, too, was open and accepting of members from other faith backgrounds. Oklahoma City's chapter was different from other chapters in other parts of the country because it did not operate as a fully independent parish.<sup>47</sup> Members of Dignity in Oklahoma City often belonged to multiple faith organizations; leadership planned their meetings around the schedules of other churches, including local Catholic parishes. Mary Ann Ladd, president of Dignity, explained this strategy in 1985, "You don't make changes by pulling out of [the Church]. You make changes slowly and personally from within."<sup>48</sup> Their goals were not limited to acceptance of the gay community, and at times, they worked on women's issues and youth concerns.<sup>49</sup> The Oklahoma City chapter of Dignity knew that the Catholic Church needed to improve, and that had to come from both outside gay groups and inside parishes. So, they stayed engaged with other Catholic churches in Oklahoma City.

Integrity, the organization for gay Episcopalians, started in the state soon after Dignity. Integrity believed that, "gay love can be as sanctifying as heterosexual love, if expressed within a

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<sup>45</sup> "G.A.L.A. Planned for March 1985," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, January 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>46</sup> "Dignity/Tulsa Receives Charter," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, July 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>47</sup> Ron Shaffer, "Gay and Catholic Not a Contradiction with Dignity," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, December 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>48</sup> Shaffer, "Gay and Catholic Not a Contradiction with Dignity."

<sup>49</sup> Shaffer, "Gay and Catholic Not a Contradiction with Dignity."

mutually committed relationship.”<sup>50</sup> For several years, Integrity had several chapters in the state, but in 1987, Dignity merged with the Integrity group. They became Dignity/Integrity in 1987. Nationwide, it was usually independent of Dignity, but there were seven chapters of this combined church (Dignity/Integrity) across the United States (one being Tulsa), which became eight when Oklahoma City joined. The president of Dignity in Oklahoma City believed Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans belonged together. Practically, members participated in alternating liturgies, but there was a greater purpose to this alliance. The president of the OKC branch believed that it was necessary to bring together the different faith groups since he saw the community in a “crisis,” likely referring to AIDS.<sup>51</sup> AIDS was an issue that many of these organizations dealt with from the beginning of their time in Oklahoma, unlike many groups in other parts of the United States that were more established by that point. The president of the OKC branch saw a broad “spiritual longing” among members of the gay community in Oklahoma City and felt that Dignity/Integrity was a way to fill that need while providing important service to the community.<sup>52</sup>

Love of Christ Community Church joined MCC, Dignity, and Integrity in the now small group of gay-friendly religious organizations in the mid-1980s. It first advertised in *The Gayly* in 1986, in an advertisement in September, and then in an article the following month. The church referred to itself as an “alternative” church that catered to people of all religions and had members who were Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal, among others.<sup>53</sup> “This group has shown exciting growth in only a month of existence, and with the effort they are putting forth in the

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<sup>50</sup> “Integrity Comes to OKC,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, June 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>51</sup> “Integrity Comes to OKC.”

<sup>52</sup> “Integrity Comes to OKC.”

<sup>53</sup> “‘Alternative’ Church Begins Ministry,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

community promises to be a growing and major influence,” wrote the *Gayly* staff.<sup>54</sup> In 1987, this congregation changed its name to Love of Christ Community Gospel Church after it became a part of a fellowship with a growing group of gay-friendly Pentecostal churches.<sup>55</sup> They note an “anxiety” about sharing this merger with people because it would mean they were no longer fully independent.<sup>56</sup> Church members had unanimously voted in favor of the merger, though, so overall, the church's leadership seemed excited. Like many gay-friendly churches in Oklahoma, Love of Christ had an affiliation with a specific sect of Christianity but maintained an openness to people of all backgrounds. The church, however, did continue, though it sometimes struggled to meet regularly.<sup>57</sup>

Affirmation, a group for United Methodists, started the same year at the Love of Christ Community Church. At one point, there was talk of another group known as Affirmation that would be for gay Mormons or gay people who had left the Mormon church.<sup>58</sup> When the Methodist Affirmation started in 1986, *The Gayly* reported that the group got off to a very strong start.<sup>59</sup> The meetings were well attended, and they were able to have guest speakers attend to speak to the congregation.<sup>60</sup> The group invited people of all denominations to join. Their purpose was twofold: to create a friendly religious space for the gay community and push for the inclusion of queer people in the United Methodist church. “It is hoped,” *The Gayly* staff wrote, “that by the year 2000, through the reconciliation of the United Methodist Church, Affirmation,

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<sup>54</sup> “‘Alternative’ Church Begins Ministry.”

<sup>55</sup> “L.O.C.C.G.C. Report,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, June 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>56</sup> “L.O.C.C.G.C. Report.”

<sup>57</sup> “L.O.C.C.G.C. Report,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>58</sup> S.L.D. “Letter to the editor,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, February 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>59</sup> “Affirmation: Off to A Strong Start,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, July 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>60</sup> “Affirmation Off To A Strong Start”

as an organization, will no longer be needed. Please feel free to be part of the group and share its goal.”<sup>61</sup> Affirmation also worked alongside the city to bring about change within the community.<sup>62</sup>

Leaders of Oklahoma’s Affirmation group also took on important roles in the national organization. One of the founders of Affirmation, Richard Monroe of Oklahoma City, convened the Advisory Committee of the Reconciling Congregation Program of National Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian and Gay Concerns.<sup>63</sup> The committee worked to help local United Methodist congregations accept gay members into their community. Working with straight members of congregations to overcome their homophobia and working with gay members to fulfill their spiritual needs were central to their mission as Christians.<sup>64</sup> Much like Dignity, Affirmation was very interested in not working separately from straight Methodists but reintegrating their congregations.

Even as these groups started and grew, offering more space for affirmation and support, queer Oklahomans still faced a repressive political and religious culture in the state. The Vice President of Dignity in San Antonio, Texas, Frank Leclerc, observed the effects of this repression in his recollections of his visit to Oklahoma City with friends from Florida and California in 1985.<sup>65</sup> He said he found the gay community of Oklahoma City to be extremely paranoid. Members of the queer community questioned him and his companions about their affiliation with the community at the bars they went to, which raised their own levels of paranoia

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<sup>61</sup> “Affirmation-United Methodists for Gay and Lesbian Concerns,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, April 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>62</sup> “Affirmation-United Methodists for Gay and Lesbian Concerns.”

<sup>63</sup> “Oklahoma Convenes National Committee,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>64</sup> “Oklahoma Convenes National Committee.”

<sup>65</sup> Leclerc, “Letter to the Editor.”



about being in Oklahoma. He wrote, “After living in locations where more non-fundamentalist liberal attitudes prevail, it was ‘foundation shaking’ to realize fully that not all my gay sisters and brothers enjoy the relative freedom which I had enjoyed as a gay person.”<sup>66</sup> He encouraged members of Oklahoma's gay community to keep fighting for their right to live as themselves.<sup>67</sup> What Leclerc did not realize was that the queer community of Oklahoma still found their own ways to be themselves and live their lives. While it might not have been in the same way that members of queer communities in other cities did, they engaged and invested in organizations like MCC, Dignity/Integrity, and Affirmation to connect with the community in their own way, and those organizations helped to shape and support the community in a way unique to them.

#### How People Saw Themselves and Practiced Their Faith

In the 1980s, both in the context of these organizations and the pages of the state queer publications, Oklahoma’s gay community regularly discussed faith and spirituality. People found ways to worship that often fell outside of the Bible's teachings and regular churches. Many people who were actively writing and engaging with the gay religious community seemed to have believed that the Bible and the church were inherently anti-gay and that they needed to find their own way to worship.<sup>68</sup> For many of them, this came from what they had experienced growing up in Oklahoma.<sup>69</sup> Still, people engaged in discussions of religion and sometimes used it as a guide for their writing and thoughts. Some of this stemmed directly from their investment in a particular denomination, while others spoke about faith generally. They also critiqued readings of the Bible that were anti-gay and critiqued churches that preached anti-gay rhetoric.

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<sup>66</sup> Leclerc, “Letter to the Editor.”

<sup>67</sup> Leclerc, “Letter to the Editor.”

<sup>68</sup> J.C., “Fundamentalists Would Do Away With Democracy.”

<sup>69</sup> O’Henry, “Letter to the Editor.”

There were many ways that community members brought Christianity into the philosophy of their daily life, and their investment in it became clear through their writings either for *The Gayly* or for *Herland*.

Many members of the community had been raised religiously, and some remained religious into adulthood. For some people, that meant they stayed with the religion they had been raised in, while others moved away from how they were raised, either to a new denomination or a more general sense of faith. One of the regular writers for *The Gayly*, Patrick O’Henry, was raised as a Catholic in Oklahoma, and his faith remained important to him during his time writing for *The Gayly*. O’Henry took up the issue of gay people and religion in an article written for Pride Month in 1986. He explained that while he had known several people who had been told by a minister it was wrong for them to be gay, he had never had that experience as a Roman Catholic. He described his religion as, “very conservative on such matters, but it is flexible.”<sup>70</sup> He continued to explain, “For example, the Catholic Church teaches that being a homosexual is not sinful. But practicing homosexuality is sinful.”<sup>71</sup> In O’Henry’s opinion, the Catholic Church had taken steps in the right direction, even if it was not much. As he wrapped up his article, O’Henry explained that he never felt any guilt when he realized he was gay and felt grateful to God that he had never experienced that anxiety around sexuality that many other gay people suffered from.<sup>72</sup> O’Henry’s experience at the church he attended growing up showed this since he realized he was gay at 12 and never was made to feel guilty about that.<sup>73</sup> Ron Schaffer, who was an editor of *The Gayly* and an important part of Oklahoma City’s gay community, also wrote

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<sup>70</sup> O’Henry, “Gay Pride-A Religious Perspective.”

<sup>71</sup> O’Henry, “Gay Pride-A Religious Perspective.”

<sup>72</sup> O’Henry, “Gay Pride-A Religious Perspective.”

<sup>73</sup> O’Henry, “Gay Pride-A Religious Perspective.”

about his own thoughts on religion and queerness, as well as his opinion on Catholicism. He knew that many people saw Christianity as anti-gay, but he presented it to people as a way to show that Christianity and being gay did not have to be a contradiction.<sup>74</sup> Much like O’Henry, he utilized love and faith to make his argument of why people could be gay and religious. Schaffer also discussed some of the more liberal policies the group of gay Catholics from Oklahoma wanted to pursue.<sup>75</sup> These authors remained invested in certain denominations and used that to share their opinions with the rest of the community.

Other community members did not share this same investment in a particular denomination and instead spoke about faith generally. Ken Johnson was an artist and member of Oklahoma City’s gay community who advocated for self-love and self-care.<sup>76</sup> While he started as the subject of a spotlight column, two months later, he began writing his own semi-regular column, which did not embrace any particular denomination but instead spoke of faith in a general way.<sup>77</sup> He worked to provide a positive outlook on life through his writing. In his first column, he wrote

How much we use our mind is crucial to our finding and getting what we want out of life, and giving what we want to it. Success, love, and abundance are not given to a privileged few by the whim of a judgmental God. Those who enjoy happiness do so because they have earned it with their thoughts. They have the faith that God is working for their good, and that every moment of life is a precious gift. By so thinking, they open the door to goodness and success.<sup>78</sup>

The rest of the column continued similarly. The author encouraged people to work on creating a positive outlook and not to allow themselves to become stuck in what has happened to them in

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<sup>74</sup> Schaffer, “Gay and Catholic Not a Contradiction with Dignity.”

<sup>75</sup> Schaffer, “Gay and Catholic Not a Contradiction with Dignity.”

<sup>76</sup> Ken Johnson, “Looking Up,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, August 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>77</sup> Catherine Decker Shields, “Vantage Point: Artist Ken Johnson,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, June 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>78</sup> Johnson, “Looking Up.”

the past. While there is not too much emphasis on God or religion, the author believed that God worked for the good of people and that the higher power he believed in had not turned against him because he was gay. The author also thought that happiness and success were things that people had to work on themselves.<sup>79</sup> This theme of self-improvement was common in many of Johnson's columns. He believed in changing mentality to improve quality of life and to look forward to a more positive future.<sup>80</sup> Clinging to the past was how people became bitter, preventing them from moving forward. This was a way to reject the mentality that some letters to the editor spoke of, that religion and religious fundamentalists were against gay people and did not believe they could live a happy life.<sup>81</sup> Johnson suggested that the community embrace self-acceptance through faith and be happy. They did not have to embrace a particular denomination to do so, though; they just had to embrace faith.

People who wrote in *The Gayly* also critiqued how the Bible had been used and interpreted and looked towards alternate interpretations. There is one column from the mid-1980s that talked about a new Bible that was printed that intended to be more inclusive of gay people.<sup>82</sup> In the new Bible, the writing did not condemn gay people, and love for other people was considered the most important of Jesus's teachings.<sup>83</sup> Liberal Protestants had been making that claim in one way or another since 1946, when "homosexual" first appeared in the Bible.<sup>84</sup> Even gay people in Oklahoma did not know the addition was so recent. They, like their anti-gay neighbors, assumed that language was a longstanding part of the Bible.<sup>85</sup> O'Henry found that

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<sup>79</sup> Johnson, "Looking Up."

<sup>80</sup> Johnson, "Looking Up."

<sup>81</sup> J.C., "Fundamentalists Would Do Away With Democracy."

<sup>82</sup> "Now a Bible for Gays," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, April 1984, *The Gateway to Oklahoma History*.

<sup>83</sup> "Now a Bible for Gays."

<sup>84</sup> White, *Reforming Sodom*, 1.

<sup>85</sup> White, *Reforming Sodom*, 3.

many gay people he had spoken to, but especially those raised in the Baptist church, struggled with accepting themselves because of the way the church taught them the Bible.<sup>86</sup> He, as a Catholic, used the justification that Jesus never condemned gay people as his way to reconcile his sexuality with his religion.<sup>87</sup> He fell in line with what liberal Protestants had done in previous decades through his explanation that the Bible did not condemn homosexuality and instead, it was interpretations of the Bible that led to the issues he saw in the churches of the 1980s.<sup>88</sup>

Some critiques of the Bible fell along denominational lines. Patrick O’Henry did identify himself as a Catholic, so he based his analysis of Protestants on what he had learned from friends, but that did not stop him from writing about Protestants and the Bible. His main issue was with the way fundamentalist Protestant churches taught the Bible. O’Henry wrote, “Fundamentalists forget that men wrote the Bible, but with God’s inspiration. They also wrote in the context of their own times. And they wrote with their own individual prejudices, just as I am doing with my own right now.”<sup>89</sup> The word “homosexuals” did not appear in the Bible until 1946 as a “modernizing” take on terms used in older translations.<sup>90</sup> O’Henry’s take on the Bible was very different from how he described the fundamentalists. He saw the Old Testament as a history book and explained Jesus never said anything against gay people.<sup>91</sup> His religious views and upbringing came into play here, but this passage explained how Oklahoman Protestants, at least the most vocal or well-known, taught the Bible to their congregations. Multiple aspects of

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<sup>86</sup> Patrick O’Henry, “The Word of God,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, June 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>87</sup> O’Henry, “The Word of God.”

<sup>88</sup> White, *Reforming Sodom*, 2.

<sup>89</sup> O’Henry, “Gay Pride-A Religious Perspective.”

<sup>90</sup> White, *Reforming Sodom*, 1.

<sup>91</sup> O’Henry, “Gay Pride-A Religious Perspective.”

people's identities played a role in how they viewed the Bible and other denominations' interpretations of the Bible.

General criticisms of the church followed the more specific critiques of specific denominations. Lynn Atkinson criticized the church when *Herland Sister Resources* interviewed her. She said that, in her view, the true teachings of Jesus Christ were not what the churches taught when she gave the interview. To her, the true teachings of Christ revolved around empowerment and healing.<sup>92</sup> Much of this relates to Bible interpretations and how different churches used the writings. Still, in this case, Atkinson did not single out a specific denomination and instead aimed at any church that claimed to teach what Christ taught because, in her view, there was a disconnect between those two points. O'Henry also criticized the hypocrisy of churches in a letter he published in *The Gayly*, but he directed it at Joseph Sorban, a conservative Catholic who wrote for *The Daily Oklahoman*.<sup>93</sup> He attempted to point out the hypocrisy of Sobran's justifications for his anti-gay rhetoric; O'Henry explained that many churches preach against divorce and that going by their rules would mean that Ronald Reagan had been committing adultery.<sup>94</sup> The church's actions were a sore point for some people writing for the paper. Even those like O'Henry, who were still proudly part of a church, acknowledged the hypocrisy of some of their rhetoric.

The role of God in the life of a queer person was another thread that authors followed. Some who stayed with a certain denomination usually saw God from the way their church taught them or the way they interpreted God based on their interpretations of the Bible or other religious

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<sup>92</sup> Mary P., "An Interview with Lynn Atkinson," *Herland Sister Resources*, July 1989, UCO-Herland Newsletter Archive.

<sup>93</sup> O'Henry, "Letter to the Editor."

<sup>94</sup> O'Henry, "Letter to the Editor."

teachings. Troy Perry, the founder of MCC, argued that God knew he was gay.<sup>95</sup> According to Heather White, MCC blended queerness and religion through claims like this and informed their story of its beginnings.<sup>96</sup> Ken Johnson wrote that seeing people be who they truly were is the way to achieve the type of life that God intended for people.<sup>97</sup> In a later piece, he wrote, “We have been given a Divine responsibility -to ourselves, to the world, and to God. That responsibility is to live fully and joyously in the way in the way we were created -Gay.”<sup>98</sup> The work he did here focused on healing trauma and how gay people could still accept God in their lives even though many residents felt rejected or hurt by church rhetoric. There were plenty of vocal citizens of Oklahoma who believed that being gay was a sin, and these beliefs had been heard by many of the gay community in Oklahoma as they grew up and attended church. Johnson never mentioned the church. Instead, he focused on the individual and the work they needed to do to heal and make themselves a better person and how God played a role in that.<sup>99</sup> What he advocated for in his columns is similar to what the liberal Protestants that Heather White discusses in her book did. White wrote, “They [liberal Protestants] constantly slough off their own religiosity in pursuit of a truer faith.”<sup>100</sup> Johnson and others like him were in pursuit of faith that was free from strict denominations. He believed God was involved in the lives of queer people so they could be who they were meant to be, and for some, that did not mean they had to align with a particular set of beliefs.

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<sup>95</sup> White, *Reforming Sodom*, 153

<sup>96</sup> White, *Reforming Sodom*, 153

<sup>97</sup> Ken Johnson, “Looking Up,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>98</sup> Ken Johnson, “Looking Up,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, December 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>99</sup> Johnson, “Looking Up.”

<sup>100</sup> White, *Reforming Sodom*, 8.

In a similar vein to God's involvement in the lives of queer people, the empowerment people could find through faith and God was also important to some writers. In a 1989 issue, Mary, a member of Herland staff, and Dr. Lynn Atkinson, a professor at OSU and social worker, talked about power and God.<sup>101</sup> Atkinson suggested that community change had to begin with change on an individual level. "When you're talking about empowerment," Atkinson added, "you're talking about doing what Jesus Christ taught. Not what the churches teach today, but what he taught. In terms of equalizing people, reaching out and seeing the pain inside of other people, and healing it, in trying to realize that we're all in this together."<sup>102</sup> For Atkinson, too, churches had contorted Christ's true meaning. She believed in creating a space where people could find equality, work on healing themselves, and find the power to heal others. Atkinson and the interviewer discussed how people can best work on healing themselves and progressing on their journeys to become better people. Johnson and others had also spoken about the empowerment and healing that people could find through faith, but Atkinson put it in terms of power.

Writers also applied ideas usually associated with Christianity and the church to the queer community. One of these was the idea of judgment. Ken Johnson brought this up and used religious rhetoric to show how the community might view judgment. In one of his articles, he discussed the way that people within the queer community might criticize others for acting a certain way.<sup>103</sup> The example he used is gay men judging a partner or friend for not acting masculine enough. He compared this to the way homophobes judge gay people for not living in

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<sup>101</sup> Mary P., "An Interview with Lynn Atkinson," *Herland Sister Resources*, July 1989, UCO-Herland Newsletter Archive.

<sup>102</sup> Mary P., "An Interview with Lynn Atkinson."

<sup>103</sup> Ken Johnson, "Looking Up," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, September 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.



the way that “God intended.” Johnson explained the damage these judgments can cause, and that to make a more positive personal world for themselves, people need to, ““Judge not, lest ye be judged.”” And ““Love thy neighbor as thyself.””<sup>104</sup> Both passages come from religious texts, and Johnson used them as a prescription for the community. His use of judgment turned around the way that people would have been used to thinking about judgment. Homophobes used it against queer people, but here he reminded people that gay people also needed to remember not to judge other members of the community. Johnson saw that there was a way to live that started to become the “norm” for members of the gay community, and people who did not meet that standard received backlash.<sup>105</sup> So, he turned “judgment” as a concept back to the community as a method of self-reflection. He knew these were lines that people would be familiar with, but he wanted people to embrace these lessons and apply them within their community.<sup>106</sup>

Anger and wariness towards the church and God persisted through the pages of *The Gayly* and of *Herland*. One *Herland* poet expressed anger at God for how the church treats women. She wrote, “I think the Christian God is 17 years old. Scared shitless of his women and ignoring his mother as much as He is able.”<sup>107</sup> In this poem, she flipped around a lot of typical narratives about Christian religions. Instead of God being the father of everything, in her poem, he is a teenage boy who does not know how to treat women. Perhaps this author felt treated by the church in a way similar to how men in her life treated her. She said that God was ignoring his mother, which could have been an allusion to the way she felt the church, or the Bible ignored women. Wariness or even hatred towards the church and religion was not uncommon since many

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<sup>104</sup> Johnson, “Looking Up.”

<sup>105</sup> Johnson, “Looking Up.”

<sup>106</sup> Johnson, “Looking Up.”

<sup>107</sup> Coad, “Heresy.”

felt rejected by the church's teachings. However, some people found ways to criticize and remain religious and affiliated with the church, while others criticized it in a way that indicated they had moved away from the church if not religion as a whole.

People who wrote into *The Gayly Oklahoman* and *Herland Sister Resources* held a variety of opinions on God, the church, different denominations, and the teachings of Jesus. They expressed these opinions through letters to the editor, columns, or interviews. While people may have differed in their views on these topics associated with faith and religion, they all integrated them into their writing. As seen in these newspapers, they invested in discussions about faith and belief, making them an important aspect of community life. People did not have to be a part of a specific denomination to engage; they did not have to have a favorable opinion of the church, and many did not. They found and discussed faith in ways that felt important to them and emphasized things they wanted others to consider or things they wanted to change.

### The Work That Was Done

As gay-friendly churches grew during this decade, their impact on the community increased, and they actively worked to create connections between themselves and the queer community and among members of the community. This manifested in several different ways but can best be seen through *The Gayly* and *Herland Sister Resources* and their organization of community events and sponsorships of projects that supported Oklahoma's gay community. The community participated in these events and supported the churches, and the churches supported them.

Faith organizations in Oklahoma often organized events to bring people together and raise awareness or funds for a cause that was important to people. These events also helped to

provide a greater understanding of the gay community to members of the community who were not as active. One of these was the Gay and Lesbian Awards hosted by MCC. The event was an opportunity to fundraise to help support the community and highlight the work done by members of the community. It was not only about activism but also art, community support, and visibility.<sup>108</sup> The proceeds from the event went to help the community in some way. They supported the community through funding of the gay community center, the food bank that was run by the community center, AIDS-related organizations, or other causes that were deemed important by MCC.<sup>109</sup> While people who were more visible and active in the community usually attended an event like this, there were still ways in which people who were not as active got involved. After the first year, MCC made it so people could vote for all these awards through a ballot in *The Gayly*. This allowed people who might not be able to attend to feel engaged with their community. While visibility had increased during the 1980s, many people were still in the closet or could not engage in the community because they did not live in Oklahoma City or Tulsa. Events like these allowed people to engage and have a voice within their community, even if it was limited. People also benefited from the money raised since it went back into the local community.

Fundraising for the community also became an important aspect of the churches' work. Many in the community were struggling, and donations to the food bank and community center were important but, unfortunately, were not always consistent. There was controversy surrounding projects like the community center since it was usually unclear who was in charge.<sup>110</sup> Many religious organizations ended up holding separate events to help the community

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<sup>108</sup> "G.A.L.A. Planned for March 1985."

<sup>109</sup> "G.A.L.A. Planned for March 1985."

<sup>110</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 291-292.

as a result of this. This was an important way to support a community that often lived in fear of losing their jobs because they were gay. Through the work that the churches did, people had something to fall back on if they ended up losing their jobs.

In Oklahoma City, Pride Week in 1986 focused strongly on religion. All of the major gay-friendly faith organizations were involved.<sup>111</sup> They showed films and sponsored talks that aimed at helping people better understand the role religion did or could play in their lives. The MCC sponsored a showing of “God, Gays, and the Gospel,” which told the story of MCC and the work they did, as well as getting into how the Bible discussed gay life and sexism in Christian communities. Dignity sponsored a film as well, focusing on a straight man who stood up for two gay classmates. Not every event held that week had an obvious tie to religion. There were events for gay parents, as well as a block party and art show.<sup>112</sup> There had been an understanding that the churches in Oklahoma had hurt many people, and there was clearly a desire for the faith organizations to show people that the fundamentalist church they had grown up in did not reflect the way all churches practiced their faith. By making religion a central theme of Pride Week, organizers showed their understanding of the importance of faith organizations to the community. Multiple organizations got their own night to plan films to show and organize speakers for this event, and it was considered a success by leaders of the main sponsors and event organizers.

As a result of many of the faith-based organizations not starting in Oklahoma until the 1980s, the AIDS crisis was something they dealt with as they were founded and grew as organizations. While *The Gayly* did emphasize that AIDS was not as prevalent in Oklahoma as it

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<sup>111</sup> Mary Bishop “Gay Pride Week-Oasis,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, June 1986. The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>112</sup> Bishop, “Gay Pride Week-Oasis.”

was in other states and major cities, people still mobilized to push for education and increased testing, as well as lobbied their representatives to block laws that would harm people with AIDS as well as the gay community.<sup>113</sup> In 1988, a group called Interfaith Connection on AIDS Response and Education (I CARE) formed in Oklahoma City.<sup>114</sup> Faith organization leaders made up the group, who wanted to be able to inform members of their congregation about AIDS in an educational way. Leaders hoped that out of this group, members of the congregation would mobilize into teams to respond to the needs of the community.<sup>115</sup> Combating the AIDS crisis was a nationwide issue for the queer community in the 1980s, and mobilizing people through churches was a common way that people in the past organized for different causes. While the gay-friendly religious organizations of Oklahoma were mainly only a few years old, it seemed that with this organization, they also reached out to non-gay churches. Activists did not limit themselves to Oklahoma City either; Tulsa also held an interfaith conference with AIDS as its main subject.<sup>116</sup> The event provided people with educational resources. Gay-friendly faith organizations worked to make sure they educated people about the AIDS crisis, even while some national religious organizations failed to respond in a way that helped the gay community.

The first Metropolitan Community Church was very involved in politics in San Francisco. The leader, Troy Perry, organized marches, vigils, and sit-ins.<sup>117</sup> While some of the members of the community worried about getting involved in politics, eventually, leaders

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<sup>113</sup> "Oklahoma AIDS Foundation Formed in OKC," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>114</sup> "New Group Called I CARE," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>115</sup> "New Group Called I CARE,"

<sup>116</sup> "AIDS Conference To Be Held In Tulsa," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, September 1989, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>117</sup> White, *Reforming Sodom*, 155.

decided that the identity of MCC could not be separated from activism.<sup>118</sup> The Metropolitan Community Churches in Oklahoma did engage in activism but not to the same extent that other Metropolitan Community Churches did. Their activism usually consisted of holding meetings, raising money, and supporting the community through their work.<sup>119</sup> So, while they both participated in activism, they were influenced differently in the early years of their congregations. The Civil Rights Movement influenced the early years of the MCC in San Francisco in the 1960s.<sup>120</sup> The early years of the MCC in Oklahoma City in the 1970s and early 1980s catered to a different group of people, many of whom were not ready to be out. With this type of activism, people could participate more passively if they were not in a situation where they could be out.

The work of gay-friendly religious-based organizations in Oklahoma was often done in a way that allowed people to stay in the closet if they wanted to. While in other parts of the country, religious organizations got very involved with activist groups that focused on visibility, this later start to gay-friendly religious groups in Oklahoma meant they did not feel the same influence that groups on the coast did, due to time and geography. They did what was best for the community of gay people in Oklahoma. Oklahomans lived in a different situation, one where they did not have to get involved politically until later. The community invested in religion, and the gay-friendly faith organizations that were popular at the time helped support and advocate for the community. They brought people together and grew as the community grew.

## Conclusion

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<sup>118</sup> White, *Reforming Sodom*, 156.

<sup>119</sup> "MCC Prepares for Fifth Gala Awards Banquet," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, February 1989, The Gateway to Oklahoma History."

<sup>120</sup> Wilcox, "Of Markets and Missions," 88.

The gay community and the faith organizations of Oklahoma came about at a different time than many other queer faith organizations. As a result of this, they grew and formed their identities in very different contexts than gay-friendly churches of the 1960s and 1970s, which were very involved with gay activism that existed in those decades. While it was different, they were still influenced by the work of those groups as well as by the work done by Liberal Protestants in the early to mid-twentieth century. Different people were influenced in different ways, leading to the development of various philosophies about religion, God, and the Bible. Women felt differently about the Bible than men did and chose different mediums to express their feelings about God. The 1980s were an incredibly important time for queer religious people and gay-friendly churches in Oklahoma. They grew as the community did and helped to bring together a community that had previously not been very active. This growth came at the best time for Oklahoma; while it may have been after other parts of the country, when these organizations formed at this time, they could grow alongside the community and change and adapt to the needs of the community. The formation and growth of these groups alongside the community in Oklahoma meant that they had a significant impact on the formation of Oklahoma's gay community, and the community, in turn, invested more in these gay-friendly organizations.

## Chapter 2

### Where LA Was Ten Years Ago:

#### Gay Oklahomans and Making Politics Work For Them

David Goodstein, publisher of *The Advocate*, visited Tulsa and Norman in 1984.<sup>1</sup> He spoke about the spirit and perseverance he saw in the gay community of Oklahoma. In a comment that he intended to encourage activism and progress for the gay community, he noted that Oklahoma was where Los Angeles was about ten years ago when it came to the gay rights movement.<sup>2</sup> Such a narrative-- that places like Oklahoma lagged behind cities like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles—was not new. Goodstein and others like him assumed that San Francisco's benchmarks of progress would be the same as Oklahoma's benchmarks. In Oklahoma, for a long time, the gay population was not very politically active, and many people were not out as gay in public.<sup>3</sup> When the community became politically active, they had to use methods and strategies different from those of people in major cities on the coasts. Oklahoma did not have the same population of out, politically active gay people. So, while it may have seemed like Oklahoma was lagging behind, the gay community was pursuing important goals and adopting strategies employed in major cities to fit their different situation. Conservative ideology had a strong hold on Oklahoma, so people in the gay community adapted to this by investing more in religion and, for some of them, the Republican Party. Those who were not conservative tailored their strategies for the conservative climate. While not everyone adopted these values,

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<sup>1</sup> "Publisher Speaks in Tulsa & Norman," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, March 1984, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>2</sup> "Publisher Speaks in Tulsa & Norman."

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Lee Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1889-2005" (PhD Dissertation, Oklahoma State University, 2006), 234.



there was a great awareness of them, and they had to base their strategy around these conservative forces.

The late 1970s was an important time of political transformation for Oklahoma's gay community.<sup>4</sup> The community had not felt the impact of the Stonewall Rebellion in the same way many other parts of the country had, and fear of what might happen kept many people from engaging in political activism.<sup>5</sup> People were not politically unaware, though; there were groups that existed on college campuses that started to support the queer community, and activists still did try and organize people for their cause. The passage of the Helm Bill was an important event for many queer Oklahomans since it put even more pressure on them to keep quiet about their sexual orientation so they would not lose their jobs.<sup>6</sup> This bill sparked the founding of Oklahomans for Human Rights (OHR), which played an important role in the early 1980s. After a politically quiet decade, the Oklahoma gay community had a very active 1980s.

In the pages of *The Gayly Oklahoman* and the newsletter published by Herland Sister Resources, there was an ongoing discussion about how to make social change in Oklahoma. Some wanted to be bold with their activism, while others wanted to stay quiet and show that gay people could fit into a dominant heterosexual society, like other gay communities in conservative areas. These tensions changed the strategies available to organizations like the Oklahoma Gay Political Caucus, as they did not have the same visible voter base that activist groups in San Francisco had. Still, they worked with what they had to make changes in the way they thought would best support their community. This meant they worked across party lines and often

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<sup>4</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 235-36.

<sup>5</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 234.

<sup>6</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 235-36.

struggled to gain support from the community. Many people were afraid to come out, so often, only a few people acted in a public capacity.

Gay Democrats and gay Republicans also had to operate differently in Oklahoma than they did in other parts of the country. At the time, Oklahoma was still shifting to a place where Democrats aligned with liberalism and Republicans aligned with conservatism. There were many Democrats who were against gay rights, and many who were not against gay rights did not do much to support causes important to the gay community. Gay activists' strategies shifted because of this; some supported who they believed would be best for the gay community even if that person had not voiced their support. Sometimes, that meant going against the party they usually aligned themselves with. Others decided to support whatever candidate most closely aligned with them on issues that mattered to the voter, which, for many gay Oklahomans, were not always issues related to gay rights.

### Background

Oklahoma's gay community became increasingly politically active during the 1980s. Activists from this time noted that while they were very aware of Stonewall and the movements that had grown in response to it, they did not feel the same pull towards community action that the activists who had started groups like the Gay Liberation Front did. Historian Aaron Lee Bachhofer argues that fear played an important role in this hesitation to be involved in activism.<sup>7</sup> Harassment and crackdowns on gay bars in the 1960s led to a lack of motivation to respond to the harassment through activism. The election of people like Curtis Harris, a county attorney who was extremely anti-gay, also led people to fear what might happen to them if they engaged

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<sup>7</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 234-35.

in any activist activities. After the passage of the Helm Bill, members of Oklahoma's gay community began to take action in greater numbers.<sup>8</sup> New political organizations formed, and people worked with other members of the community and with allies to promote better protections and rights for the gay community. This often required compromises and reaching across the aisle because Oklahoma tended to lean conservative.

Oklahomans for Human Rights was one of these early organizations that encouraged activism within the gay community. There were different branches, one in Oklahoma City and one in Tulsa, which diverged as the decade went by. OHR was responsible for the beginnings of *The Gayly Oklahoman* since the editors originally conceived it as a newsletter for the organization. It grew and eventually separated from OHR, but the organization continued to influence the community through the first half of the 1980s and even later for Tulsa's branch. Oklahoma City's branch suffered from a lack of interest and eventually reevaluated its goals and decided to focus most of its attention on the hotline it ran.<sup>9</sup> The "Gay Helpline," as the OHR eventually dubbed it, was run by the OKC-OHR, and the staff answered questions to the best of their ability or just acted as a friendly voice for a member of the community who may have been struggling.<sup>10</sup> OHR-OKC faced controversy because of its leadership, and eventually, the 1985 board felt that it was time to shift its focus.<sup>11</sup> What this branch had done was try to meet Oklahoma City's gay community where they were and push them a little further. Much of their organizing centered around the community center and the hotline. They did not push people to

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<sup>8</sup> Bachhofer, "The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay and Bisexual Male Subculture," 235.

<sup>9</sup> Alice Ruffel, "Open Letter From OKC/OHR," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>10</sup> Ruffel, "Open Letter From OKC/OHR."

<sup>11</sup> Paul R. Thompson, "OHR/OKC Resignation," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, January 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

come out and be public about their identity, and a lot of what they did raised awareness about the community for the community instead of for the general public.

Tulsa's branch of the OHR lasted longer than OKC's, and community engagement with it was very different from what leadership in OKC experienced. In 1985, they split from OKC-OHR and became Tulsa Oklahomans for Human Rights (TOHR). The organizations' leadership did this for tax purposes, but it ended up changing the future of these organizations as OKC-OHR would change their mission by the end of the year, while Tulsa Oklahomans for Human Rights would continue.<sup>12</sup> TOHR involved itself more with AIDS education and other community projects and was met with a positive community response, which allowed them to continue through the end of the decade.<sup>13</sup> They also initiated a program called "Straight Talk" which was a speaking program that went to local community centers and spoke with people as a way to dispel common myths about gay people.<sup>14</sup> This was successful for TOHR, and they celebrated their impact on Tulsa through their helpline and other programs. Much like its sister organization, TOHR tried to meet the community on its own terms. It did go a step further, though, by reaching out to the non-queer people of Tulsa. This was not done in a very radical way, but it could have been considered radical for a conservative state like Oklahoma; all that the program intended to do was to begin to dispel commonly held negative beliefs about the queer community.<sup>15</sup> TOHR was able to adapt to the shifting landscape of activism that existed in Oklahoma in the 1980s. They took on new projects and made themselves important to a community that was facing many changes and problems.

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<sup>12</sup> "Tulsa OHR Changes Name," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, May 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>13</sup> "TOHR Executive Board Set Sites High!" *The Gayly Oklahoman*, February 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>14</sup> "Happy Birthday TOHR!!" *The Gayly Oklahoman*, July 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>15</sup> "with Dignity/Integrity," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

The Oklahoma Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus began as the Oklahoma Gay Political Caucus, and it formed as a way for queer Oklahomans to meet and advocate for issues that were important to them.<sup>16</sup> Housing, employment discrimination, AIDS education and resources, and foster parenting were all issues taken up by the OGLPC. The group aimed to work with gay Democrats and gay Republicans in order to create an Oklahoma that was a better place for the gay community.<sup>17</sup> While the group started out as the “Gay Political Caucus,” it changed to “Gay and Lesbian” because of the involvement of women from Herland Sister Resources and other queer women.<sup>18</sup> Keith Smith was a member of the leadership, and he became the public face of the organization through his involvement with *The Gayly*.<sup>19</sup> The OGLPC also worked hard to keep the community informed about what was going on politically within the state of Oklahoma.<sup>20</sup> Smith would often write columns for *The Gayly*, which explained to people upcoming bills they needed to be aware of and what they could do about those bills.<sup>21</sup> Letter writing and contacting representatives were two of the major ways that the OGLPC encouraged people to get involved.<sup>22</sup> They knew from the previous experience of the OHR that it could be challenging to get people involved, so many of their methods often involved low time commitments and activities that would likely not risk people outing themselves to friends or family. The OGLPC also kept the community informed about issues that did not directly involve

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<sup>16</sup> “Caucus Forming To Defend Rights,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, May 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>17</sup> “Political Caucus Update,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1989, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>18</sup> “Political Caucus Update.”

<sup>19</sup> “Rally For Your Rights,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, September 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>20</sup> “Political News,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>21</sup> Keith Smith, “In My Opinion...,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1984, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Clark, “Oklahoma’s State Sodomy Law Ruled Unconstitutional,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, April 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

gay rights.<sup>23</sup> They knew the importance of forming alliances with groups focused on adjacent causes. As a result, there would occasionally be information about causes that did not affect every community member but did affect some. The leadership of the OGLPC tended to be liberal, but they were willing to work with people in both parties and support candidates from either party as long as those people were willing to help further their cause.<sup>24</sup>

Herland Sister Resources existed both as a business, an activist organization, and a newsletter. They were an organization of queer women formed because of a local Oklahoman bookstore. They worked alongside organizations like the OGLPC and fought for the concerns of women in addition to issues specifically faced by queer people.<sup>25</sup> Getting women elected was an important issue for Herland Sister Resources, and they wrote about the success of women politicians, regardless of party.<sup>26</sup> The organization saw itself as a lesbian and feminist organization and argued that all lesbians were inherently feminist, even if they did not see themselves that way.<sup>27</sup> Other authors echoed this guiding belief throughout the pages of the newsletter. They saw their existence as radical even if they did not engage in much open and explicit political action. Gay men tended to do a lot of the political writing for *The Gayly*, and the newsletter produced by Herland gave queer women a chance to present the issues important to them and then fight for those causes through their work with the OGLPC.

Many other queer political organizations existed in Oklahoma throughout the 1980s. Particularly as the AIDS crisis became a more prominent issue within the state, new groups

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<sup>23</sup> Keith Smith, "In My Opinion...," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, March 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>24</sup> "Political Caucus Update."

<sup>25</sup> "Political Caucus Update."

<sup>26</sup> "Women Win Primaries," *Herland Sister Resources*, October 1986, UCO-Herland Voice Newsletter Archive.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Jo Osterman and Phyllis Jean Athey, "A Lesbian Is Always A Feminist," *Herland Sister Resources*, August 1986, UCO-Herland Voice Newsletter Archive.

appeared to help fight for AIDS education, testing, and support for persons with AIDS. All of the groups found varying levels of success. Some were absorbed into other groups, while others fell apart quickly. What all of these groups had in common, though, was that they had to strategize.<sup>28</sup> They were dealing with a community that had not been politically active until the late 1970s and one where many people still feared what might happen to them if they came out. The conservative nature of Oklahoma also meant that many members of the community tended to vote for conservatives who did not usually support gay rights. The activist groups could not separate themselves from this population since many were vocal about their distrust of liberal politicians. Groups like the OGLPC knew they needed people from different political backgrounds and were willing to support politicians who might be labeled “conservative” because, as they said, even politicians who people labeled as liberal in Oklahoma would be conservative anywhere else.<sup>29</sup> Even with the community spurred to action with the Helm Bill, advocacy groups still struggled with a lack of support from the community. To combat this, they encouraged people to get involved in ways that would not require much of their time and would not force them to come out to their families and jobs. The organizations that understood this strategy found more success.

### Gay Republicans

While many members of the community who were politically active during this decade tended to lean towards the Democratic Party, there were still those who identified as Republicans. As a result of this, activists had to be willing and able to work with people from

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<sup>28</sup> Lynette Hill, “The AIDS Support Program Choosing Its Battles Carefully,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>29</sup> Keith Smith, “Politically Speaking,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

both parties since there were people active on both sides. While being gay and being Republican has usually been seen as a contradiction, historian Clayton Howard wrote about how there have been many people who have identified this way, and they have not seen their identities as contradictory.<sup>30</sup> The people he wrote about became known as “Log Cabin Republicans,” and the ones featured in his article were normally from major cities like New York, San Francisco, and Chicago.<sup>31</sup> Many of them had started out working with gay rights groups but realized that they tended to work with the Democratic party and had a liberal-leaning ideology.<sup>32</sup> When gay Republicans were asked by other members their opinions on issues that did not have to do with the gay rights movement, many of them began to turn away because they believed that the groups they had joined should only focus on gay rights issues. Since there was a large gay population in many of these major cities, gay Republicans were able to find others who shared their views and formed groups that worked to support both gay rights and issues important to Republicans.<sup>33</sup> The gay Republicans who lived in major cities often came out as both gay and Republican so that they could better argue their perspective on the issues.<sup>34</sup> Oklahoma’s population of gay Republicans did not make themselves as visible to the Oklahoma Republican party; some worked for different branches of the party but often did not come out. They also did not form separate political groups to advocate for gay rights. Despite these differences, many still held similar opinions about the place of gay rights among other issues, and the role of political diversity in the gay community.

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<sup>30</sup> Clayton Howard, “Gay and Conservative: An Early History of the Log Cabin Republicans,” in *Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American State Since the 1970s*, edited by Jonathan Bell (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 141.

<sup>31</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 144.

<sup>32</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 145.

<sup>33</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 146-47.

<sup>34</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 148.



Local politics was very important to the gay Republicans of Oklahoma. As one former Republican noted in a letter to the editor, “It is, however, beyond my comprehension that a formerly respected mainstream political party in my own state, The Republican party of Oklahoma, would allow itself to become the puppet of such dangerous, destructive thinking.”<sup>35</sup> The individual in this letter found themselves dissatisfied with the state and local Republican party more than with the national party, which is what caused them to leave.<sup>36</sup> On the other side of this, another individual interviewed by *The Gayly* found himself dissatisfied with the national Republican party but was happy to work with the local party.<sup>37</sup> The article's subject expressed his support for Ronald Reagan but believed that other forces in the party were pushing him further right. The article written about him explained, “The National Republican Convention in Dallas was controlled by conservative right wing Republicans who gave Reagan a more conservative platform than he really expected.”<sup>38</sup> In this individual’s view, there was too much media attention given to people like Jerry Falwell and Phyllis Schlafly (whom he calls “kooks”), which distracts from the work that mainstream Republicans did.<sup>39</sup> He had high hopes for Oklahoma Republicans though, “Oklahoma City, because of the growing strength of the Republican party in the northwest part of town, stands to become a Republican bastion in the near future.”<sup>40</sup> He believed that the state party would succeed soon as well.<sup>41</sup> This disconnect between national and state parties is not unusual for people involved in politics. However, in Oklahoma, people also

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<sup>35</sup> Victor Gorin, “Letters of Response to the Oklahoma GOP or Why I Am No Longer a Gay Republican,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, May 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>36</sup> Gorin, “Letters of Response.”

<sup>37</sup> Mark Clark, “Gay Republican Perspective,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, December 1984, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, “Gay Republican Perspective.”

<sup>39</sup> Clark, “Gay Republican Perspective.”

<sup>40</sup> Clark, “Gay Republican Perspective.”

<sup>41</sup> Clark, “Gay Republican Perspective.”

had a strong state Republican Party to turn to if they found themselves dissatisfied with the national party. The Republican Party was going through major changes, and people felt those effects differently depending on how they interacted with the party. For some, that meant turning more towards the state party or the national party, while others ended up leaving the party altogether.<sup>42</sup>

Much like some queer religious people tried to do, gay Republicans in Oklahoma tried to change the party from the inside. One of them compared what he was doing to the integration of schools during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>43</sup> In his view, if gay Republicans got into party politics and began to work alongside other people, and then someone found out they were gay, then that person might not care as much. The advice that individual had for gay people was, “An entry point for gays who wish to become active in the Republican party is, as it is with life in general, to be better than you have to be. If you’re gay, to be an achiever.”<sup>44</sup> Oklahoma did not have the same gay population that major cities like New York and San Francisco did during the 1980s. In a chapter for *Beyond the Politics of the Closet*, Clayton Howard explains that gay Republicans in many major cities did participate in GOP activities, but as people like Anita Bryant and Jerry Falwell became more influential, many of them started their own gay-friendly Republican organizations<sup>45</sup> While these clubs were usually small in numbers, they worked on voter registration and education and in California were able to get about 200,000 voters registered in 1982.<sup>46</sup> In Oklahoma, gay Republicans did not have these same organizations and instead worked to change the GOP from within with their local branches of the party.

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<sup>42</sup> Gorin, “Letters of Response.”

<sup>43</sup> Clark, “Gay Republican Perspective.”

<sup>44</sup> Clark, “Gay Republican Perspective.”

<sup>45</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 146.

<sup>46</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 148.

There is also a disconnect between the way that gay Republicans in major cities interacted with the GOP and the way that Oklahoma gay Republicans interacted with the branches of the GOP. Howard also discussed the ways that the gay Republicans who lived in major cities thought it was essential to be “out” as both gay and Republican. They believed that their dual identity allowed them to work with both gay people and conservatives.<sup>47</sup> They tailored their message depending on who they were dealing with and put pressure on GOP leaders to push their agenda within the Republican party.<sup>48</sup> Gay Republicans in Oklahoma who worked with the GOP did not have the same power. One individual explains, “If someone finds out you’re gay then it might not make any difference any more. I think we are a long way from that point now, but I would encourage anyone to try.”<sup>49</sup> This individual encouraged people to come out only if they had been working with other Republicans for a while, and even then, he was not sure if people would be accepting of a gay Republican working alongside him. He implies that this is a step he had not taken himself and did not think it was one people would be ready for yet.<sup>50</sup>

Some gay Republicans were driven away from the Republican Party during the AIDS crisis. As Howard noted, this left some unsure of where to go. They disagreed with Democratic policy, but there was increasing anti-gay sentiment within the GOP. Many gay Republicans believed that the lack of support for AIDS funding showed that Ronald Reagan’s main goal was to appease religious conservatives.<sup>51</sup> Some in Oklahoma also were driven away by similar policies, though their reasoning focused much more on the state Republican Party than on the

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<sup>47</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 149.

<sup>48</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 151.

<sup>49</sup> Clark, “Gay Republican Perspective.”

<sup>50</sup> Clark, “Gay Republican Perspective.”

<sup>51</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 155.

national GOP. Victor Gorin wrote in 1987, “It seems that the Oklahoma Republican party stands for ‘Freedom and Justice for some,’ and that some, it’s not even tactful in pointing out, does not include lesbians and gays.”<sup>52</sup> Earlier in the letter, he listed sections from the Oklahoma Republican platform that he perceived as anti-gay and also included his responses to those sections of the platform. Many of these policies involved the AIDS crisis and included the proposition that the state should ban gay people from working in food service because of the potential spread of AIDS, which the author pointed out had no basis in fact and was already disproven by this point.<sup>53</sup> Another part of the platform was that all gay bars and businesses should be closed because of potential health risks. The author of the letter pointed out that this would be hard to accomplish because who would decide which businesses were gay? He also noted that closing down businesses in this way would affect the livelihood of many people, and he had already noted several times before this that one of the reasons he had supported the Republicans was because of their economic position.<sup>54</sup>

One thing that many gay Republicans pointed to, both in Oklahoma and the Republicans in the cities that Howard wrote about, was that they believed that there were more issues that they cared about than just issues related to the gay community.<sup>55</sup> Many of them pointed to economics as an important issue; others brought up national defense as a reason for their support of the Republican party. Victor Gorin explained that he was drawn to the Republican party because they supported businesses and legislation that called for lower taxes.<sup>56</sup> He said that he was concerned about the big government, too. “I saw many well-intentioned Great Society social

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<sup>52</sup> Gorin, “Letters of Response.”

<sup>53</sup> Gorin, “Letters of Response.”

<sup>54</sup> Gorin, “Letters of Response.”

<sup>55</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 144.

<sup>56</sup> Gorin, “Letters of Response.”

programs of the 1960's result in dismal expensive failures, and believed that a welfare state was not the answer to society's problems," he wrote.<sup>57</sup> Gorin explained he had voted Republican ever since he was old enough to vote and supported the party when economic issues were a major part of the platform, but as social issues had become more prevalent, he pulled away.<sup>58</sup> Other letters to the editor spoke of the spending of the Democratic Party. Democrats "spend, spend, spend till it hurts and all of it comes out of my pocket in the form of taxes. They promise everything to everyone and in turn create a society that is dependent on government," one wrote.<sup>59</sup> This focus on taxes and spending was a key selling point for many of the gay Republicans who wrote into *The Gayly*. This focus on spending may have also come from Oklahoma's tendency towards social conservatism from both parties. While the Democrats were moving towards a more liberal social ideology, there were still many who remained socially conservative. To the Republicans from these articles, the economic side of politics was likely where they saw a real distinction between the parties.

Like the man mentioned above, some believed that the idea that the Democratic Party was supportive of the gay community was a myth. After a negative article about anti-gay Republicans and court decisions, many gay Republicans wrote angry rebuttals. One wrote that the author of the negative article "uses the old liberal idea that only the Democrats (Nigh? Spencer Bernard? Jim Barker?) are friendly to gays."<sup>60</sup> The Democrats that he mentioned here were socially conservative and were often against civil rights legislation that supported marginalized people. They held important positions as well; Nigh was the governor in the early

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<sup>57</sup> Gorin, "Letters of Response."

<sup>58</sup> Gorin, "Letters of Response."

<sup>59</sup> "Letters to the Editor," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, September 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>60</sup> "Letters to the Editor."

1980s, and Jim Barker was the Speaker of the House.<sup>61</sup> Barker became important when it came to housing legislation since he had a lot of influence over whether or not an anti-gay housing amendment would be removed. This triggered a letter-writing campaign to ask him to change the amendment.<sup>62</sup> It did end up getting changed, but he did not play a role.<sup>63</sup> The author of the letter to the editor pointed to local Democrats who had done nothing for gay people as a counterpoint.<sup>64</sup> With the increasing support of gay people for the Democratic party, there was a fear among some gay Republicans that Democrats would take gay voters for granted and not pay enough attention to their issues. Their concerns were not unfounded as there were few representatives who spoke directly to gay issues, with most left-leaning representatives preferring to speak more about general civil rights. A Chicago gay Republican raised this issue, but it was a concern shared by Oklahomans as well.<sup>65</sup>

The diversity of political thought was an issue best seen in the letters to the editor. With the same few people writing the legislative updates all the time, they could get a little one-sided. Other members of the community were not afraid to express their concerns; as one wrote, “It is sad to see that some gays do not see the advantage of having gays involved in both political parties.”<sup>66</sup> This quote was another response to the article written in August of 1986, which discussed Supreme Court decisions and the actions of Republican politicians.<sup>67</sup> This echoes the sentiments of people from Log Cabin Republican groups who worried that if there were no gay

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<sup>61</sup> Keith Smith, “In My Opinion,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, December 1984, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>62</sup> “Legislative Report,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, June 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>63</sup> Keith Smith, “Oklahoma Legislative Report,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, August 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>64</sup> “Letters to the Editor.”

<sup>65</sup> Howard, “Gay and Conservative,” 152.

<sup>66</sup> D.L.M., “Letters to the Editor,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, September 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, “Politically Speaking.”

people in the GOP, then the party would turn away from gay voters and focus more on the religious right.<sup>68</sup> Neither party in Oklahoma was particularly friendly towards the gay community, so for the members of the community who wrote letters like these, it made sense to them to have people in both parties. Political activists who leaned towards the Democrats believed they were making small changes within the party and wanted to keep pushing that further.<sup>69</sup> The writer of the letter noted the diversity of the gay community and wanted people to see that diversity extended to politics.<sup>70</sup> There were many who wrote about this political diversity, as well as those who did not identify themselves as Republicans. One Oklahoma resident wrote in to share their story about how *The Gayly* had inspired them to reach out to both parties' offices to ask them their stance on gay rights.<sup>71</sup> This individual explained that they did not usually get involved in politics, but the recent debate in the newspaper had encouraged them to learn more.<sup>72</sup> Another response from a resident thanked the paper for being willing to provide a space for those who did not align with the Democratic Party as they saw a lot of political diversity amongst the Oklahoma gay community.<sup>73</sup> The debate that had been going on through the last few editions of the paper had also prompted them to look further into the politicians whom the previous column had discussed, and this writer did not like what they had found.<sup>74</sup> For this writer, they had found that their senator's position on gay rights was too extreme for them to vote for him again. They had supported him previously but said, "I will admit that I believe in a

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<sup>68</sup> Howard, "Gay and Conservative," 152.

<sup>69</sup> Keith Smith, "Oklahoma Lesbian and Gay Democrats Announce Five-Point Plan," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1984, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>70</sup> D.L.M., "Letters to the Editor."

<sup>71</sup> P.C., "Letters to the Editor," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>72</sup> P.C. "Letters to the Editor."

<sup>73</sup> W.M., "Letters to the Editor," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, October 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>74</sup> W.M. "Letters to the Editors."

strong national defense, and a balanced budget, but at what cost?”<sup>75</sup> This writer then ended their letter with, “Don’t vote for a party, vote for yourself.”<sup>76</sup> The debate between gay Democrats and gay Republicans helped to encourage other members of the gay community to involve themselves in politics in a way they had not before or to look closer at the issues and people they had been voting for. People got involved at all points on the spectrum of political engagement and on the spectrum of party politics.

Gay Republicans existed all over the country, and as Howard wrote, they had been involved in politics in different ways in different decades. Gay Republicans in Oklahoma were involved in a different way than gay Republicans who lived in cities like San Francisco or New York. There were usually enough gay Republicans in those cities to form their own organizations, independent of mainstream Republican ones or ones focused on gay rights, which tended to be more liberal. The gay Republicans in these cities were able to leverage their power to influence politicians and other political organizations. Oklahoma gay Republicans did not have this same influence. While they spoke out for what they believed in, they did not form their own organizations, instead joining groups like the Gay Political Caucus, which the leaders intended to be bipartisan, or they joined an Oklahoma Republican organization where they usually did not let the people they worked with know they were gay. The gay Republicans of Oklahoma stressed that there was more to their political beliefs than just gay rights, and they argued that the Republican party had better defense and economic policies. They were also very concerned with divisions between the state Republican party and the national Republican party. They worried that people like Anita Bryant and Jerry Falwell had become too influential within

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<sup>75</sup> W.M. "Letters to the Editors."

<sup>76</sup> W.M. "Letters to the Editors."



the GOP. For some, this caused them to leave the party entirely, while others decided to focus more on state officials and state policy. They were in a different situation than those who lived in a city like San Francisco, so the gay Republicans of Oklahoma found ways to adapt that worked for them to have some influence in politics.

### Working with Democrats

While gay Republicans in Oklahoma worked silently alongside the state Republican party or left, gay Democrats in Oklahoma also struggled to work with and elect Democrats who would vote in favor of gay rights laws. In the 1980s, this mostly concerned AIDS testing and education, housing protection, and regulations concerning gay foster parents. Important political figures in Oklahoma, such as Keith Smith, who served as president of the Oklahoma Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus for years, often endorsed Democratic candidates in Oklahoma, but he did not fully support many of them. For Smith, prominent Oklahoma Democrats were simply the better option when compared to right-wing conservatives like Senator Don Nickles.<sup>77</sup>

Political endorsements in the November edition of *The Gayly or Herland Sister Resources* were common, but in many cases, they included less of an endorsement of the candidate and more of a critique of their opponent. The 1986 general election included a race for senate between Jim Jones and Don Nickles. Don Nickles was mentioned often in *The Gayly* by Keith Smith and other contributors as someone who would not be good for Oklahoma's gay community due to his rejection of funding for AIDS research and his support of anti-gay judges and other public officials.<sup>78</sup> Jim Jones received the endorsement from *The Gayly*, but it was less

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<sup>77</sup> Keith Smith, "Politically Speaking," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>78</sup> Smith, "Politically Speaking."

because of his own record and more because he ran against Nickles.<sup>79</sup> Endorsements for House of Representatives races turned out the same way. Dave McCurdy received the endorsement over Larry Humphreys because while *The Gayly* did not mention McCurdy's record on civil rights, they did know that Humphreys had ties to white supremacist organizations. Another candidate for the state House received an endorsement since they were running against Michael Hunter, who authored an anti-gay teacher bill.<sup>80</sup> The recommendations in *The Gayly* rarely used an excited tone when they endorsed candidates. The editors and political contributors usually seemed to support Democrats, not because they had great pro-gay rights records but rather because they were less conservative than their opponents.

While the Democrats *The Gayly* endorsed may have been considered less conservative than their opponents, they were usually not left-leaning enough to be considered "liberal" by political contributors. Keith Smith took this up in his piece about Jim Jones and Don Nickles; he argued "Anyone in Oklahoma is liberal in comparison to a Right Wing-er like US Senator Don Nickles."<sup>81</sup> He expanded on this by reminding readers of a recent study done by Americans for Democratic Action, which gave Jim Jones a 40 percent rating, which Smith viewed as far from liberal despite recent campaign ads that had referred to Jones as a liberal.<sup>82</sup> While Smith did not see Jones as a liberal candidate, he did see him as a better option than Nickles, whom Smith wrote about multiple times. David Boren was another conservative Democrat with whom *The Gayly* took issue. Boren was a former governor of Oklahoma who went on to serve in the U.S. Senate. *The Gayly* considered Boren's record on gay and lesbian issues worse than the average

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<sup>79</sup> "Election Picks for '86," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>80</sup> "Election Picks for '86."

<sup>81</sup> Smith, "Politically Speaking."

<sup>82</sup> Smith, "Politically Speaking."

Democratic politician from Oklahoma. Media outlets had accused him of being gay during his first campaign, and since then, he had been “terrified” of the gay community.<sup>83</sup> He refused to meet with gay and lesbian constituents who attempted to visit him in Washington, D.C., and he consistently voted in favor of anti-gay officials.<sup>84</sup> Boren stood as an example of a conservative Democrat whom the Oklahoma gay community wished to either change or get someone else elected in his place. So, while there were some liberal Democrats who voters elected to public office in Oklahoma, many other Democrats were either just as conservative as Republicans or they were just a little less conservative than a Republican opponent they might have been facing. Gay political operatives in Oklahoma had to work within this situation as best they could, which often meant attempting to appeal to people who did not have good records on gay rights simply because they were better than the other option.

The presence of gay Republicans in the state of Oklahoma often sparked anger from liberal Democrats. While gay Republicans argued that they did not believe in voting based on their sexual orientation, especially since several of them pointed out that the Democratic Party in Oklahoma was not always supportive of the gay community, there were many liberal Democrats who did not understand why they continued to support the Republican Party. Louise from Stillwater, Oklahoma, wrote in a letter to the editor

You are not traitors or enemies of your gay brothers and sisters simply by being gay Republicans. What makes you the enemy of your own people is your unwillingness to either change to the Democratic party or get active in your own party to change its homophobic platform and anti-gay activities. Until you clean up your party, selling it to gays and lesbians is like selling the Nazi Party to Jews

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<sup>83</sup> Keith Smith, “Election Analysis: What We’ve Lost and What We’ve Gained,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, December 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>84</sup> Smith, “Election Analysis.”

or the KKK to the blacks. You boys have some house cleaning to do on lesbian/gay issues before we gay Democrats keep quiet.<sup>85</sup>

She was not the only member of the gay community who was angry at gay Republicans. Harry Livesay, a former Republican and, at the time of the letter, current Democratic activist who worked in both Texas and Oklahoma, also wrote a letter to the editor asking gay Republicans what they were doing to improve their party. He noted that at the recent Oklahoma State Democratic Convention, there had been openly gay delegates who had taken part; the same could not be said for the recent GOP convention.<sup>86</sup> While the Democrats in these letters were angry, they recognized that the Republican party held a lot of influence in Oklahoma. Hence, they needed gay Republicans to try and change the party's policies from the inside. Livesay wondered if anything might have been different with the AIDS crisis if gay Republicans had spoken up and taken an active role in their party. While he was just musing on what could happen if gay Republicans were more active, he was speaking to larger issues of visibility. Gay Democrats were angry at gay Republicans because they did not make themselves visible in the Republican party and, in their view, allowed homophobia to fester in both the state and national party platforms. In a state with a liberal Democratic majority, appealing to gay Republicans may not have been such an important task. In Oklahoma, it was necessary.

Democrats had to be willing to work with the Republican party; the state had shifted to be Republican-controlled, so to get work done, Democrats had to communicate with Republicans. In 1986, the Oklahoma Gay Political Caucus endorsed Republican Henry Bellmon for governor. *The Gayly* editors did not endorse either the Republican or Democratic candidate since they

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<sup>85</sup> Louise, "Letter to the Editor: Clean Up Your Party!" *The Gayly Oklahoman*, February 1989, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>86</sup> Harry Livesay, "Letter to the Editor: Where Were The Republicans," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, February 1989, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

argued both had a decent record on civil rights.<sup>87</sup> The Oklahoma Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus, while it tended to endorse Democrats and its leaders tended to identify as liberals, intended to be an organization that represented the political interests of the gay community, no matter what political party they belonged to.

Before the late 1970s, the gay community in Oklahoma had not been very politically active; as a result of this, gay Democrats felt they had to catch up and integrate themselves into the party. For gay Democrats, this meant “to attend Democratic meetings in off years and to be more involved and become an integral part of the Democratic Party as opposed to participants in the system every four years.”<sup>88</sup> This quote appeared in *The Gayly* in 1985. In 1988, J.W. from Oklahoma City wrote a letter to the editor. The author of the letter felt excited about the progress that gay Democrats had made but knew there was still more work in the future. At the 5th District Convention, the Oklahoma Democratic Party had the chance to elect what would have been its first openly gay delegate to attend the National Democratic Convention.<sup>89</sup> While they did not elect a member of the gay community, the group that tried to get a member of the community elected only lost by seven votes. The author of the letter was disappointed and wondered where all of the members of the community who were registered to vote were, but they also noted the progress the community had made for them to lose by only seven votes. The author also wrote that to get to that point, members of the gay community who involved themselves with the Democratic Party had to overcome homophobia and prejudice among

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<sup>87</sup> “Election Picks For ‘86”

<sup>88</sup> Keith Smith, “Demos To Have Precinct Meeting,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, February 1985, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>89</sup> J.W. “Letters to the Editor: Gay Democrats Gaining Clout,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, May 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

members of the party who were not a part of the community.<sup>90</sup> Gay Democrats in Oklahoma had come a long way but were still dealing with conservative Democrats and liberal Democrats who were homophobic.

Finding straight allies within the Democratic Party was a goal for gay Democrats. The Republicans also understood the importance of allies, but since many of them did not come out to fellow Republicans, it was harder to test for potential alliances. In 1984, the pages of *The Gayly* proclaimed that a representative of Oklahoma's gay community would attend the Democratic National Convention.<sup>91</sup> Midway through the first paragraph of the article, the author explains that Helen Pate, who represented Oklahoma's third district, is not gay, but she is an ally. Keith Smith, *The Gayly*'s political correspondent, and gay rights activist, had met her at a district-level convention. She supported him in a failed attempt to run as a delegate for the state convention, and when she was elected to represent Oklahoma, she decided to attend in support of the gay community.<sup>92</sup> The Oklahoma Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus also sought support from women's organizations, and in turn, they supported causes that were important to those groups. *Herland Sister Resources*, which operated as both a lesbian and feminist publication, helped bring together these people and causes to build alliances and work towards what both groups sought.

The strategies employed by the Oklahoma gay Democrats were usually not very visible. Still, they were effective for a group of people who had members who could not be out publicly. With the expectation of Pride parades in June, Oklahoma was not home to many political

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<sup>90</sup> J.W. "Letters to the Editor."

<sup>91</sup> "Oklahoma Gays To Be Represented At Democratic Convention," *The Gayly Oklahoman*, July 1984, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>92</sup> "Oklahoma Gays To Be Represented At Democratic Convention."

marches. As a result, activists employed different strategies to get people involved. Phone calls and letter writing were very popular strategies to get people involved with politics. Encouraging people to call their representatives or recruiting volunteers to call constituents to encourage them to vote were common strategies in *The Gayly*.<sup>93</sup> As in many parts of the country, voter registration became an important aspect of political activist's strategy.

Gay Democrats in Oklahoma did not have the advantage of a strong liberal Democratic state party. Republicans controlled the state legislature, and many Democratic politicians were socially conservative. Those who were deemed “liberal” were often not liberal enough to take a strong stance on gay rights issues. These obstacles led gay Democrats to rely on alternative strategies since they often struggled to get delegates elected to represent their community. The work of allies and other left-leaning civil rights groups was essential to what gay Democrats did during the 1980s. They also appealed to gay Republicans in the state to try and get them to either work on changing their party or work more with the Democrats so that they could accomplish more.

## AIDS

The gay community of Oklahoma did not have the same sense of urgency that major cities like New York or San Francisco had in the early 1980s when it came to the AIDS crisis. AIDS did not hit Oklahoma as hard at the beginning of the crisis as it did other parts of the country. Many were not as concerned about it, particularly in the lesbian community. Still, leaders of the gay community pushed to recognize AIDS as a major issue, and gay rights organizations recognized Oklahoma’s AIDS education programs for how important they were.

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<sup>93</sup> Smith, “Oklahoma Lesbian and Gay Democrats Announce Five-Point Plan.”

While it seems like Oklahoma may have lagged behind other parts of the country when it came to AIDS, the gay community did what best suited its needs and the issues it faced in the early 1980s. Organizations focused a lot of their attention on AIDS education, and by making that their main priority, they accomplished more. Groups also worked with members of both major political parties to accomplish their goals. Many conservative leaders still opposed legislation in favor of education and testing, but some came around and were supportive.

For the lesbian community of Oklahoma, AIDS was not a major priority for them until late in the 1980s. In the newsletter published by Herland Sister Resources, there was a letter to the editor where the writer told a story about a party where she had gotten close with another woman when the woman asked her about “gloves” and then began talking about HIV/AIDS.<sup>94</sup> The writer was confused by this as she was under the impression that lesbians could not get AIDS. In response, the editor tells her to calm down as while it is true that lesbians could get AIDS, as a community, they were at very low risk.<sup>95</sup> This mindset that lesbians were low-risk and, therefore, did not need to worry about AIDS remained prevalent for the first few years of the *Herland Sister Resources* newsletter. As cases of AIDS increased in Oklahoma and AIDS education became a larger issue, the newsletter started printing articles that the editors intended to educate lesbians about how AIDS could affect them. While this delay in concern about AIDS education did come later for Oklahoma lesbians than it did for lesbians in cities like New York, it also reflected their situation.<sup>96</sup> Many of the lesbians who were involved with the AIDS crisis in major cities were involved because they knew gay men who were affected and got involved from

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<sup>94</sup> Terri Fied, “Just Ask Ima,” *Herland Sister Resources*, December 1987, UCO-Herland Newsletter Archive.

<sup>95</sup> Fied, “Just Ask Ima.”

<sup>96</sup> Amber Hollibaugh, “Lesbian Denial and Lesbian Leadership in the AIDS Epidemic: Bravery and Fear in the Construction of a Lesbian Geography of Risk.” In *Women Resisting AIDS: Feminist Strategies of Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 224.



there. In Oklahoma City, the lesbian community and the gay male community were not as directly involved with each other.<sup>97</sup> *The Gayly* did not write much about issues that concerned women and lesbians, and *Herland* did not publish much on issues that were relevant to gay men early in the 1980s. Things changed as the two communities started to work together more through groups like the OGLPC. While there was not a complete bringing together of the lesbian community and the queer man community in the 1980s, people did start to work together more on issues like the AIDS crisis.

At the end of the decade, *Herland Sister Resources* changed how they addressed the AIDS crisis. It had gotten more serious in Oklahoma, and it was now clearer how it could affect women. One article that seemingly acted as a major turning point in the activism of the lesbian community was published in both *The Gayly* and *Herland*. It was entitled, “AIDS: A Woman's Concern,” and a nurse from Oklahoma wrote it.<sup>98</sup> It explained to women, both gay and straight, why they needed to take the AIDS crisis seriously and specifically spoke to lesbians about why they should be concerned.<sup>99</sup> One of these reasons is the fact there was still a lot that people living in 1988 did not know about AIDS. This article did bring about a greater awareness for everyone about the risks of AIDS. The article itself called explicitly for people not to mirror heterosexual beliefs about AIDS and assume it only affected gay men.<sup>100</sup> *Herland Sister Resources* started publishing more about AIDS education, and the editors of *The Gayly* also showed their readers that this was not an issue only gay men were facing. Testing for HIV/AIDS had been a major

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<sup>97</sup> “Who Reads The Gayly...and Why?” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1984, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>98</sup> Cindy Irwin, “AIDS: A Woman’s Concern,” *Herland Sister Resources*, March 1988, UCO-Herland Newsletters Archive.

<sup>99</sup> Irwin, “AIDS.”

<sup>100</sup> Irwin, “AIDS.”

issue in Oklahoma, and while previously people had usually encouraged gay men to get tested, women were now also encouraged to get themselves tested, particularly if AIDS educators considered them high-risk, which generally referred to women who were sex workers, who used needles or who had sex with men which included some queer women from *Herland's* community.<sup>101</sup>

The AIDS crisis caused the gay community to start more and more groups focused on activism and education. Some focused more on education, others focused on helping those who were affected by the disease, and others worked on political advocacy. AIDS education was very important to members of the gay community in Oklahoma who worked on advocacy. In 1987, Oklahoma passed a bill to mandate AIDS education, and twelve other states had followed its lead by mid-1988.<sup>102</sup> Oklahoma was the first state to pass a bill related to AIDS education, and it set a precedent for other states. In 1988, Oklahoma also managed to secure a federal grant of one million dollars to be put towards AIDS testing and education.<sup>103</sup> While there was a potential conflict because the Helms Amendment did not allow for any federal funding that would promote “homosexual activity,” the AIDS activist groups in the state found ways to adjust their programs and the wording of their materials so that they would not violate the law.<sup>104</sup> The Helms Amendment was federal legislation that the ACLU attempted to challenge.<sup>105</sup> The groups that received funding from this grant were well organized and had planned out what money would go

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<sup>101</sup> Irwin, “AIDS.”

<sup>102</sup> “Oklahoma Leads in AIDS Education,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, July 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>103</sup> Harry Livesay, “State to Receive Million Dollar AIDS Grant,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, July 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>104</sup> Livesay, “State to Receive Million Dollar AIDS Grant.”

The Helms Amendment was a different piece of legislation than the Helm Bill from Oklahoma.

<sup>105</sup> Larry Prater, “AIDS Update,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, December 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

to testing, which sites it would go to, and which “high-risk” groups to target for increased education.<sup>106</sup>

While AIDS education in Oklahoma did make an important impact, it did not come about without roadblocks. One of these was the Republican Party of Oklahoma. In 1987, *The Gayly* reported that the state Republican platform stood against any state-mandated sex education program that included AIDS education.<sup>107</sup> There were also state legislators who attempted to put up roadblocks to increased funding for AIDS education.<sup>108</sup> One of the people who broke from this platform was Oklahoma’s governor, Henry Bellmon, who added funding for AIDS education into the executive budget and stated his support for AIDS education for teenagers. He explained that he knew his position would be unpopular with state Republicans, but he also saw that AIDS was an epidemic and felt he needed to do something.<sup>109</sup> There were others who followed the governor's lead and broke from the party platform by supporting a bill that called for AIDS education in public schools.<sup>110</sup> So while there were roadblocks, such as blocked funding for AIDS education by a Republican representative from Tulsa, there was also support from places that members of the gay community did not expect.<sup>111</sup>

The push to reframe AIDS as an issue faced by many groups of people, not just gay men, was a shift made by the community as the 1980s wore on. The AIDS support programs in Oklahoma reflected this in the stances they took. The chairman of the AIDS Support Program

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<sup>106</sup> Livesay, “State to Receive Million Dollar AIDS Grant.”

<sup>107</sup> “State Republican Party Takes Anti-Gay Platform Bellmon Defies AIDS Education Plank,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, April 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>108</sup> “State Republican Party Takes Anti-Gay Platform Bellmon Defies AIDS Education Plank.”

<sup>109</sup> “State Republican Party Takes Anti-Gay Platform Bellmon Defies AIDS Education Plank.”

<sup>110</sup> “State Republican Party Takes Anti-Gay Platform Bellmon Defies AIDS Education Plank.”

<sup>111</sup> Harry Livesay, “State Senator Blocks TOHR AIDS Funding,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, August 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

explained that, “The A.S.P. is focused on AIDS and not on being a gay organization. The AIDS health crisis primarily affected gays in the beginning, but it affects the whole spectrum of society.”<sup>112</sup> *The Gayly* also published statistics about other groups of people and how they had been affected by AIDS, as well as letting people know what might increase their chances of AIDS.<sup>113</sup> AIDS reached the straight community, which also brought up issues with biphobia. As one woman who wrote to *Herland* explained, she had experienced discrimination from both the gay community and the straight community because people around her blamed bisexual people for the spread of AIDS among straight people.<sup>114</sup> While people knew at the point the author wrote the letter that AIDS could spread in several different ways, the woman who wrote the letter felt abandoned by the lesbian community because she was bisexual.<sup>115</sup> As AIDS spread in Oklahoma, new complications within the community and within the political sphere arose as forms of homophobia spread through both the gay community and Oklahoma in general.

Oklahoma was never the state that had the highest rates of AIDS or the state that had the most people fighting for AIDS awareness, but it was very strong on AIDS education, sometimes leading the way with laws and funding. Even with a strong conservative base, these bills were able to pass because of the work done by the community, but also because of the willingness of politicians to sometimes go against their party in order to help people learn more about a disease that often did not get the coverage it needed for people to learn.<sup>116</sup> There was still a lot of misinformation, and a lot of information continued to spread even after it was outdated. This

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<sup>112</sup> Lynette Hill, “The AIDS Support Program Choosing Its Battles Carefully,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, November 1988, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>113</sup> Larry M. Prater, “AIDS Update,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, February 1987, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

<sup>114</sup> “Letter to the Editor,” *Herland Sister Resources*, July 1989, UCO-Herland Newsletter Archive.

<sup>115</sup> “Letter to the Editor.”

<sup>116</sup> “O.E.T.A. Refuses to Air AIDS Program,” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, December 1986, The Gateway to Oklahoma History.

information had to be corrected, and activists and community members did their best to educate others. The many AIDS support groups also worked together to tackle different issues that persons with AIDS faced because of the disease. Some focused on political activism, others focused on testing, and others focused on support for persons with AIDS.<sup>117</sup> The main focus though, was on testing, and since activists made this a main goal, they were able to accomplish quite a lot when it came to AIDS education.

### Conclusion

In 1984, when David Goodstein spoke at the University of Oklahoma and later in Tulsa to crowds of students and members of the queer community, he said that Oklahoma was about ten years behind Los Angeles in terms of gay rights. Oklahomans lived in very different circumstances than people from LA, which makes this comparison difficult. The queer community in Oklahoma had not been moved to action by the Stonewall Riots in the same way the queer communities of other cities had been. It was not until the late 1970s that queer Oklahomans really began to organize, which led to a major growth in activism in the 1980s. Even with this, though, many people still did not participate.

Oklahoma was a very conservative state, and activists knew that the fear of conservative political forces played a role in people's willingness to participate. This led to them investing more in strategies that allowed people to participate in a way that would not risk their jobs or reputations. They also invested more attention into working with conservative forces. It would have been difficult to get anything done politically without engagement with conservative politicians, so activists worked with those who were willing to compromise and work with them.

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<sup>117</sup> Hill, "The AIDS Support Program."

This meant supporting people from either party depending on their policies since there were still conservative Democrats in the state who were less willing to support queer issues than Republicans were.

While there were still issues and disagreements amongst members of the community when it came to political parties, there was an awareness that people had to be willing to put these differences aside for the sake of the queer community. This meant encouraging gay Republicans to work on changing their party from the inside or attempting to work out which Democratic politicians would be willing to support gay rights issues. The AIDS crisis played a role here as some people put aside their differences to try and work on a public health crisis. Conservative forces could not be ignored or pressured, so aspects of them had to be embraced as a means of strategy. Very little could be accomplished without them because of their control of state politics.

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