

A short history of Alaska LGBT rights

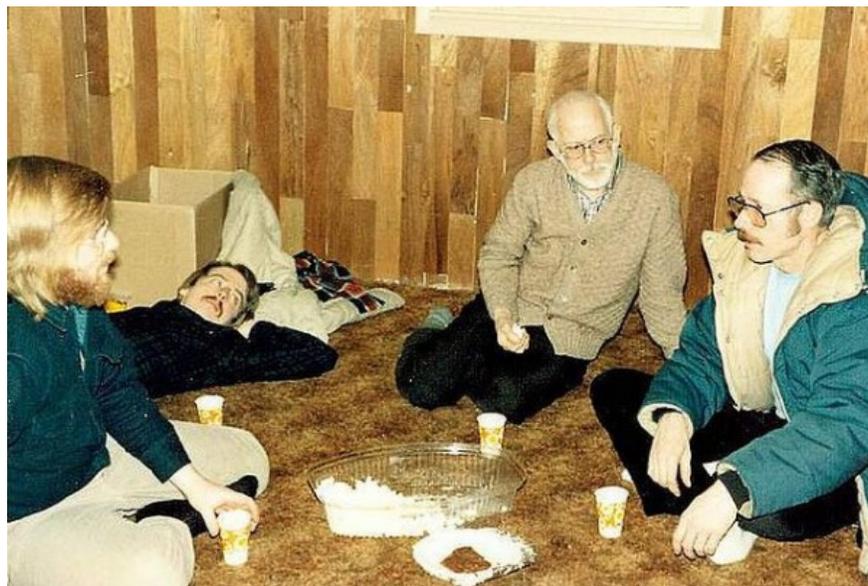
By Lakeidra Chavis, KTOO - Juneau - August 18, 2015

Alaskans voted in 1998 to define marriage in the state constitution as only between a man and a woman. Now that the U.S. Supreme Court has invalidated that definition, Alaska and the entire country has marriage equality. To some it may seem like things are changing fast, but Alaska's fight for gay rights began half a lifetime ago.

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In the course of Alaska's legislative history, there have been six bills to outlaw sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination. In Anchorage, there have been at least three ordinances.

They've all failed.



(left to right) Jay Brause, Gene Dugan, Fred Hillman and Les Baird. In 1982, the board members were moving out of the Alaska Gay & Lesbian Resource Center, which closed down. It was later revamped and named Identity, Inc. (Photo courtesy of Melissa Green)

The fight may have begun in 1975, when the Alaska State Human Rights Commission took a formal stance that sexual preference should be included in the state's non-discrimination policy.

House Bill 125 was introduced in 1987, during the AIDS epidemic. The commission director, the attorney general and the governor all supported the bill.

"[It was] just something that seemed to me, it was time to make some noise about it," says former Democratic Gov. Steve Cowper.

He **introduced the bill** less than two months after taking office. He had served in the Vietnam War and made a friend who was gay.

"They served just as well or better than other people," Cowper said.

Cowper can't remember why exactly he introduced the bill, but cites that personal experience as a possible reason. Old files **also suggest** commission Director Janet Bradley asked for his support.

"But as a general principle, people shouldn't be discriminated against any more than you should be able to discriminate for racial reasons," Cowper said.

Cowper's friend died from AIDS years later. HB 125 never made it out of committee.

Janet Bradley left the Human Rights Commission in 1988. During the last decade of her career, she had taken an aggressive approach to more inclusive legislation.

After she left, Paula Haley became the commission's director. She's still the director now and she hasn't touched the issue.

In 1989 through an LGBT advocacy group, researchers Melissa Green and Jay Brause published a [statewide survey](#) documenting the experiences of Alaska's lesbian and gay community, including issues of discrimination and health.

Janet Bradley ended the report's forward with a call to action: "This report then becomes our challenge; for if we believe that our vision of Alaska is marred when discrimination exists, we must commit ourselves to eliminating sexual orientation discrimination."

In 2012, Green published her [final report](#) on a survey on LGBT discrimination in Anchorage through Identity, Inc. It was a few weeks before Anchorage voted on Proposition 5, a sexual identity anti-discrimination measure that failed. She says the report received a lot of criticism.

"It has important things to say. I hope that people might still read it, but I'm done. I'm done. I'm off on my own life," Green said.

She's burnt out and says she's kind of bitter.

"It ate up a lot of my life and a lot of my time, and it had, I wouldn't say exactly zero impact, but pretty close to that," Green said. "Nobody really cared— outside of the [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] community, nobody really cared."

In 1986, the Anchorage Daily News [interviewed](#) a gay man working at Identity, Inc., an advocacy organization. He was collecting violent and homophobic voice mail the office received for a [research report](#) on gay and lesbian discrimination.

That man's name was Jay Brause.

"Through the AIDS crisis we started finding out how important our relationships were," Brause said.

"We started finding out we had no rights. We were denied in so many ways." Brause said.

He said he knew of couples who'd been together for decades and if one of them would become ill or die, often their relationship meant nothing when it came to hospital visitation, burials, military honors and home ownership.

"How do you explain that to people? It's a potent, virulent form of discrimination," Brause said.

During the same year the ADN published the story, he interned with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in D.C.

Brause and his now-husband Gene Dugan [applied for their marriage license](#) in 1994. The controversial act eventually led to the 1998 constitutional amendment defining marriage.

He paid for being a prominent gay figure in the 80s and 90s in more ways.

"I felt the prejudice and the discrimination very personally and directly. In a way, you don't know if you're hiding or you haven't disclosed (your sexuality)," Brause said.

Like his friend Melissa Green, he's disillusioned about his fight and American liberties. His reaction when Alaska got marriage equality?

"I did not have the person-in-the-street's reaction. No, not even a smile," Brause said.

In 2006, he and his husband moved to England, where he has dual-citizenship. In September, he'll travel back to Anchorage to clean up to the last few bits of his life in America before leaving for good.

"Thank you to every single one of us who took on that work as activists, who took chances to make a difference, and believe me, there's more to be done."

State Legislative Reference Librarian Jennifer Fletcher researched legislative files. This article could not be produced without her assistance.

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