

Bethlehem Moment: First Lehigh Valley Gay organization forms

The Bethlehem Gadfly Bethlehem Moments, History, Bethlehem July 22, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on Bethlehem Moments* 

Bethlehem Moment 25

City Council

July 21, 2020

Mary Foltz, Lehigh University

Susan Falciani Maldonado, Muhlenberg College

Kristen Leipert, Muhlenberg College

audio

Bethlehem Moment: June 22, 1969

Le-Hi-Ho, the first organized group for gays in the Lehigh Valley,

held its first meeting

As the Lehigh Valley concludes the celebration of Pride month and looks forward to Allentown's Pride Festival in August, the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community Archive has engaged with uncovering the deep history of LGBT organizing in our region. While many will know about activism at Stonewall in New York City, few in our region will recall 1960s LGBT organizations that paved the way for social change in Pennsylvania and the larger nation. We are grateful for this opportunity to share a short narrative about one such organization that originated in the months prior to the Stonewall uprising. It is our hope that this story will give

residents of Bethlehem and the larger Lehigh Valley a glimpse of the vibrant contributions of LGBT leaders to our region. And we affirm here that the Lehigh Valley has important stories to tell about LGBT history from the 1960s into the present.

In the early months of 1969, a group of friends tuned into activist groups in major urban centers envisioned bringing the energy of the Homophile Movement to the Valley. The Homophile Movement gained support in the U.S. in the 1950s and continued to make progress through the 1960s; its primary aims were to fight for equal rights for gay and lesbian people, to counter discrimination in housing and employment, and to counter negative medical, educational, and social understandings of homosexuality. As LGBT people in the Valley faced rampant discrimination, this group of friends believed that a local homophile organization could help to make civic change that greatly would impact our community.



LeHiHo members summer 2019 with student archivists

Their dream became a reality six days before the raid at the Stonewall Inn, which served as a catalyst for the gay liberation movement. On June 22, 1969, a gathering of twenty-seven individuals met “on the north slope

of the blue mountains” in Bloomsburg, PA to form a “homophile movement” in the Lehigh Valley. The meeting drew participants from a sixty-mile radius, and fifteen charter members pledged dues, time, and energy to foster the new organization. Leaders of the burgeoning organization included Ron Seeds, Joseph Burns, and others from the city of Bethlehem.

One of the primary decisions the members faced was whether or not to become an affiliate of the nationally-networked Mattachine Society, one of the earliest gay rights groups in the United States. Ultimately, the Lehigh Valley’s relative distance from New York City and Philadelphia, which presented challenges for attending meetings and events, prompted the founders to lean towards an independent organization, and the Homophile Movement of the Lehigh Valley was born. Nicknamed “Le-Hi-Ho,” the organization wanted to secure a more central location for their meetings so that many in the Lehigh Valley could attend. During the summer of 1969, Le-Hi-Ho approached the Unitarian Church of Bethlehem about holding its meetings in their building, and, after a review of the organization’s bylaws, the Church approved meetings beginning in 1970.

From its first month, Le-Hi-Ho became a hub for information about national gay liberation struggles and their regional counterparts. For example, they published their first newsletter in June 1969 and continued to offer relevant reportage about protests and activist efforts in our region and NYC and Philadelphia as well as needed discussion of social events. Even as they provided rich resources for the LGBT community, Le-Hi-Ho leaders sought to protect members from discrimination by securing mailing lists and the names and addresses of those who received newsletters. As gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people could be fired or lose housing because of their sexual or gender identities, leaders needed to ensure the privacy of members. All communication and correspondence was conducted through a Bethlehem post office box in the name of Ron Seeds, a manager at

Bethlehem Steel who was the founding director of Le-Hi-Ho. Ron Seeds was the only keeper of the Le-Hi-Ho mailing list, thereby ensuring that names of members were not revealed. The August '69 newsletter stressed the importance of discretion, recommending best practices for not revealing too much about other members of the organization.

According to Joseph Burns, the original editor of the newsletter, Le-Hi-Ho was primarily a social organization even as their members were invested in politics. Monthly meetings often featured an invited speaker, such as “Dr. Bob” in September '69, who spoke about health concerns of LGBT people, or Dick Leitsch of the Mattachine Society, who visited in January 1970. Still, the most anticipated part of the meetings was the social hour that followed the conclusion of the official agenda. Le-Hi-Ho provided an alternative to the bar scene, according to Burns, as many LGBT people wanted the opportunity to meet outside of noisy taprooms and dance halls.

While social events continued to be a huge draw for members, political organizing became the focus for others. Le-Hi-Ho members, like Frank



Whelan and Bob Wittman, were involved in starting the Lambda Center in Allentown, the first LGBT community center in our region. Others were involved with the regional chapter of N.O.W. and participated in the important fight for an anti-discrimination ordinance in Allentown. The political activity of Le-Hi-Ho members shows the value of social organizations for fostering spaces in which to build community, to dream of social change, and to create relationships that fuel the difficult work for social justice.

In the late 1990s, Le-Hi-Ho's membership began to decline as other LGBT organizations took the lead in the Valley, building on the foundation created by our earlier organizers. Still, their work on behalf of our community is an important part of Lehigh Valley history, which we are proud to celebrate.

We are fortunate to have insight into the early days of this (necessarily) private organization thanks to archivally-minded members of the group, Frank Whelan and Bob Wittman, who deposited the records of Le-Hi-Ho at the Allentown Public Library, where they are available for researchers. The collection contents can be viewed by visiting the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community Archive at

<http://trexler.muhlenberg.edu/library/specialcollections/>

“Without a shared history, we are not a true community.”