

# WE ARE FAMILY

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This installation is about the connection between the past and the present in the queer community and conveys a feeling of happiness and love. I began my journey by asking my parents a few questions: “When did you first meet?” “Can you tell me about your first date?” And then, “What was it like coming out to your parents?” I knew early on that I wanted to make something meaningful revolving around joy. I thought about what joy and happiness is and the people I feel the most happy around. I decided to devote an art piece surrounding the love I have for my parents; they have been two of the most loving and supportive people I will ever meet.

My parents are lesbians and I researched the gay rights movement to learn about the pain people endured so that my family could exist. I started from the beginning, the Stonewall riots in New York. Then, I researched the founding of disco, along with Harvey Milk and the political stance he took. While I was immersed in the history of the community, I still didn't seem to connected enough. At that point, I decided I should learn about the construction of a gay family and was lucky enough to interview Maggie Nelson, a MacArthur Fellowship recipient. With her help, I began to understand what being in a queer family means. In the fight for gay couples to be able to have children, opponents said that, without a mother and father, children would inherently disadvantaged in comparison to other children. Thus, there has been pressure on queer parents to defy this stigma. When talking with Maggie Nelson I came to understand that another way to defy the stigma is to ignore it completely. Just being loving parents is all that a parent should be worried about and they should forget any other outside influences. My project now seems to connect from start to finish.

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“*We are family.*” Throughout the 80s and 90s, this refrain from Sister Sledge was chanted in LGBTQ clubs and on the streets. Along with a number of songs and chants, this helped bring together people of all types of sexual identity and orientation to form a close-knit community and social movement that spread across the nation. In the 1960s, homosexuality was still illegal and discrimination was widespread. Virtually all LGBTQ people lived the closet - they felt they had no other choice. Bars and clubs were very important to the community - they were a place where LGBTQ people felt safe to express themselves and celebrate their lives. The police, however, frequently raided these bars, harassing and beating people and even arresting them. However when the Stonewall Inn, an underground gay bar in New York City, was raided in 1969 - for the first time, the LGBTQ community fought back. That night marked the beginning of the modern LGBTQ rights movement.

As the movement evolved, celebration played an important role and led to some unconventional - but effective - forms of protest. Since LGBTQ people had formed much of their community through coming together and celebrating in bars and clubs, it's not surprising that one facet of how they protested was through celebration. The use of celebration as protest has been a feature of the fight for LGBTQ rights throughout the years, from Pride marches to the work of Harvey Milk, who established a community and used his humor, as well as his determined and charismatic personality, to advance LGBTQ rights. Fighting for change by promoting the happiness and joy that comes with being authentic, saw a community evolve from nightclubs and pride marches to getting organized politically and coming together to fight for equal rights.

The desire to live an authentic and happy life also led people to come out. Living in the closet - hiding who they really were, being invisible - was a tremendous source of stress for people. But the act of coming out also became a key factor in influencing a change in society's attitude towards LGBTQ people, paving the way for more equal rights. Once people came to realize they actually *knew* someone who was LGBTQ, it started to influence public opinion. When that LGBTQ person was a son or daughter or sibling or aunt or uncle or grandchild or friend or neighbor or work colleague ... it became so much harder to reject all LGBTQ people. This is not to minimize the rejection that many people experienced when they initially came out. But over time, coming out was critical to changing attitudes.

As LGBTQ rights were gradually achieved in the courts, the workplace and in the society in general, the number of gay families grew exponentially. The impact of these gay families on the movement and on society was significant. It was one thing to see someone publicly happy with a group of friends, but it was a whole other thing to see them happy with their own family. Family even transcends the simplicity of the word “happy;” it is pure love and joy, unconditional and forever-lasting. The greater visibility of gay families influenced significant political and social change. The most impactful and important thing that gay marriage did was give the ability for queer people to experience all aspects of life. Alongside the use of celebration and the spread of love and happiness, the LGBTQ community was able to effectively protest and change laws in America.

### **Celebration**

The gay pride parade is an example of how the LGBTQ community used celebration to advance their political and personal cause in America. The first NYC Pride march was proposed in November 1969. Activists Craig Rodwell, his partner Fred Sargeant, Ellen Brody, and Linda Rhodes proposed a resolution at the Eastern Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations (ERCHO) in Philadelphia that a march be held in New York City to commemorate the one-year

anniversary of the raid on Stonewall. Prior to this, LGBTQ activists would host walks in silence and with a strict dress code - a suit and tie for men and a dress for women, to protest the discriminatory laws. Rodwell proposed a new approach and ultimately an effective one, working with grassroots activist Brenda Howard (an outspoken activist in the anti-war and feminist movements) to develop the first Pride march in NYC, which was then called the Christopher Street Liberation Day March. It was held in June 1970 and was intended to be both serious and fun. The incorporation of the community's party energy in promoting a political agenda was a stroke of genius. The march would eventually take place along 51 city blocks, starting in Midtown and ending at Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. It has been held every year since 1970, and, today, over 40,000 people march in New York City alone in front of over one million spectators (More Than A Million, CBS). Over the decades, pride marches spread to many other cities across the United States and around the world. On this day of celebration, you are able to see once closeted people scared about who they are, enjoy life and be with other people who appreciate and love them. Being part of this, or even just witnessing it, is a wonderful experience and extremely powerful. The Gay Pride parade is viewed as the first time the gay community openly used celebration as a focused form of protest; a practice that would be incorporated in a number of other protests in the LGBTQ Rights movements.

In the 1970s, discos became an important place to promote LGBTQ community and celebration. Historians date the first appearance of disco to the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1970. DJ promoter David Mancuso began hosting discotheque parties for people of all sexual identities and orientations to have a space to express themselves freely. These parties spread all across Lower Manhattan and then Midtown. More and more people flocked to these parties where they felt free and happy, being able to find similar people and build friendships and even fall in love. They began to create a community of solidarity. Discos spread at a rapid pace, expanding throughout New York and soon across the country and throughout the world. Disco culture highlighted a new self-awareness in the gay community that created a celebratory self-image. (Will Roscoe). As disco became more mainstream, it started losing its original connection to the community that founded it. The late-1970s saw the collapse of the disco industry. Disco night clubs rapidly began shutting down and the few night clubs that survived started forming the underground post disco-era night clubs. In New York, Paradise Garage was the most well-known of these surviving clubs, catering to a primarily queer, black, and Latin-Caribbean audience. Larry Levan, the club's resident DJ, maintained a loyal following of dancers by developing a distinctive sound that would later be dubbed "garage." Although disco was dead, the community survived and was together and stronger than ever.

Harvey Milk incorporated celebration into the fight for LGBTQ rights. Milk helped establish a strong LGBTQ community on Castro Street. The energetic and accepting attitude on Castro Street was well-known throughout America. Born in New York in 1930, Harvey Milk lead a closeted life working in a number of jobs, including a public school teacher, a production assistant for several high-profile Broadway musicals, and as a stock analyst and investment banker on Wall Street. It was when he moved to San Francisco in 1972 that his life and political activism evolved. He opened a business on Castro Street, Castro Camera, and within the year had formed strong connections with other business owners and the people who frequented Castro Street. These connections became so important that he was able to create somewhat of a family out of the neighborhood and soon became known as the "Mayor of Castro Street."

In 1973, Milk ran for a position on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. A novice politician with little money, Milk lost the election, but the experience did not deter him from trying again.

Two years later, he narrowly lost a second election for the same seat .By this time, Milk was an outspoken representative for the gay community with a number of political connections. Civically speaking, San Francisco had an eye on Castro Street because it was a seemingly separate world as a result of the feeling of acceptance from all the people living and working there. Castro Street wasn't only a safe haven for anyone LGBTQ, it was a party that never stopped. Harvey's humor and joyful attitude spread through Castro Street and beyond; people rejected from family or friends in their hometowns moved to San Francisco, attracted by the culture of acceptance. At that time, Castro Street, similar to a disco club - was always bustling with people, everyone knew each other and there was a sense of family. Much like the clubs of New York, this constructed family came to serve as an important lifeline for LGBTQ people and quickly became famous. Evidence of the humorous and joyous attitude on Castro Street was shown even during protests, when people marching would chant "Anita/A liar/We'll set your hair on fire,," referencing Anita Bryant, an American singer and outspoken figure in the anti-gay movement (who also known for using a little too much hair spray). In 1977, Milk finally won a seat on the San Francisco City-County Board. He was inaugurated on January 9, 1978, becoming the city's first openly gay politician in America. On November 27, 1978, supervisor Dan White entered Mayor George Moscone's office and shot him twice before entering Harvey Milk's office and shooting him twice in the body and once in the head. Although Harvey Milk died, the movement was stronger than ever and with the same joyful and determined attitude, strengthened by a sense of loss and gratitude.

### **Gay Families**

Although the LGBTQ rights movement saw advances as well as setbacks over the years, one big bright rainbow ray of hope shined. On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court ruled by a 6-3 vote in the case of Pavan v. Smith that under their decision in Obergefell, same-sex couples must be treated equally to opposite-sex couples. Gay marriage is now legal in all 50 states, the years of fighting for equal rights paid off.

Equality was achieved, right? Does this mean that the fight is over? I don't think it's so easy to say that a movement has a start and a beginning, rather it grows and evolves. Right now there is a new battle the LGBTQ movement is fighting and it's less of a political battle and more of a social battle. However since our politics comes from our society, the two are interwoven so it is impossible to talk about politics without mentioning its social implications and vice-versa. The battle now takes place in the family sector, specifically the integration of the gay family in American society.

Prior to gay marriage being legalized, gay families felt, in large part, isolated and alienated from their own community and the larger heterosexual community. Many of these families first began appearing from men and women who had originally been in heterosexual marriages but left their partners when they finally felt safe enough to live as they wished. Many times in these scenarios, men lost custody of their children alongside of their jobs and were rejected from their community. Lesbians faced even more rejection from not just other lesbians, but also feminists. However, mothers who left their marriages were, for the most part, able to keep custody of their children. Things began to change by the 1980s and 1990s, when networks of donors for insemination, surrogates and other fertility services allowed record numbers of gay and lesbians to become parents. Slowly, thanks to the formation of these families, a new way of being took shape. More gay families were becoming outspoken about challenging laws that prevented gay parents from adopting children. This era of new gay and lesbian families was

dubbed the “gay baby boom.” During this period, gays and lesbians continued to fight against homophobic and discriminatory laws and policies. By the early 2000s, anti-sodomy laws had been declared unconstitutional and by 2017, gay marriage was legal in America.

In the years battling for gay marriage, opponents use the argument that, a child would be inherently disadvantaged since they didn't have one mother and one father. Although these stigmas have been disproven, I wanted to investigate whether queer families have internalized this idea that they have to prove to be suitable parents. In researching this, I interviewed Maggie Nelson, who wrote *The Argonauts* and is an English professor, recipient of the MacArthur Fellow Award, and mother in a queer family. When asked to comment on these same ideas, Nelson presented some very interesting and original insights. She comments, “historically speaking, there have been real pressures on gay parents in the face of the demonizing mythology of them as perverted, irresponsible, or corrupting people; depending on where one lives, what one's laws and neighbors are like, that can surely take a toll. And countless children have been taken away from their parents on account of their parents being gay in times past, so that legacy can persist, inside and outside oneself.” In this statement, she recognizes the historical pressures of gay parents and how the “legacy” is still regrettably influential. However, even though she acknowledges the fact that gay parents in America still deal with this stigma, she wants to question its existence, relevance, and even its need to be further disproven, “I personally reject that whole line of inquiry, as it begins by giving credence to the idea that there is something wrong or corrosive about queers that has to be disproven. I don't believe for a second that there is anything wrong with us.” By trying to disprove the fact that there is anything wrong or different about queer parents, they are unknowingly giving credit to the statement. Queer families are families like the rest, sometimes messy, but no different from any other heterosexual family.

Obviously, queer families have been around for generations, so what is their significance to the movement nowadays? Within the LGBTQ community itself, there has been some resistance to the formation of the “nuclear family.” As a result of being ostracized from society and their own families, many queer people felt that anything that resembled conforming to society's expectation, (like marriage and raising kids) should be rejected. Queer by definition does mean going against the norm so a number of people in the LGBTQ community looked down on the other people in the community who, in their eyes, conformed to the norm. However, as Nelson writes, “this stance has never been monolithic, and the truth is that gay people have been having children since time immemorial.” Consequently, even if faced with disagreement, you can't see queer families as separate or an extension of the LGBTQ movement, they have been part of the community since the start. Similarly, I'm also guilty of once with making this separation of queer families with the movement. I asked Nelson, “Do you think Gay families could be viewed as an extension and/or an evolution of the LGBTQ community celebrating itself?” She responded by writing the eye opening statement, “While I don't think one could say that queer family-making is necessarily an easy extension of gay pride, I do think that allowing queers access to all of life's experiences, including that of making and raising children, is a critical element of the movement.” I now come to the understanding that gay and queer families should not be seen as a separate entity. It is, as I now come to see it, a wonderfully conforming situation. Having queer families has giving even more equality to anyone in the LGBTQ community. This normal, simply act of happiness and love is, funnily enough, a huge step in the LGBTQ movement.

Will it ever be possible for gay families to be seen as fully equal to straight families? Although hard to know, the future looks hopeful. In the 1960s, only 50 years ago, it was illegal

to even be gay. Now there are pride parades, there is gay marriage and even coming out isn't close to as scary as it used to be. This isn't to say the fight is over or that prejudices don't exist anymore, but it's important to be optimistic about the future. Look at where we started, in a little bar in New York City, the Stonewall Inn. Then the gay community took over the nightlife across the entire country with disco, creating a new sound everybody could enjoy. Even though disco detached from its gay roots, its impact lasted forever. By having all different types of people enjoying music together, the gay community was able to joyously advance their cause - just by dancing. Now, gay marriage is legal and - the way I see it - the advancement of the movement falls on gay families and their children. It's hard to tell what is going to come next in American society, but the community, more accurately the family that the gay community has built, is strong and alive in everybody who is gay or has a son, daughter, brother, sister, father, mother, nephew, aunt, and friend who are either gay, lesbian, transgender, bi- or queer. Now I feel it's up to the new generation to determine how we can advance the movement. But how do we do this? I'm not a MacArthur winner, nor was I there at Stonewall, but I do think that if we are all able to understand the history, and learn, not invade, the culture of other people, we can come closer to a more united and accepting country.

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