

# OUT OF SILENCE

## FREE, Minnesota's First Gay Rights Organization

**Bruce Johansen**

There is no denying the historical significance of the Stonewall uprising that began on June 28, 1969. Sparked by a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village, the clash between patrons and authorities that began in the wee hours of June 28, 1969, drew unprecedented attention to the oppressions experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people in their daily lives. As such, Stonewall is commonly viewed as a turning point, ushering in the gay rights movement.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Stonewall has overshadowed other LGBTQ milestones, including one in Minnesota. A few weeks before tensions boiled over at the Stonewall Inn, a group of young people in Minneapolis's West Bank neighborhood founded FREE, an acronym for Fight Repression of Erotic Expression—the first gay organization in the state. Fewer than 40 groups across the nation represented gays when FREE was founded on May 18, 1969. This was still a time when LGBTQ people lacked basic human rights protections, making them fearful about gathering together in public and vulnerable to arrest, being fired from their jobs, and refused housing. FREE is thought to be the second gay student organization in the nation, preceded only by Columbia University's Student Homophile League, founded in 1966.<sup>2</sup>

FREE's pioneering role has remained a source of pride. "A lot of people think that the movement started in Stonewall out East and exploded from there," said FREE cofounder Koreen Phelps in 1993. "In reality, it moved from the West throughout the Midwest and then to the

East Coast. Stonewall was the big major explosion, but there were so many things leading up to that. It was like a pressure cooker." Stephen Ihrig, FREE's other cofounder, said simply, "We would cling to this until we die, that we were ahead of Stonewall."<sup>3</sup>

During its brief but influential history, FREE members took bold actions, including integrating campus dances, picketing discriminatory employers, and advocating for same-sex marriage. They also engaged in spirited, frequently contentious, debates over how to effectively bring about change and advance gay rights, occasionally expounding on their views in long treatises. Fault lines emerged between those who sought and valued acceptance from mainstream society, working within established legal frameworks and institutions, and those who took a more radical stance, celebrating difference and promoting confrontational tactics and the overturn of institutions. Regardless of where they stood, FREE members were passionate about the burgeoning movement they were participating in and exhibited courage by coming out when doing so was fraught with risk, even danger. Some used FREE as a launching pad for careers as activists or politicians. For all it was a place to connect with others who had felt alienated, frustrated, or isolated because of their sexuality. Because of the media attention FREE received, Minnesota's LGBTQ people emerged from the shadows like never before.<sup>4</sup>

FREE grew from a conversation in the winter of 1968–69 at the Coffeehouse Extempore, a West Bank mecca for youth. Folk musician Dakota Dave Hull described the Extempore scene in a 2006 blog post: "There were chess players, talkers, hippies, beatniks, do-gooders and just plain old hangers-on. And then there were the musicians.



Stephen Ihrig, FREE cofounder: "He was really a free spirit guy, long hair and the whole thing."

. . . Everybody was broke, nobody had a pot to piss in, but we did have a real sense of community, a sense of place and of purpose."<sup>5</sup>

The Extempore was also where young people like Koreen Phelps and Stephen Ihrig, outcasts elsewhere, felt at home. "At the Extempore you were safe, you could relax, you could get a cup of coffee, you didn't have to scrounge to pay for it," said Ihrig. One patron Ihrig came to know was a man in his 40s or 50s with long silver hair: "He was scary to me because he was so sophisticated and calm, but he was a lovely man. . . . He was one of the few people who actually listened to me at the time. And he said one night, 'There's somebody I want you to meet. . . . I think you two would like each other.' And as clear as it happened last night, I still remember all of this, because it had such an effect."<sup>6</sup>

The person Ihrig was introduced to was Koreen Phelps, 19 years old. He was 20. He recalled, "She had this long blond hair. . . . She wore a shirt and jeans or khakis. . . . And she had this little smile. . . . It was one of those smiles that only really, really important people have. . . . It's almost a Mona Lisa smile. . . . It's so entrancing and it's so unknowable. . . . And very soft-spoken."

The man with the silver hair told Ihrig that Phelps was a lesbian and Phelps that Ihrig was gay. The two talked all night. Ihrig said, "She told me about herself. I told her about myself. It was all very calm. There was no drama. I wasn't sure exactly what was happening."

Recounting her first impressions of Ihrig, Phelps said, "He was really far-out. He would find his jewelry on the street. He'd pick up little pieces of tin or metal things or whatever and he'd string and wear this stuff. He'd walk around and wear this big black cape with a red silk lining and he was flamboyant and very creative. . . . He was really a free spirit guy, long hair and the whole thing." Of their first encounter, she recalled, "We just sat and talked with each other and things seemed to come out then, we started talking about how would a person meet someone else like ourselves."<sup>7</sup>

Both Phelps and Ihrig had experienced trauma around their sexuality. Phelps spent her childhood in South Minneapolis, before moving to Golden Valley and attending Robbinsdale High School. Although she knew she was gay by 15, she was also aware of her father's prejudices, so she kept her sexuality a secret. Her father's job in the navy had been to arrest gay officers. She recalled, "He used to hide underneath their beds with tape recorders and then arrest them and take them in. He was very prejudiced and extremely prejudiced against gay people. I picked that up right away because I heard his comments . . . 'queer' this and 'queer' that, and so on."<sup>8</sup>

Unexpectedly, Phelps's parents learned about her sexuality. She relayed, "I developed manic depression . . . and I ended up hospitalized several times. . . . I had this doctor who I told, 'I think I'm gay, but I don't want you to tell my parents about it,' and he did. Not only did he tell them, but he suggested that they lock me up in Anoka State Hospital, to 'teach me a lesson.' I ended up there for about three months." She was locked in what she described as a cell, tied to a bed. "I really believed that they, my parents, weren't real sophisticated or real well-educated people, and I think . . . they just didn't know what to do with me."<sup>9</sup>

## The Extempore was where young people like Koreen Phelps and Stephen Ihrig, outcasts elsewhere, felt at home.

After her release, Phelps stole her mother's car and credit card and left for San Francisco, where she began using drugs, nearly dying at one point. Upon returning to the Twin Cities, she tried college—first Hamline University, then the University of Minnesota—before concluding college was not for her.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Ihrig was struggling in rural Nebraska. He was the son of a Lutheran minister and one of seven

children; his family had moved three times by the time he entered high school. He knew he was gay by age 11—didn't know what it meant, but knew he had to keep it secret. "And that does a real number on a kid," he noted, and led to overwhelming loneliness: "I was just the odd person out. The odd person out in my family, the odd person out in school, the odd person out in that small town."<sup>11</sup>

Things got worse when he left for college, first Gustavus Adolphus in St. Peter and then the University of Minnesota. What he remembers most was the acute sense of isolation; also, that he hated college: "It was orderly. It was predictable. Everyone was headed in the same direction. None of that was for me." This led to what he thinks was a walking nervous breakdown. What saved him was the West Bank. "I became a very integral part of that community. I became a hippie." He also discovered downtown's gay bars: "Like any young kid I wanted to meet somebody. I wanted to fall in love. I wanted romance. I wanted sex. And I wanted companionship. And [the bars were] the only place you could go and get that or find that."

### Teach a Class, Learn a Subject

Both Phelps and Ihrig ached for community. They brainstormed ways to bring people together around issues of sexuality and came up with a plan for Phelps to teach a course through the Free University, a self-education program with informal classes that met at the Coffeehouse Extempore. Entitled the Homosexual Revolution, the course was described as follows: "This course will be about homosexuality and its place in the sexual revolution. For truly concerned, openminded men and women, straight or gay, couples or singles who would like to reach a deeper understanding of this large minority group. There will be some outside reading. Don't hesitate. The revolution is now!"<sup>12</sup>

The course title and much of Phelps's thinking about its content grew out of her rapt interest in the work of San Francisco journalist and activist Leo Laurence, who declared in March that "this is the beginning of a new revolution in San Francisco, the Homosexual Revolution of 1969." Laurence had urged gays to form coalitions "with other militant and radical groups such as the Black Panthers and the antiwar movement" and promoted "very aggressive picketing and demonstrating." Phelps later reflected, "I don't know how we thought we could teach people about being gay, because . . . we really didn't know very much and we were really sort of educating ourselves by starting this class. . . . I don't know what we expected to say to the people when they came." Yet come they did, 100 or more attending the first session on May 18, 1969.



Poster advertising FREE-sponsored picnics, August–September 1969.

That date marks the beginning of weekly Sunday evening meetings of the group that would soon come to be known as FREE.<sup>13</sup>

Memories differ over who appeared. Phelps remembered coffeehouse regulars, counterculture types, people from Youth Emergency Services, and runaway youth. Tensions quickly arose around Phelps's insistence that members be political, protesting for gay rights and supporting movements for worker's rights, women's equality, and racial equality and against the Vietnam War. She recalled the atmosphere being a bit disorderly: "I had to stand up on a table and yell for people to be quiet. It didn't get violent, but it was pretty wild and lots of craziness, lots of yelling." Ihrig remembered the class drawing students and patrons of Sutton's, a popular downtown Minneapolis gay bar he frequented. He recalled no hippies nor activists. "The others," he said, "were just ordinary guys. I think they were workers, probably no lawyers." Most who showed up simply wanted to meet others in a space outside the bars, and he suspected many were curious to learn who "these freaks," the organizers, were. Few women attended, which Ihrig noted "was always a bitter disappointment to Koreen."<sup>14</sup>

## Inclusiveness was fundamental. FREE “wasn’t meant to be exclusively just a gay group.”

For some of these ordinary guys, attending the class took courage. In an interview, one young man, “Vic” (Vic Campbell), not out to his parents, described his trepidation: “It took a lot of guts just to walk in,” he said, but he kept returning for meetings and, in time, was elected secretary of FREE.<sup>15</sup>

The Free University classes continued weekly throughout the summer of 1969, as did picnics and other social events. These activities attracted media attention. The first newspaper article appeared on June 20 in the *Minnesota Daily*, the University of Minnesota student newspaper. Headlined “Free U starts ‘homosexual revolution,’” it began: “First there was Black Power. Then Red Power. And now, through the efforts of two former University students, pink power has come to Minneapolis. Gay Power as it is properly termed, is a homosexual movement that seeks to change the laws, attitudes and prejudices of uptight, upright heterosexual America.” The *Minneapolis Tribune* shared the news three days later with a wider audience: “Akin to the ‘black is beautiful’ movement, the aim is to shatter a stereotype, reverse conventional attitudes . . .



Robert Halfhill (right) and unidentified friend, 1970. Halfhill steered the group through the administrative channels needed to establish FREE as a student group and served as the group’s treasurer.

and lessen repression-spawned ills.”<sup>16</sup>

By the time he first attended the Free University class in mid-July, Robert Halfhill, a philosophy PhD student from Kentucky, said the number of regular attendees had declined to around a dozen. So Halfhill took up the charge to form an official University of Minnesota student group, an offshoot of the informal class.

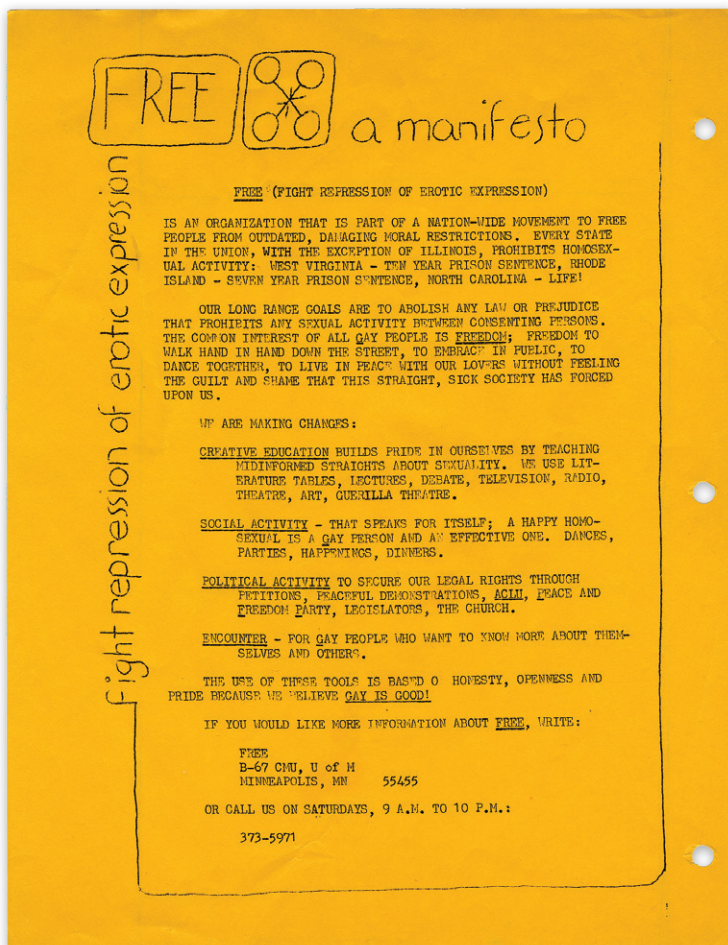
With the sponsorship of Mulford Q. Sibley, a popular and radical professor of political science and American studies, Halfhill (who went on to serve as the group’s treasurer) got the paperwork going. The university’s Senate Committee on Student Affairs voted unanimously to grant the group recognition on October 24, 1969. This did not imply approval, explained Ludwig Spolyar, director of the Student Activities Bureau, but simply that the applicant had agreed to abide by the school’s policies and current laws. Recognition *did* mean free use of university facilities for meetings and access to mimeograph machines and other equipment.<sup>17</sup>

What to call the group was among the first decisions. Because Phelps had been institutionalized, her freedom taken away, the word “free” was important to her. As a result, “We thought of the word ‘free’ and then what the letters would stand for. We were playing around when we thought of Fight Repression of Erotic Expression, but later we thought that really includes everybody.” This inclusiveness was fundamental. FREE “wasn’t meant to be exclusively just a gay group,” Phelps explained. Rather, it was grounded in new ideas about sexuality and the belief that people should be free to love and be physical with whomever they chose.<sup>18</sup>

A constitution, which would establish membership criteria and governance, was required by the university. The group also drafted a manifesto, which stated in part: “Our long-range goals are to abolish any law or prejudice that prohibits any sexual activity between consenting adults. The common interest of all gay people is freedom; freedom to walk hand in hand down the street, to embrace in public, to dance together, to live in peace with



FREE pamphlet, 1969–70.



FREE manifesto, prepared for Welcome Week at the University of Minnesota, September 1969.

our lovers without feeling the guilt and shame that this straight, sick society has forced upon us.”<sup>19</sup>

As with the class, a tug-of-war remained between those who wished FREE to be a place to meet others and those wanting to “go picket and raise hell and demonstrate.” Phelps stayed firmly aligned with the latter: “Our main responsibility was to fight for civil rights. . . . I felt we needed to have a strong organization that was political. . . . We knew the only way to get our rights was to get out in public.” Distrusting both the Republican and the Democratic-Farmer-Labor parties, Phelps aligned herself with the Socialist Workers Party: “I wanted FREE to be a political militant organization.”<sup>20</sup>

As students returned for classes in fall 1969, FREE was there to greet them, part of Welcome Week’s activities fair. Allan Spear, a University of Minnesota history professor who in 1972 would be elected the nation’s first openly gay male legislator, recounted how significant this was for him: “My consciousness as a gay man was galvanized between 1969 and 1972, but it was not by Stonewall and it did not happen all at once. It began . . . when I walked through the ground floor of Coffman Union where student

groups set up information tables, and saw, to my astonishment, a table for a group called FREE. . . . This was one of the first times I ever saw gay people proclaiming their sexual orientation in public.”<sup>21</sup>

With FREE’s presence on campus, Ihrig perceived that FREE had transformed into something different than its founders had envisioned. “Gay liberation, for me, was never about the university,” he recalled. “It was never about academia. It was never about courses. [Its location on campus] happened just because we needed a place to park ourselves.” Yet participation was growing. Vic Campbell, FREE’s secretary, reported later that FREE’s first weekly meeting drew around 60 people, and grew to between 80 and 120. Dances FREE had begun hosting were attracting around 100 people. Both the dances and the meetings were a turning point in Lyn Miller’s development in her identity as a lesbian. She recalled, “Every week there were new faces, but the stories were painfully the same: years of loneliness, guilt, abuse.”<sup>22</sup>

### The Arrival of Jack Baker

The most notable new face to appear at the September 28, 1969, meeting was 27-year-old Jack Baker, an Oklahoma native who had moved to Minnesota from Kansas to attend law school. Baker’s partner, Michael McConnell, temporarily remained in Kansas. When the pair had been introduced to each other at an Oklahoma barn party three years earlier, Baker was a US Air Force veteran, working as a field engineer for a concrete producer in Oklahoma City, while McConnell was pursuing a library science degree at the University of Oklahoma. After Baker obtained a higher-paying job, he was fired when his employer learned he was gay, a motivation for attending law school.<sup>23</sup>

McConnell recalled that Baker lunged headfirst into campus activities: “Before he left for law school, Jack and I had read about the first gay student organization in the country . . . at Columbia University. Jack mused about forming a similar group on the U of M campus. But when he arrived in Minneapolis, he saw an article in the city’s daily morning newspaper, the *Tribune*, about Welcome Week events on campus and learned that such a group had already formed.”<sup>24</sup>

Through the force of his personality and a desire for leadership, Baker, running unopposed, was elected president of FREE, and soon worked to change its focus. According to McConnell, “The original founders, Koreen and Stephen, never dreamed of creating such a fast-paced, highly structured group.” By contrast, “[Baker] decided that the fastest and cheapest way to advance gay rights was to keep the movement newsworthy. He called it

**A tug-of-war remained between those who wished FREE to be a place to meet others and those wanting to “go picket and raise hell and demonstrate.”**

‘steam pipe politics’ because it reminded him of throwing icy water on a hot steam pipe. ‘That’s how you get people to pay attention,’ he said. . . . ‘When the pipe sizzles, the public is reacting to a hot issue. Then you keep the pressure on.’”<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, even less overtly political activities, such as FREE’s gay dances, raised its profile. The university memorandum that granted approval began, “The opinion of the University Attorney was that boys could dance with other boys at dances both on and off University property.” (Nothing was said about girls dancing with girls.) The first all-gay dance took place at Coffman Union’s Gopher Hole on October 28, 1969.<sup>26</sup>

Three weeks later, FREE issued a press release to invite media to cover a Thanksgiving dance. A *Washington Post* article, in which the dances were prominently featured, was picked up by newspapers across the country. Dances attracted more national publicity when NBC’s *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* aired a series about “campus morality,” with dance footage featured. A *Minneapolis Star* article quoted sophomore Nick Lenarz: “These dances are really something—they really release me,” he said. “I feel just like a ‘straight’ person who had never danced before.”



Michael McConnell (left) and Jack Baker assembling the FREE booth on the Washington Avenue bridge for Welcome Week 1970.

This pamphlet was one tactic FREE used to “acclimate the straight public to our existence—to our reality.”



A Gay person is no different from anyone else—he or she is just like your neighbor in the dorm. However, the same-sex life style allows individuals to plan their futures with persons of the same sex.

Originally, the word “homosexual” was used by medical doctors to clinically describe physical, sexual acts. Such a word cannot convey a feeling of emotional attachment or of an essentially social relationship.

That is why Gay people prefer the term “Gay” -- because it describes a life style that may or may not include a sexual act.

“There is probably more nonsense written about *same-sex* life style, more unwarranted fear of it, and less understanding of it, than of any other area of sexuality.”

-Doctor Wardell Pomeroy, researcher and co-author of the Kinsey Report



Baker explained to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*: “What we’re trying to do is counteract the ‘gay bar’ mentality and help those under 21, especially, to meet people as human beings before they become hardened to life.”<sup>27</sup>

In February 1970, FREE achieved its goal of integrating a heterosexual dance.

“One of our main functions as a group,” Ihrig was quoted in a university press release, “is to acclimate the straight public to our existence—to our reality.” The *Minneapolis Star* reported, “There was no trouble. Most of those at the dance seemed either unaware or unconcerned that homosexuals shared the floor.”<sup>28</sup>

Behind the scenes, the organization experienced strain. Ihrig admitted that he and Phelps were not good at managing: “That posed a real problem once you get 50 or 100 people [and] became a real stumbling block.” By contrast, he said, “Jack came in and he was very focused. . . . I think Jack saw that, there’s a legitimate organization that he could use in order to push for what he wanted to push for, which I think—it was astounding—was gay marriage.”

Looking back, Ihrig acknowledged how difficult it was to experience FREE being usurped. It was “violent and upsetting and infuriating and despairing, because it was ours, it was our baby, and it was sort of killed off in infancy, what we wanted, or what we thought we wanted.” Of Baker, he said, “He just took over . . . that’s how we experienced it. That’s why it was upsetting.”<sup>29</sup>

For media and community outreach, FREE’s speaker’s bureau maintained a roster of members willing to be interviewed or to give presentations, and it was here that contrasts between Ihrig and Baker became the focus of much attention, including over FREE’s public image. “Should we look and behave like straight people, or should we just be ourselves,” Phelps recalled, noting, “It probably was the first time that gay people had been on television in this area . . . and we were concerned about our image.” Because of his long hair and beads, Ihrig

"looked like a hippie," and the group's consensus was "to look as conservative as we could," a decision Phelps lived to regret: "Stephen would have been the logical choice, because he really was at the heart of it, it was a lot of his ideas that were propelling things." However, thinking strategically, Baker, with his crewcut, was selected because he "looked the straightest." Phelps, too, defied stereotypes, conforming to society's accepted notions of femininity. "Not only was I the only woman, but I also looked very feminine too."<sup>30</sup>

FREE's increased publicity led University of Minnesota regents to voice concern. They asked for a review of the policy under which student organizations were recognized. In November 1969 the *Minneapolis Tribune* reported, "The study apparently stems from the [university's] recent recognition of a group of homosexuals and their sympathizers called FREE (Fight Repression of Erotic Expression)."<sup>31</sup>

As controversy with the regents mounted, tensions within FREE continued to build. The January 15, 1970, newsletter announced that "major organizational changes" would be aired at an upcoming meeting, with a proposal from Ihrig to replace the existing hierarchical leadership structure with a more grassroots, diffused way of operating in which "each person does activity; each person is important; each person can become a leader." The *Minnesota Daily* reported that by the end of the two-and-a-half-hour meeting, Baker looked as though "everything he had worked so long and hard on was suddenly falling apart . . . although he had been elected to a temporary one-month FREE coordinating committee that would run the group, he was no longer president." The group's constitution, which Baker had a major hand in drafting, would be replaced by "a new and seemingly more radical one."<sup>32</sup>

Frank Seiler, a philosophy instructor and FREE member, summed up the growing tensions. On one hand were "assimilationists" or "accommodationists" who, like Baker, preferred to seek reform within established systems, including changing laws and policies and courting public favor through mainstream media. On the other hand were those calling for a more radical, "liberationist" approach, in which difference was celebrated, not simply tolerated or erased, and in which confrontational tactics, often in public spaces, were preferred. "I get ill, personally," Seiler said, "when I see people going to the FREE dances and not doing another thing. The tone of this organization at present is just not devoted to the goal of liberation—neither for the people here nor the people outside."<sup>33</sup>

While serving as one of three new rotating coordinators, along with Ihrig and Dianne Denne, Baker held firm

## WEEK'S EVENTS

JAN 15 (Thursday) meeting 8pm, Men's Lounge at Gopher Union  
JAN 16 (Friday) literature table 11am-1pm  
JAN 17 (Saturday) phone 9am-10pm 373-5971  
JAN 18 (Sunday) Fot-luck dinner 1pm at St. Stephens School basement  
JAN 19-21 (Mon-Wed) lit tables at Coffman  
JAN 20 (Tuesday) gay dance 8pm to midnight at Gopher Whole, GU

January 15, 1970  
FREE  
B-67 GU, U of M  
Minneapolis, MN

**npls free**  
FIGHT REPRESSION OF EROTIC EXPRESSION

## Major organizational changes aired at tonight's discussion

The most important topic to be discussed at this Thursday's FREE meeting will be the constitution proposed by Stephan Ihrig.

According to Ihrig's explanation, the constitution calls for "a new structure based upon the needs of the movement here in Minneapolis; the need to attract young people, the need to make them change their self image through work, . . . the need for every person in the organization to feel he or she is listened to when he or she speaks about actions or ideas."

Some of the above goals are expected to be accomplished through certain proposals in article II, entitled "Cells and Jobs." Three

of the proposed seven cells are Homosexuality and Religion, Homosexuality and University and Publicity.

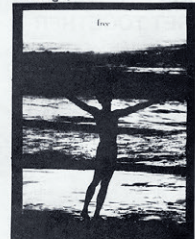
The new constitution represents a reversed structure from the present one, he explained. He described the distribution of authority as a "bottom-up structure," beginning with the small cells and jobs where the main activity is centered.

In the new constitution, Ihrig explained, "each person does activity; each person is important; each person can become a leader in a short period of time."

In general, the new proposal reduces the status of the president and the executive committee, and places the bulk of the work, re-

sponsibility, and need for initiative on an active membership.

Other articles in the constitution concern membership, coordinating committee dues, motions and by-laws, amendments, determination of constitutionality, and meetings.



### First gay dance of quarter will be next Tuesday in Gopher Whole

Dancing for Gay men and women will resume this Tuesday, Jan. 20, in the Gopher Hole of Coffman Union. The dance, sponsored by FREE, will last from 8PM 'til midnight. There will be an admission donation of 70¢ for

non-members and 45¢ for members. Planners hope to provide a more relaxed and friendly atmosphere with a dancing area, a corner for newcomers to talk with FREE members, gay articles and papers, and refreshments.

FREE has the above 18" X 24" poster available for a donation of \$1.50 each. Lorin Gillette of San Francisco is the photographer. Orders may be placed at the Thursday meeting or Tuesday's dance.

## West coast gays meet in Berkley

### Discuss radical moves

500 delegates recently attended the West Coast Gay Liberation Conference and Symposium in Berkeley. The purpose of the December meet was to "plan strategy for the coming year," and to hear committee reports on such topics as "Organization

of High School Campuses" and "Communes." Included in the symposium were plans for establishing a Gay colony in some "remote" California locale, and taking over the area's government and assets.

During the symposium, de-

legates had an opportunity to demonstrate their unity in Berkeley's People's Park. Straight picketers already there were soon overwhelmed by Gay delegates, who turned the scene into a Gay Power rally.

*FREE's vote to move from hierarchical leadership to a diffused, grassroots structure illustrated mounting tensions by January 1970.*

in arguing his case for a single, high-profile leader: "In my opinion, the real purpose of an organization like FREE is to make headway with the outside world. This can best be done with a recognized leader by both title and manner. . . . Our experience is that the press will give better coverage when they have a recognized leader to deal with instead of a whole bunch of 'non-leaders.'" He added, "Very little headway will be made with the University administration" absent such an identifiable leader.<sup>34</sup>

For Phelps, who took a diminished role, the issue of leadership extended to several men, each with his own specific agenda and style: "I think once you had Jack Baker, a total egoist, and Steven Endean [who became very active in DFL politics and went on to found the organization that became known as the Human Rights Campaign] playing for the Democrats for all he's worth.



... Then, Tim Campbell [who would go on to launch the *GLC Voice*; no relation to Vic] was a total provocateur who just wanted to wreck everything. . . . Once you got those people together in meetings, they tore it apart. Stephen and I didn't want to fight and couldn't take it anymore. He was really discouraged before he left for New York." Ihrig agreed: "Koreen and I weren't like the great civil rights leaders who were able to slog on and on and on through all the evolutions."<sup>35</sup>

### A More Activist FREE

FREE meeting minutes through 1970 reflect the group's growing roster of activities, including participating in the Minneapolis Police Department's officer training sessions and speaking at churches. Baker, a practicing Catholic, told a reporter, "What really surprises us is that the



FAR LEFT: University philosophy instructor and FREE member Frank Siler. LEFT: When Thom Higgins was fired from his job after he announced he was planning to serve as FREE publicity director, FREE members took to the streets in protest, February 1970.

## A catalyst for FREE becoming a bolder, more activist force presented itself when 19-year-old member Thom Higgins was fired from his job.

churches are actually begging for us, asking us to speak to them." Handing out literature and talking with students at Coffman Union and operating Saturday phone lines were other ways of reaching those seeking support. Vic Campbell said that while the phone lines got their share of crank calls, and some from people calling to pray for them, "We want to be there to talk to callers like the 19-year-old who lives at home, barely knows what gay is, but knows that he is gay, and is scared."<sup>36</sup>

A catalyst for FREE becoming a bolder, more activist force presented itself when 19-year-old member Thom Higgins was fired from his job with the State Radio Services for the Blind's Radio Talking Book Network after announcing he intended to serve as FREE's publicity director. FREE took to the streets in February 1970, picketing Higgins's former employer. Higgins told the *Minnesota Daily* the protests were not solely for his benefit, but so that "gay people all over Minnesota will no longer have to fear for their jobs." A photo in the *Minneapolis Tribune* captured several FREE members among the 30 to 50 protesters.<sup>37</sup>

The decision to protest further divided the group. In response to those FREE members who favored protesting against Higgins's firing, Baker told an interviewer, "I'm against picketing from the word go. We tried to vote them [Higgins's protesters] down . . . because I think it's counterproductive. . . . I think you're much better off trying to discuss."<sup>38</sup>





Michael McConnell (left) and Jack Baker made history when they were the first same-sex couple to apply for a marriage license, May 18, 1970.

As these events unfolded, FREE gained a valuable advocate, Conrad Balfour, Minnesota's commissioner of human rights. With Balfour's support, FREE sued the commission Balfour headed for refusing to handle Higgins's case. Frustrated that sexual orientation was not included in the state's antidiscrimination statutes, Balfour found it "beautiful" that his department was being sued. Subsequently, Balfour initiated a Department of Human Rights Study on Discrimination Against Homosexuals, in which he gave FREE a major voice.<sup>39</sup>

Three months later, on May 18, 1970, Baker and McConnell made US history as the first same-sex couple to apply for a marriage license. After they paid the filing fee, Hennepin County Attorney George M. Scott refused the application. The couple took their case to Hennepin County District Court, which also denied them a license. The events received coverage from *LOOK* magazine and from nationally televised programs, including *Donahue* and *The David Suskind Show*. Crowds as large as 2,000 people turned out for Baker and McConnell's speaking engagements. Among letters received from around the world, "We only got three hate letters," McConnell told the *Minneapolis Tribune*.<sup>40</sup>

Marriage had long been important to the pair. On Baker's twenty-fifth birthday, he proposed to McConnell that they become lovers and make a commitment to live their lives as a couple. McConnell accepted the proposal, with one condition: "He insisted that someday, some way, they would marry legally."<sup>41</sup>

Prioritizing marriage baffled most FREE members. Phelps recalled, "At the time I thought that given the fact that we didn't have basic rights to anything: work, jobs, housing, or anything, the right to get married was just a

publicity stunt. I was really angry about that and felt that Jack was an opportunist and really in it for himself. After that I didn't have much to do with him." Allan Spear also disapproved: "They took a retinue of reporters with them and when, predictably, the license was denied, they got the press coverage for which Jack had long been looking." One of FREE's coordinators, 25-year-old James Chesebro, a doctoral student in speech and communications,

recalled, "A lot of people were irked by [Baker's] actions . . . because it really made FREE sound like we were for marriage equality as a primary goal."<sup>42</sup>

Publicity surrounding the marriage application adversely affected McConnell, who a month earlier had been offered a position as head of the cataloging division on the university's St. Paul campus. While Ralph Hopp, associate director of the university's library system, staunchly supported McConnell, his employment offer came up for review when the board of regents' Faculty, Staff, and Student Affairs Committee met privately with the university's attorney. Regents routinely approved such hiring decisions; however, the committee voted against McConnell's appointment and denied his appeal to have the decision reversed. The reason: McConnell's "personal conduct, as represented in the public and University news media, is not consistent with the best interest of the University."<sup>43</sup>

Despite internal disagreements, FREE rallied around McConnell. A statement by FREE coordinating committee members Baker, Chesebro, Ed Bertorelli, and Mike Moreno called the action illegal, a denial of fundamental human rights guaranteed by the US Constitution. In a brief reprieve, a federal district court judge issued an injunction forbidding the university to renege on its hiring decision and stating that "a homosexual is, after all, a human being." The regents, however, appealed to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, which overturned the district court decision, ruling, "McConnell's public activity was an 'attempt to foist approval' of his 'deviant' lifestyle on his employer."<sup>44</sup>

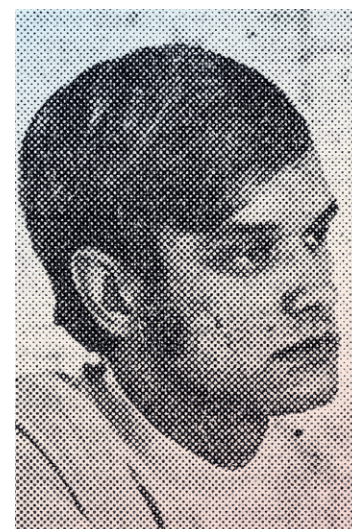
A poster exclaimed, "Hire Mike McConnell! RALLY Tuesday, Oct. 26, Noon in front of Morrill Hall. End dis-

**Prioritizing marriage baffled most FREE members. “given the fact that we didn’t have basic rights to anything: work, jobs, housing, or anything.”**

crimination against gays NOW!” With legal support from the American Civil Liberties Union, the next step was to take the appellate court decision to the US Supreme Court; however, it refused to hear the case and McConnell was denied a position at the university. He was hired instead by Hennepin County Library, where he had a long and distinguished career.<sup>45</sup>

Employment discrimination was a major concern for all FREE members, and they desired to ban on-campus recruiting from companies that acknowledged discriminatory hiring practices. The organization sent a letter to 12 Twin Cities corporations to survey their hiring practices. James Chesebro wrote the letter, which simply asked, “Would your company fail to hire, restrict advancement,

or fire an individual who admitted he was a homosexual?” Information from the survey would be shared with several groups: all graduating seniors, the university’s committee on social policy, and the Minnesota Human Rights Commission. A request would also be made for the University of Minnesota to sever all economic ties with discriminatory companies.<sup>46</sup>



James Chesebro, 1970.

Representatives of General Mills, Pillsbury, and Dayton’s had promptly responded that they did not discriminate. Gerry E. Morse, a Honeywell vice president, replied, “We would not employ a known homosexual. Our practice is the result of actual adverse prior experience.” Chesebro responded to Morse that if dialogue failed, Honeywell could expect FREE to “picket, leaflet, or disrupt the on-going business of the firm, ask University of Minnesota students to boycott the firm, and ask the university to sever all economic ties with Honeywell.” Chesebro later explained that he targeted Honeywell because it was defending an anti-gay policy: “Once I attacked it, [Honeywell] started to quasi-defend it.” These actions made the local papers, including a *Minneapolis Star* article headlined “FREE Plans Poll of Businesses on Homosexuals” and a *Minneapolis Tribune* article, “Homosexual Group Plans to Fight Alleged Business Discrimination.” In January 1971, the *Minnesota Daily* reported that the university was moving ahead to adopt a policy that would forbid corporations from recruiting on campus if they refused to hire students based on criteria other than their academic standing. FREE was credited with being the driving force behind this significant change.<sup>47</sup>

The more media attention FREE received—interviews with members, stories about protests, and coverage of Baker and McConnell’s marriage—the more people locally and from across the country sought it out. The organization’s archives, housed at the Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies at the University of Minnesota Archives, contain correspondence with students interested in starting similar organizations on their campuses in Maryland, West Virginia, California, North Carolina, Ohio, Illinois, and Oklahoma. Some were doing research for a college or high school class.

**Hire  
Mike McConnell!**

**RALLY**

**TUESDAY  
Oct. 26 Noon**

**In front of  
morrill hall**

--TO DEMAND THAT THE REGENTS HIRE MIKE MC CONNELL  
--TO DENOUNCE THE 8TH CIRCUIT COURT OF APPEALS DECISION AS REPUGNANT  
--TO THE CONSTITUTIONAL MANDATE THAT EVERY PERSON IS EQUAL  
--TO DEMAND THAT THE UNIVERSITY AND GOVERNOR ANDERSON ACT TO  
PROTECT THE JOB RIGHTS OF ETHNIC, CULTURAL AND SEXUAL MINORITIES

**End  
discrimination  
against  
gays NOW!**

FUNDS URGENTLY NEEDED!!! SEND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MC CONNELL DEFENSE FUND, C/O WOMENS LIBERATION, ROOM 110 COFFMAN UNION, U. OF MINNESOTA, 55455

FREE rallied around Mike McConnell when the the University of Minnesota rescinded a job offer after publicity over his marriage license application broke.

Other letters in the Tretter Collection are from those who had nowhere else to turn. A sampling reveals the pervasive isolation, fear, and loneliness—and the hope that FREE could be a lifeline. After seeing Baker on KMSP-TV, a St. Cloud State student from Foley, Minnesota, began sending a series of long, handwritten letters to him. “I must keep my sexuality hidden in order not to hurt my parents or family,” the student wrote, and, “Your organization is my only help. . . . Please hurry!” Finally, the student traveled to Minneapolis to attend a FREE meeting. “Just walking into a room with 75 people with my sexual orientation awed me,” he wrote. “Probably the greatest benefit was seeing the people there not merely accepting their fate, but actually proud of being gay.”<sup>48</sup>

A Hamline University student wrote, “I have feelings similar to those expressed by the girl interviewed [on a local news program] and would greatly welcome a chance to speak with other girls who express what I feel.” Another: “I am fifteen and a sophomore in high school.

I am also a Lesbian. I am wondering if people other than college students could join F.R.E.E.?” She went on to recount the homophobic comments she had heard her father and brother make. A closeted man included in his letter specific instructions on how to respond to him discretely, asking that FREE’s weekly meetings be referred to as “a special union meeting.”<sup>49</sup>

Many correspondents were from rural areas. A man from Cisco, Texas, pleaded, “Please send any and all information in a plain envelope as the size of Cisco is only 4500 and nobody here knows I’m gay. Should anyone find out life here would be impossible.” A Birmingham, Alabama, man reacted to Baker’s advice that he come out to his parents, residents of a town with a population of 250: “I wish like heck that I could, but I would die if they ever found out and would rather be dead than for them to ever know.” An Iowa State student who had received a reply to his letter responded, “I really didn’t think anybody would care enough to write back.”<sup>50</sup>



**Shortly after 10 tonight some viewer is going to growl, “What’re they showin’ us these gay boys for?” and switch off Eyewitness News.**

**Too bad. We’ll miss him. All week.**

It’s a queer world sometimes. Eyewitness News assumes you want to know it like it is. Tonight we start a week-long series of Special Reports on homosexuality. You’ll meet homosexuals, and experts concerned with their medical, legal and social problems. You’ll also hear that, unless you’re homosexual yourself, it’s all largely none of your business. You will, that is, if you don’t turn us off. Or your mind.

**Starting tonight: “Homosexuality”  
EYEWITNESS NEWS SPECIAL REPORT**

**KMSP 9**

Ad for KMSP-TV’s “Homosexuality” series, February 1970, featured FREE members Tom Shuster (left) and Thom Higgins.

## Things Fall Apart

A year after FREE became a university organization, it made some adjustments to its name and mission. As of August 1970, the name FREE was no longer an acronym for Fight Repression of Erotic Expression. Rather, the four letters simply represented the word “free,” and the name added the subtitle Gay Liberation of Minnesota to clarify its mission. Henceforth, the organization would identify explicitly as part of the gay rights movement. An article in FREE’s newsletter explained the changes: “When FREE originally formed and was recognized as a student organization, its concern was for the elimination of all forms of repressive laws which restricted an[y] individual when no other person was being harmed. . . . Since its inception . . . FREE has consistently sought to achieve equivalent rights for those denied to Gay people but granted to heterosexuals.” Coordinating committee member Ed Bertorelli elaborated, “It narrows the scope of the organization . . . it indicates our main concern.”<sup>51</sup>

These changes stirred little controversy, but dissension on another front was about to erupt at a regional convention for gay activists organized by James Chesebro through the auspices of FREE. Chesebro had envisioned the convention, scheduled for October 10–11, 1970, being held on the University of Minnesota campus. Rather than being approved by the vice president to whom it was sent, Chesebro’s request was passed along to the same committee of the Board of Regents that had retracted McConnell’s job offer. Chesebro wrote, “As far as we are able to tell, the only distinct feature of the request is the fact that FREE

is requesting a convention." The request was denied. The *Minnesota Daily* called the venue denial "One of the recent casualties in the continuing battle between the Board of Regents and FREE: Gay Liberation of Minnesota." Dania Hall, on the West Bank, became the venue.<sup>52</sup>

The convention attracted around 150 activists from several midwestern states and both coasts. Sessions were to be devoted to educational programs, problems with churches, employment and housing rights, police and repressive laws, and strategies and tactics of the gay liberation movement. Plans soon went awry. As attendees began convening Friday night, a vocal contingent made up of delegates from New York and Chicago issued a number of demands, including that straight speakers and clergy be dropped, and that the proposed agenda be replaced by reports from each group represented, "followed by a discussion of Gay oppression and how Gay people repress each other, followed by a discussion of sexism and then racism." Jettisoning the announced agenda for what Chesebro described as "a radical structure designed by and for radicals" resulted in around 40 of the attendees walking out, evidence of fissures between those espousing more moderate and radical tactics. FREE member Sue Born told Chesebro, "The women are not here and that says something." To her it indicated that women generally felt alienated by "the chauvinism of an all-male dominated group."<sup>53</sup>

The convention's bitter divides were later spelled out in lengthy critiques. Baker described the event as marred by chaos and charged that the format change did a disservice to convention goers who had traveled as far as 3,000 miles. Halfhill asserted the convention was attended by "the sort of pseudo radicals who sit around in a circle picking at each other's statements as sexist and racist instead of doing something." Chesebro, in Halfhill's view, was a chief culprit of "this sort of imitation radicalism." Halfhill wrote, "FREE has achieved its present degree of success by speaking in a rational and unemotional tone of voice and working within the system." He pointed to several actions by Baker that demonstrated "the relative effectiveness" of a "liberal approach" over "the radicals' stridency."<sup>54</sup>

Things came to a head in fall 1970, when FREE voted at the convention to recognize the Black Panther Party as "the vanguard for the elimination of repression for all people," an action advocated by Chesebro and his allies and announced in a University of Minnesota news service release on October 22, 1970. In an open letter to FREE members, Chesebro, Ed Bertorelli, Jim Meko, and John Dawson argued that while more traditional groups were willing to wait decades for acceptance, "Some FREE members want to gain and protect their identity now and are

## Phelps considered helping launch the first Gay Pride parade in 1972 as FREE's final major accomplishment and an important part of its legacy.

ready to fight for their Gay Pride, and to end oppression now." Halfhill countered, "One decision by a federal judge or the Minnesota Human Rights Commission can have more effect on the welfare of Gay people than a picket line consisting of all the members of the Twin Cities Radical community." Halfhill concluded by warning that radicals in the group were threatening to "destroy the organization."<sup>55</sup>

In Baker's view, the end of spring quarter 1971 marked FREE's collapse; he noted that this coincided with his successful campaign for the office of Minnesota Student Association (MSA) president. Halfhill would argue that FREE's demise began with adoption of the new constitution put forth by Ihrig and accelerated under Chesebro and the group that coalesced around him. Baker's run for office had raised the ire of FREE's more radical members, including Chesebro, Bertorelli, and Meko, who wrote a letter to the editor denouncing his candidacy as an opportunistic bid based on the publicity he had received when he applied for his marriage license. They disputed that he was "an outspoken advocate of homosexual rights" other than his own. This led to angry rebuttals by Baker's supporters, such as Halfhill, who described Baker in his letter to the editor as "responsible for FREE's outward-looking program of public speaking, legal battles, etc. Chesebro-Meko-Bertorelli, on the other hand," Halfhill continued, turned FREE to a course of inward-looking, ineffective radicalism when they had control of the organization from October 1970 to January 1971. When Baker won the election handily, CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite reported the news of yet another gay first.<sup>56</sup>

Once in office, Baker continued to make headlines. An MSA news release on September 7, 1971, announced that he and McConnell had celebrated "the first legally recognized same-sex marriage" four days earlier. Baker, it explained, had been adopted by McConnell, changed his name to Pat Lyn McConnell, and with the name change the couple had applied for a marriage license in Mankato, Minnesota.<sup>57</sup>

Despite Baker's view of FREE collapsing upon his departure, the organization continued beyond spring 1971. Phelps considered helping launch the first Gay Pride parade in 1972 as FREE's final major accomplishment

and an important part of its legacy. “The real inspiration for those early marches came out of FREE,” said Phelps, who served as 1989 Gay Pride Parade Grand Marshal. Ultimately, however, the organization fell apart over the divisive philosophical and political differences between the Chesebro and Baker factions.<sup>58</sup>

FREE maintained its status as a student organization beyond the point it remained active. FREE members Phelps, Jean-Nickolaus Tretter, Steve Endean, and others

then regrouped as Minnesota Gay Activists in fall 1973. But by fall 1974, the group had disbanded and been replaced by the University Community Gay Association (UCGA). Those interested in political activism were being referred to the Minnesota Committee for Gay Rights (MCGR), founded by Endean in 1974. UCGA was succeeded by the University Lesbian Gay Community (ULGC) in 1977. As it became increasingly clear that one organization could not serve the needs of all LGBTQ people, ULGC

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

► FREE cofounder **Koreen Phelps** (1948–2007) went on to work in other movements. According to her close friend Theo Page, “She really felt that communities of color were excluded [in the gay rights movement], and that’s one of the reasons she really liked union organizing, because that’s one of the places . . . that included communities of color, women.” Phelps’s final chapter was tragic. Page says she was misdiagnosed with the flu and went into a diabetic coma: “She stayed in some bizarre state of coming out of this coma . . . for six months. She never went home.” The day she died, June 18, 2007, Social Security sent a letter rejecting benefits for her disability. “If there was anything . . . that would sum up why she hated government, that was it,” says Page. “‘I’m f\*\*\*ing dead and you’re denying me disability, and you wonder why I hate the government.’ . . . If there was any defining moment that was it.”<sup>1</sup>

► FREE cofounder **Stephen Ihrig** resides in New York City, fulfilling his desire to “disappear into the real world as a homosexual, and as a homosexual who lives his life openly and doesn’t hide it.” His 2018 interview with University of Minnesota graduate student Noah Barth, conducted for a short documentary commemorating FREE, marks one of the only occasions Ihrig has spoken publicly about FREE since leaving Minneapolis in the early 1970s.

► **Jack Baker** and **Michael McConnell** mostly retreated from public life in 1980, although they received a good deal of attention once again when marriage equality was made the law of the land in 2015. Their memoir, *The Wedding Heard ‘Round the World*, was published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2016, and the couple played a prominent role in the 2017 TPT documentary *Out North: MNLGBTQ History*.<sup>2</sup>

► **James Chesebro** became a professor of communications at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. He served as president of the National Communication Association. Many who worked alongside Chesebro, or who clashed with him, have died. **Jim Meko** (1949–2015), at one point Chesebro’s lover, became a community activist in San Francisco’s SoMa (South of Market) District. He died on August 3, 2015, at age 66. **Robert Halfhill**, who played a central role in FREE through each of its chapters, first as a founding member, then as its treasurer, remained a gay activist and archivist throughout his life. He died on April 7, 2017, at the age of 76.

► **Tim Campbell**, who went on to publish the *GLC Voice*, and who was known to ruffle feathers, died of cancer in Houston, Texas, on December 26, 2015, at the age of 76. **Thom Higgins**, another provocateur, most famous for throwing a pie in the face of anti-gay crusader Anita Bryant, died in 1994 at the age of 44.

► **Jean-Nickolaus Tretter** is notable for having organized the first Twin Cities commemoration of the Stonewall Riots in June 1972, and for having collected LGBTQ materials ever since. The University of Minnesota’s Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in GLBT studies is named after him.

► **Steve Endean** rose to national prominence, first becoming director of the Gay Rights National Lobby, and in 1980 launching the Human Rights Fund, which became the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). Endean served as its first executive director. He died of AIDS on August 4, 1993, two days shy of his forty-fifth birthday. **Allan Spear**, one of his allies, made headlines on December 9, 1974, while serving in the Minnesota Senate, for coming out as the first openly gay man to serve as a state legislator, and being the first Minnesota politician to reveal he was gay. He served as president of the senate for nearly a decade and as a professor of history at the University of Minnesota for 35 years. Spear died of heart surgery complications on October 11, 2008, at the age of 71.

### Notes

1. Theo Page, interview by author, Sept. 18, 2018.

2. *Out North: MNLGBTQ History*, Twin Cities PBS, <https://www.tpt.org/out-north/>.

The author has yet to discover what transpired in the later lives of others whose names come up with some frequency, most notably Vic Campbell, Ed Bertorelli, and Frank Seiler. Others are Sue Born, Mike Moreno, and Nick Lenarz.

would split into two groups in 1982, one for men, one for women. Later, other groups emerged. By 1998, LGBTQ students at the University of Minnesota could affiliate with one or more of almost a dozen organizations that were part of the Queer Student Cultural Center (QSCC).<sup>59</sup>

The currents that launched FREE were felt across the nation. Two years after FREE's founding, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported more than 150 student associations similar to FREE. And by 1989, the twentieth anniversary of FREE's founding, there were more than 10,000 LGBTQ organizations of all kinds nationwide. As author Stewart Van Cleve has observed, "Groups throughout Minnesota regard FREE as a seminal organization that ushered in local community activism." Now, fifty years after its founding, so much has sprung forth. Beginning with Gay Community Services, Gay House, the Lesbian Resource Center, and Amazon Bookstore in the 1970s, FREE can be viewed as the spark that led to a plethora of groups and businesses addressing a wide variety of needs of LGBTQ community members of all ages and backgrounds, as well as a new generation of LGBTQIA+ students.<sup>60</sup> □



Koreen Phelps in 1989, when she served as grand marshall of the Gay Pride parade.

## Notes

In these notes, the Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies, Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, is abbreviated as Tretter Collection. The following collections are part of the larger Tretter Collection: Robert W. Halfhill papers, Michael McConnell files, Queer Student Cultural Center records. Citations for "F.R.E.E. (Free/Fight Repression of Erotic Expression)" are abbreviated as FREE.

The author wishes to thank Noah Barth for providing access to his Sept. 2018 interview with Stephen Ihrig.

1. Some sources say the uprising lasted three days, others five, still others six.

2. Vicki L. Eaklor, *Queer America: A People's GLBT History of the United States* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 124. Eaklor calls Stonewall "an event increasingly famous for being famous, but one whose star power has obscured as much as it reveals."

On FREE's founding, see John D. Wrathall, "What Are You After?: A History of Lesbians, Gay Men, Bisexuals, and Transgender People at the Twin Cities Campus of the University of Minnesota, 1969–1993," in *Breaking the Silence: Final Report of the Select Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns* (University of Minnesota, Nov. 1, 1993), 48, [https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/116515/BreakingtheSilence\\_1993.pdf](https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/116515/BreakingtheSilence_1993.pdf). "Sexual minority communities had existed in Minnesota before that time. But now for the first time activists challenged the

silence which stifled the gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender community, developed support networks for each other, and sought to persuade the 'straight' majority that it was in the interest of all to accept and celebrate sexual diversity rather than to punish it." See also Jean-Nickolaus Tretter, roundtable discussion on KUOM Radio's *Talking Sense*, St. Paul, MN, June 1989, Queer Student Cultural Center records, box 9, FREE—Koren [sic] Phelps, circa 1970–1993.

Jamie Beckenstein, "A Reflection on the LGBTQ+ Columbia University Alumni Oral Histories," Columbia Center for Oral History Research, Dec. 20, 2017, <http://www.ccohr.incite.columbia.edu/blog/2017/12/20-reflection-lgbtq-columbia-oral-history>.

3. Koreen Phelps, interview by Scott Paulsen, Nov. 5, 1993, Twin Cities Gay and Lesbian Community Oral History Project, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. Stephen Ihrig, interview by Noah Barth, Sept. 2018.

4. Kevin P. Murphy, "Gay Was Good: Progress, Homonormativity, and Oral History," in *Queer Twin Cities*, ed. Editorial Board of the Twin Cities GLBT Oral History Project (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 308. Based on interviews conducted for *Queer Twin Cities*, historian Murphy wrote, "Even our narrators who were politically aware and active downplayed the importance of Stonewall, citing a local activist organization FREE, a university-based group founded in April 1969—two months before Stonewall—with close ties to the antiwar New Left and countercultural movements."

Members directory, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1b FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1970–2014.

5. "Coffeehouse Extempore," Twin Cities Music Highlights, <https://twincitiesmusichighlights.net/venues/the-coffeehouse-extempore/>; Dakota Dave Hull, "Coffeehouses," Jan. 5, 2006, <https://dakotadavehull.com/coffeehouses/>. The coffeehouse operated from 1965 to 1987.

6. Ihrig interview.

7. Phelps interview, 1993. See also "FREE Before Stonewall: Twin Cities Gay Organization Launched Six Weeks Prior to Pivotal New York Event," *Lavender*, June 4, 2009: "In Minnesota, by early 1969, the gay community [for many men, at least] consisted of what some called the four B's—our only gathering places: bars—like the 19 Bar and Gay 90s; bookstores—like Ferris Alexander's recently opened adult establishments; bathhouses—like the Hennepin Baths; and bushes—like Bare Ass Beach."

8. Phelps interview, 1993.

9. Phelps interview, 1993; Koreen Phelps, interview, 1995, Queer Student Cultural Center records, box 9, FREE—Koreen Phelps, circa 1970–1993.

10. Phelps interview, 1993.

11. Ihrig interview.

12. James Park, *History of the Minnesota Free University*, cited in Dick Hewetson, *History of the Gay Movement in Minnesota and the Role of the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union* (Minneapolis: Friends of the Bill of Rights Association, 2013), 17, <https://www.qlibrary.org/wordpress/wp>

-content/uploads/2014/04/MN\_Gay\_Movement\_MCLU.pdf. Unaffiliated with the University of Minnesota, the community-based program lasted from 1968 to 1979, offering classes for no credit, at no cost. Ken Bronson, *A Quest for Full Equality*, "Founding of FREE," 47, <http://members.peak.org/~kat/date/2004/06/21/JACKBAKERQuest.pdf>.

13. David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 116–17. Society for Individual Rights (SIR) has been described as much bolder and more politically radical than earlier gay liberation groups such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis. See Chris Nelson, "FREE Before Stonewall," *Lavender*, May 28, 2004, 16; Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1c, FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1969–1972; Phelps interview, 1993.

Phelps and Ihrig visited Laurence after launching their class. "I think we got more of a focus from being in touch with [Laurence]," Phelps said.

On attendees: Phelps interview, 1993. Figure also cited in writings of Robert Halfhill, Jack Baker, and others.

14. Phelps interview, 1993; Theo Page, interview by author, Sept. 18, 2018, Minneapolis; Ihrig interview.

15. Rick Mitz, "Vic: 'Disjointed' No More," *Minnesota Daily*, Jan. 27, 1970.

16. S. Jane Albert, reprinted in *Official Pride Guide 1989: Stonewall 20, A Generation of Pride*, eds. George Holdgrafer and Jean Taylor, 15, Queer Student Cultural Center records, box 9, FREE—History by Jack Baker, 1977; Dale Fetherling, "Homosexuals Put Out Literature at University," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Sept. 23, 1969.

17. Robert Halfhill, "FREE: The First Gay Liberation Group in Minnesota," *Pride Guide 1989*, 13, Robert W. Halfhill papers, 1956–2011, box 5, Personal and Biographical Materials, 1969–1997; Phelps interview, 1993; Lyn Miller, "The Dawn of Gay Liberation in Minnesota," *Pride Guide 1989*, 7, Tretter Collection; "U. of Minn. Recognizes Homophile Group," *The Advocate*, Feb. 1970, 6, and Jack Baker, "Everything You Wanted to Know about FREE (but were afraid to ask)," *Pro/Con* (Jan. 1971): 9—both Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1a FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1968–2013.

18. Phelps interview, 1993. See also Stewart Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012): Van Cleve has called FREE "truly Minnesota's first 'queer' organization."

19. FREE Constitution, ratified Oct. 23, 1969, Robert W. Halfhill papers, 1956–2011, box 5, Personal and Biographical Materials, 1969–1997. FREE's constitution stipulated it was established to: educate the university community "about the homosexual community and its place in society"; secure those rights now enjoyed by heterosexuals; protest legislation of sexual morality; and establish and coordinate meetings and social events "for the homosexual student community

for intellectual and social gain." FREE Manifesto, reprinted in *Pride Guide 1989*, Michael McConnell files, box 9, FREE—1969–1970.

20. Nelson, "FREE Before Stonewall," 19; Miller, "Dawn of Gay Liberation," 9–10.

21. "History of FREE," Michael McConnell files, box 9, FREE—1969–1970; Allan H. Spear, *Crossing the Barriers: The Autobiography of Allan H. Spear* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 187.

22. Ihrig interview; letter dated Jan. 11, 1970, Michael McConnell files, box 8, FREE—General Correspondence, 1969–1972; Miller, "Dawn of Gay Liberation," 8.

23. Bronson, *Quest for Full Equality*, 2.

24. Michael McConnell with Jack Baker, as told to Gail Langer Karowski, *The Wedding Heard 'Round the World: America's First Gay Marriage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 56.

25. McConnell with Baker, *The Wedding Heard 'Round the World*, 59, 60.

26. Memorandum, RE: University Attorney's opinion on the status of the organization FREE and the members' ability to dance on and off the university campus, Oct. 30, 1969, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1c FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1970–2014.

27. Austin Wehrwein, "Minn. U. Recognizes Club for Homosexuals," *Washington Post*, Nov. 25, 1969; FREE newsletter, Jan. 15, 1970, Michael McConnell files, box 8, FREE—General Correspondence, 1969–1972; see also Vanderbilt Television News Archive, <https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/siteindex/1969-12>; Mike Wolff, "Gay Is Good—Should be 'FREE': 'Double Life' Ends for 'U' Group," *Minneapolis Star*, Nov. 19, 1969; Roger Bergerson, "U Homosexuals Hold Dance," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Nov. 19, 1969.

28. University of Minnesota News Service release, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1c FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1970–2014; Roberta Lieberman, "Homosexual Group 'Integrates' Dance," *Minneapolis Star*, Feb. 28, 1970; Ihrig interview.

29. In a 1993 interview for the Twin Cities Gay and Lesbian Community Oral History Project, Jean-Nickolaus Tretter said, "In my opinion Baker's single biggest fault was that he didn't realize that if he were to lead a nation of gays and lesbians, that was a nation of very specific individuals: each of whom had a story to tell, each of whom probably had a certain amount of trauma and trial and tribulation in reaching the point to where they're able to come out and be open. You don't manhandle people like that if you want to be their leader. That's where we get all of our problems with leadership." Dennis Miller, interviewed for same project, said, "[Baker] wasn't very interested in building coalitions. He always, I think, had a reputation of being an individualist and a loner and that can be very good, but to be politically successful, I think that it did make that more difficult."

30. The speakers' bureau was instituted the month FREE became an official student organi-

zation. Miller, "Dawn of Gay Liberation," 8; Phelps interview, 1993.

31. David Kuhn, "Regents Query Acceptance of Homosexual Unit," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 23, 1969.

32. FREE newsletter, Jan. 15, 1970, 1, Michael McConnell files, box 8, FREE—General Correspondence, 1969–1972; Rick Mitz, "No-no's and Libidos," *Minnesota Daily*, Jan. 27, 1970.

33. Mitz, "No-no's and Libidos." For an expanded discussion about these divides among LGBTQIA+ activists, see Eaklor, *Queer America*, 158–59.

34. Baker to Jonathan Ely, Dec. 5, 1970, Michael McConnell files, box 8, FREE—General Correspondence, 1969–1972.

35. Ihrig interview; Phelps interview, 1993. Note: Phelps was also the target of Campbell's misogyny.

36. FREE's Jan. 15, 1970, newsletter announced that the Minneapolis Police Department had invited FREE to send representatives to one- to two-hour "in-training sessions" that would reach about 98 percent of the force over six months. By August, reportedly well over 60 of the area's leading civic and religious leaders were participating in Friends of FREE and Clergy in Support of FREE. Michael McConnell files, box 8, FREE—1969–1970.

Lily Hansen, "F.R.E.E. at Last: Minneapolis Mecca for Gays," *Gay*, May 11, 1970, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1a FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1968–2013. See also Michael McConnell files, box 8, FREE—Telephone Service Log, 1969–1970.

37. Known as a provocateur, Higgins would later gain fame for throwing a pie in the face of anti-gay activist Anita Bryant during an appearance in Des Moines, Iowa: see Andy Birkey, "LGBT History Month: The Pie and Anita Bryant," *The Column*, Oct. 2, 2013, <http://thecolu.mn/9842/minnesota-lgbt-history-month-the-pie-and-anita-bryant>.

Don Daleske, "Group to Fight for FREEdom, In Court, on the Dance Floor," *Minnesota Daily*, Queer Student Cultural Center records, box 9, FREE—1969–1989, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1C FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1970–2014. "Firing Protested," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Feb. 11, 1970.

38. Lily Hansen, "Man from Minnesota," *Gay*, May 18, 1970, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1a FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1968–2013.

39. Floyd Egner, "Human Rights Commissioner Backs Homosexual Movement," *Minnesota Daily*, Feb. 27, 1970; "Homosexuals' Problems to Be Studied, Rights Official Says," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 20, 1970. Executive committee members James Chesebro, Robert Halfhill, James Meko, and Sue Born all participated in a study group created to help define the issues gay people confronted in seeking equal rights.

40. Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves*, 86–87; Bronson, *Quest for Full Equality*, 7, 27; Robert T. Smith, "Homosexuals Continue Fight to Wed," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 22, 1970, 10B.

41. Bronson, *Quest for Full Equality*, 3.

42. Phelps interview, 1993; Spear, *Crossing the Barriers*, 208. Spear, who valued working with the system and proceeding cautiously on gay rights, became politically aligned with FREE member Steve Endean. He delayed coming out, to the chagrin of several FREE members. Spear, in turn, viewed Jack Baker, Thom Higgins, Tim Campbell, and Robert Halfhill as overly confrontational, radical, and militant. James Chesebro, interview by author, Aug. 28, 2018.

43. Floyd Egner, "RE: Gents and Free," *Minnesota Daily Welcome Week Magazine*, Sept. 21–25, 1970, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1a FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1968–2013. Bronson, *Quest for Full Equality*, 10, cites minutes of the Faculty, Staff, and Student Affairs Committee of the Board of Regents, University of Minnesota, June 22, 1970. The committee took only one action before adjournment: "Voted to recommend that the appointment of Mr. J. M. McConnell to the position of Head of the Cataloging Division of the St. Paul Campus Library at the rank of Instructor not be approved." Bronson cites James F. Hogg, secretary, Board of Regents, letter to J. Michael McConnell, July 10, 1970.

44. Randy Tigue, "Regent: FREE member case 'matter of public relations,'" *Minnesota Daily*, July 16, 1970; "History of FREE": Halfhill, "FREE: The First Gay Liberation Group in Minnesota," 2.

45. By this point, McConnell had rallied an impressive list of supporters. Among them were former state Human Rights Commissioner Conrad Balfour, Minneapolis School Board member Harry Davis, Professor Mulford Q. Sibley, several ministers and priests and labor leaders, and a variety of organizations, including the Young Socialist Alliance: Robert W. Halfhill papers, 1956–2011, box 5, Personal and Biographical Materials, 1969–1997.

Bronson, *Quest for Full Equality*, 32.

46. James Chesebro letter, Robert W. Halfhill papers, 1956–2011, box 5, Personal and Biographical Materials, 1969–1997. Chesebro had been in New York to celebrate his birthday the weekend of the Stonewall uprising: Chesebro interview. He, along with Jim Meko, his boyfriend at the time, attended his first meeting eight months after FREE began.

47. "Survey Starts Drive on Job Discrimination," *The Advocate*, July 22–Aug. 4, 1970, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1a, FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1968–2013; and G. E. Morse to Chesebro, June 29, 1970; Robert W. Halfhill papers, 1956–2011, box 5, Personal and Biographical Materials, 1969–1997; Dale Fetherling, "Homosexual Group Plans to Fight Alleged Business Discrimination," *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 7, 1970; Chesebro interview; "Honeywell Won't Hire Homosexuals" and "FREE Plans Poll of Businesses on Homosexuals," July 7, 1970, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1a FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1968–2013. FREE was also mentioned prominently in a *St. Paul Pioneer*

Press article ("Discrimination In Hiring Hit," Oct. 22, 1970) on the topic.

Three years after the university developed its policy, Honeywell still refused to budge. Consequently, in May 1973, Halfhill used two of Morse's statements—one in 1970, another in 1973—as proof that Honeywell was violating university policy. Morse was ousted. His replacement, Charles E. Brown, said Honeywell would extend its anti-discriminatory hiring policies to gay people, adding that existing policy had been interpreted by Morse "perhaps on the basis of his own beliefs." Lars Bjornson, "A Quiet Win: Honeywell Yields," *The Advocate*, Apr. 10, 1974, 13, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1a FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1968–2013.

48. Letters to Jack Baker, Michael McConnell files, box 8, folders 1–2, FREE—General Correspondence, 1969–1972.

49. Letters to Jack Baker, folders 1–2.

50. Letters to Jack Baker, folder 3; letter to Jack Baker, Michael McConnell files, box 21, 1d FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1970–2013. Dennis Brumm, the Iowa State letter writer, eventually drove to Minneapolis and recounted his experience in a blog, "My Own Early Gay History," *The Early Gay Liberation Movement at Iowa State University*, <http://www.brumm.com/schools/gaylib/earlybrumm.html>.

51. "FREE officially changes its name," FREE newsletter, Aug. 24, 1970; McConnell files, box 20, 1b, FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1968–2013. "FREE Changes Its Name," *Minnesota Daily*, Aug. 4, 1970.

52. News release, "FREE's Request for a Regional Convention Referred to the Board of Regent's Committee," July 15, 1970, Michael McConnell files, box 8, FREE—1969–1970; Floyd Egner, "FREE Convention Quashed," *Minnesota Daily*, Sept. 29, 1970.

53. FREE news release and National Gay Conference agenda, Oct. 8, 1970, Michael McConnell files, box 8, FREE—1969–1970; James Chesebro, report, Nov. 1970, 1–2, and Jack Baker, "Reactions to Jim Chesebro's Version of the Gaylib Convention," Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1c FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1970–2014. In a 10-page, single-spaced typed report detailing his thoughts, distributed at FREE's November 12 meeting, Chesebro argued that, "While liberal structures are clear and efficient, the hierarchies used often preclude all people from speaking and sometimes make some people feel less significant as human beings."

Steve Olsen, "Disorganization Marks Gay Lib Convention," *Minnesota Daily*, Oct. 13, 1970.

54. Baker, "Reactions to James Chesebro's Version"; Halfhill, "FREE: The First Gay Liberation Group in Minnesota," 3.

55. Halfhill, "Radicalism vs. Gay Liberation," unpublished paper, Apr. 1, 1971, Robert W. Halfhill papers, 1956–2011, box 5, Personal and Biographical Materials, 1969–1997.

56. "Baker's view": Post-it note attached to article from the Willmar paper headlined

"Homosexual President of 'U' Student Association," Apr. 10, 1971, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1c FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1970–2014; Halfhill, "FREE: The First Gay Liberation Group in Minnesota"; "Letter Mistaken," *Minnesota Daily*, Apr. 14, 1971; Laura Silver, "Tender Was Their Fight," *University of Minnesota Alumni Magazine* (spring 2016), <https://umnalumni.org/UMAA-stories/Off-the-Shelf-The-Wedding-Heard-Round>.

57. Minnesota Student Association, "Minnesota Hosts First Legally Sanctioned Same-Sex Marriage," Sept. 7, 1971, Robert W. Halfhill papers, 1956–2011, box 5, Personal and Biographical Materials, 1969–1997.

58. Phelps interview, 1993.

59. Koreen Phelps, "What Happened to Minnesota Gay Activists," *Minnesota Daily*, Nov. 12, 1974; Social Networks and Archival Context (SNAC), University of Minnesota Queer Student Cultural Center, <http://snaccooperative.org/ark:/99166/w6tx9g4k>. For current list of member groups, <http://www.qscc.org/groups.html>.

60. William A. Sievert, "Drive to Gain Rights for Homosexuals Wins Adherents on Many Campuses," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Oct. 1971): 8, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1a FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1968–2013; Tretter, *Talking Sense*; Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves*, 202–3; SNAC, University of Minnesota Queer Student Cultural Center; Nick Schrott, "University of Minnesota Queer Activism: From FREE to QSCC," *Lavender*, May 28, 2004, Michael McConnell files, box 20, 1a FREE—Gay Liberation of Minnesota, 1968–2013. Gay House, in which McConnell played a major role, was one of the early ones.

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Photos and images on cover, p. 191 (top), 193 (left), Queer Student Cultural Center records, 1969–2009, Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis (henceforth Tretter Collection); p. 187, 193 (far left), John Hustad Papers, Tretter Collection; p. 188, 189 (top), 190, 191 (bottom), 192, 195 (top), 196, Michael McConnell files, Tretter Collection; p. 194, MNHS Collections; p. 195, Robert W. Halfhill papers, 1956–2011, Tretter Collection. Photos on p. 187 and 193 (far left) by John Hustad. Photos on p. 189 (bottom), 191 (bottom) by Paul Hagen.





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