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The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups

Author(s): Brett Beemyn

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The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups

BRETT BEEMYN

Ohio State University

THE STORY SOUNDS FAMILIAR: following a 1969 confrontation in New York, a small group of self-identified lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and their supporters created a militant gay rights organization in the United States, one that would help foster the gay liberation movement. However, the individuals involved in this group were not residents of New York City but students at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and the confrontation was not the riot of working-class black and Latino drag queens at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village but the takeover by African American students of Willard Straight Hall, Cornell's campus union. Nor did the group, the Student Homophile League (SHL), begin in the wake of Stonewall; rather, it was formed in 1968, making it the second gay rights group to be organized on a college campus, after Columbia University's Student Homophile League, of which the Cornell group was initially a chapter.¹

While Stonewall served as a main catalyst for the rise of a new era in the struggle for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, the preceding gay activism at Columbia, Cornell, and a handful of other universities played a critical role in laying the groundwork that would enable a militant movement to emerge following the riots. Not only did the student groups take the lead in asserting a sense of pride in being gay, but,

I would like to thank Haftan Eckholdt, Janis Kelly, Jearld Moldenhauer, and the staff of Cornell's Rare and Manuscript Collections, especially Brenda Marston and David Corson, for their help in my research.

¹A gay rights group at Stanford University gained formal university recognition several months prior to Cornell's Student Homophile League, but the group never went beyond the formative stage. "SHL Established at Stanford U," *SHL Newsletter*, March 24, 1968; Stephen Donaldson to Jearld Moldenhauer, March 17, 1968, Cornell Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Coalition Records, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

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through speaking unabashedly to others about their personal experiences (what the Cornell group called “zaps”) and developing alliances with those engaged in other struggles, especially the antiwar movement, they made gay liberation an important concern for many nongay people.² As a result, in the late 1960s and early 1970s gay politics moved from the relatively insular environment of homophile organizations onto the agendas of many radical student activists.³ These nongay activists, some of whom subsequently recognized their attraction to others of the same gender and began to identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual, helped broaden the base of support for gay liberation at Cornell and other schools in the years following Stonewall.

Yet the importance of college groups to gay liberation has been largely overlooked by LGBT historians, who either assume that the movement was born literally overnight following the riots or give too much credit to the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, and other mainline homophile organizations, many of whose members were actually opposed to the greater militancy represented by Stonewall.⁴ In order to sharpen our understanding of the emergence of the gay liberation movement, I will trace the development of the gay rights groups at Columbia and particularly at Cornell, where the militant tactics of the campus antiwar and Black Power movements encouraged the university’s Student Homophile League to become more visible and more confrontational. The transition of Cornell’s SHL from focusing on civil liberties to advocating social and political liberation both reflected and contributed to the growing radicalism of the LGBT movement.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE STUDENT HOMOPHILE LEAGUE

Although students attracted to others of the same gender had developed semiprivate meeting places and informal social networks on many college campuses well before the rise of the homophile movement in the 1950s and 1960s, the activism of the Mattachine Society served as the inspiration for the establishment of the first student gay rights organization. In the fall of 1965 Stephen Donaldson (né Robert Martin) entered Columbia University as an openly bisexual student who had not only been involved in the New York City chapter of the Mattachine Society but lived with the group’s president after his mother could not accept his announcement of his bisexuality. During his first year at Columbia he did not meet

²Unless otherwise indicated, I will use the word “gay” throughout this article in the way that it was often used then: to refer to lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals.

³Justin David Suran, “Coming Out against the War: Antimilitarism and the Politicization of Homosexuality in the Era of Vietnam,” *American Quarterly* 53 (September 2001): 467.

⁴For a discussion of the New York Mattachine Society’s reluctance to identify with the Stonewall rioters, see Terence Kissack, “Freaking Fag Revolutionaries: New York’s Gay Liberation Front, 1969–1971,” *Radical History Review* 62 (spring 1995): 104–34.

any other gay students and was forced by school officials to move out of his residence-hall room after his suitemates complained about living with someone who identified as bisexual. Deeply affected by the experience, when he finally met other gay students the following school year he suggested that they form a Mattachine-like organization on campus, what he envisioned as “the first chapter of a spreading confederation of student homophile groups.”⁵

Establishing the group at Columbia proved to be a tremendous challenge. Donaldson and another student were willing to represent the SHL to the administration (albeit under pseudonyms, a common precautionary measure in the homophile movement), but others would participate in the group only if they could remain completely anonymous. Columbia at that time would not grant university recognition to a student organization without a membership list and refused to make an exception to protect the rights of gay students. As a result, the league had to function “underground” for much of the 1966–67 school year, which hindered its ability to attract new members, since it could not receive university funding or hold public events on campus. The impasse was finally resolved when Donaldson realized that he did not have to submit the names of actual participants in the SHL, just individuals who belonged to the organization. By recruiting the most prominent student leaders to become pro forma members, he could satisfy the administration without compromising the anonymity of gay students, and Columbia officially chartered the country’s first student gay rights group on April 19, 1967.⁶

Ironically, receiving university recognition almost led to the league’s demise. On May 3 the *New York Times* ran a front-page article about the group being granted a charter, “which provoked a national controversy and very nearly cost the students involved in the SHL their careers at Columbia.” The university was inundated with outraged letters, and the pages of the student newspaper, the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, were filled with criticism of the decision. The dean of the college called the SHL “quite unnecessary,” and the director of the counseling service expressed a concern that the group would promote “deviant behavior” among students. The strong support of the league’s advisor, the university chaplain, apparently prevented Columbia officials from revoking the group’s charter, but “it was forbidden to serve a social function for fear that this would lead to violations of New York State’s sodomy laws.”⁷

⁵Robert A. Martin (Stephen Donaldson), “Student Homophile League: Founder’s Retrospect,” 1982, Stephen Donaldson Papers, Manuscript and Archives Section, New York Public Library. Because Robert Martin used the pseudonym “Stephen Donaldson” in his writing and socially for much of his adult life, I will refer to him by this name.

⁶*Ibid.*; Columbia Queer Alliance, “Our History,” <www.columbia.edu/cu/lbgc/about.html>.

⁷“Columbia Charters Homosexual Group,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1967; Columbia Queer Alliance; Martin (Donaldson), “Student Homophile League.”

However negative, the publicity did help with recruitment. When the SHL gained university recognition, it had about a dozen members; the following semester, more than twenty students were actively involved. The membership included a number of heterosexuals but few women.⁸ The group might have grown larger, but Donaldson insisted on interviewing prospective members in order “to see if they are serious and really interested” and to protect the identities of current members.⁹

THE SHL’S GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Beyond attracting interest at Columbia, the media coverage led students at other colleges and universities to contact Donaldson to inquire about starting SHL chapters on their campuses. For example, the *Cornell Daily Sun*, the university’s student newspaper, ran two brief articles at the end of the spring semester in 1967 reporting on the Columbia group’s efforts to gain recognition and published more detailed stories in the fall describing the league’s growth and attempts to establish chapters at other institutions. Cornell, though, was not among these schools. “A Student Homophile League chapter at Cornell could not be established until a Cornell student contacted [him],” Donaldson stated, and “no such contact from Cornell has yet been received.” But should students seek to form a Cornell SHL chapter, the *Sun* discovered that the administration would not oppose the group’s establishment, and the chair of the board that granted recognition to student organizations noted that they had “recognized controversial groups in the past.”¹⁰

Whether the *Sun* reporter intended to provoke Cornell students to begin the process of forming an SHL chapter on campus is unclear, but that was the ultimate result. Though gay students at Cornell may have been less interested in organizing politically than their counterparts elsewhere, they did have a nascent social network that made it possible for an SHL chapter to be established once organizing began. Historically, male Cornell students looking to meet other men patronized certain campus bathrooms (the restroom in the College of Liberal Arts building became so popular that a sign was posted stating, “This room is regularly patrolled”) or subtly approached others in several predominantly heterosexual bars near the university.¹¹ By

⁸“Columbia Charters Homosexual Group”; “New Student League Backs Homosexuals,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, November 10, 1967.

⁹“Columbia Charters Homosexual Group”; Stephen Donaldson to Robert Hermann (Jearld Moldenhauer), n.d. (April 1968), Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

¹⁰“Columbia Organizes Unit for Homophiles,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, May 4, 1967; “Homophile Group Explained,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, May 5, 1967; “New Student League Backs Homosexuals”; “Chapter May Form Here,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, November 22, 1967.

¹¹Anonymous, “Unwanted Compassion,” editorial, *Cornell Daily Sun*, December 12, 1966; Haftan Eckholdt interview with Jearld Moldenhauer, November 21, 1989, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

the early 1960s gay students had begun to socialize discreetly on campus, most notably, in the Music Room of the student union—which, ironically, was named Willard Straight Hall or “the Straight”—and in the coffeehouse in Anabel Taylor Hall that was run by the Reverend Daniel Berrigan, the associate director for service at Cornell United Religious Works and a leading peace and justice activist. Gay students and gay-supportive friends also gathered during lunch at a table in the main cafeteria of the student union, and it was here that Jearld Moldenhauer initially broached the idea of forming a gay rights group at Cornell.¹²

Moldenhauer, a second-semester junior, had read the *Sun* articles about the lack of interest thus far from anyone at Cornell and decided that he would take the initiative to organize an SHL chapter on campus. The response to Moldenhauer’s idea was tepid at best. According to Robert Roth, one of the regulars at the table, there was “considerable opposition among this little gay group of people,” because many were extremely secretive about their sexual identities and feared the visibility that would result from the creation of such an organization. Still, there was enough support that Moldenhauer wrote to Donaldson in March 1968 to obtain a copy of the SHL charter for possible membership by students at Cornell. “I believe it is important to establish such an organization, even if we find it necessary to function on a limited basis,” he told Donaldson, because “[t]he mere presence of such an organization . . . will help to stimulate a more honest, healthy attitude about homosexuality” on campus.¹³

A month later, Moldenhauer was able to report to Donaldson that he had made significant progress toward establishing an SHL chapter at Cornell. Recognizing that faculty members, even those he knew or suspected were gay, would not want to be associated with the group, Moldenhauer approached Berrigan, whose progressive politics were well known on campus, about acting as their advisor. Berrigan agreed to do so, even though he was busy planning to protest the Vietnam War by burning draft cards in Catonsville, Maryland, a few weeks later. Moldenhauer also recruited three students, “all established heterosexuals,” who were willing to serve as SHL officers should he have to divulge individuals’ names in order to gain approval for the organization. But, as he told Donaldson, he hoped that he could convince the Scheduling, Coordination, and Activities Review Board, the body that recognized Cornell student groups, to make an exception in this case because of the potential risk to the safety of

¹²Eckholdt interview with Moldenhauer, and Janis Kelly interview with Robert Roth (videotape), Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; Pauline Layton, “A Short History of Student Homophile Groups at Cornell during Two Different Periods (1968–70 and 1978–81),” Pauline Layton Papers, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

¹³Kelly interview with Roth, and Moldenhauer to Donaldson, March 5, 1968, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

members who were thought to be gay.¹⁴ “It was a big step in those days for people to come out and be talking openly,” Moldenhauer recalled years later. “We were among the very first.” Although Moldenhauer initially wrote to Donaldson using his actual name, he, like the Columbia leader, adopted a pseudonym when he began to organize an SHL chapter. “I was not so much concerned for myself or afraid for myself, [but] I still had concerns about my family because there are very few Moldenhauers running around,” he stated.¹⁵

Most gay students at Cornell were unwilling to be publicly identified as gay, even under a pseudonym, and, as a result, Moldenhauer found it extremely difficult to recruit members. “I hardly knew anyone gay, and the gay people that I did know were afraid of what I was doing and stayed away from me as a group.”¹⁶ Among the gay students who had lunch together in the union or who gathered in the Music Room, only one person immediately agreed to become involved in the league, forcing Moldenhauer to reach out to gay people beyond those in his immediate social circle. He began to pass out literature about the SHL in plain white envelopes to individuals whom he thought might be gay in the bars near campus, and when this approach proved unsuccessful, he “tried the bold tactic of walking up and announcing his gayness to nice-looking strangers and then trying to recruit them for SHL.”¹⁷ Despite the possibility for a hostile response, Moldenhauer received some “very positive” feedback, leading him to believe that a number of gay students would soon join or at least contribute money. However, at the time that he sought formal approval for the group, he had to admit to Donaldson that “[r]eactions to the League don’t seem that great. . . . Right now we have four heterosexual members and two homosexual members.”¹⁸

Yet the small size of the group was not an obstacle to gaining recognition. Having had his own difficulties recruiting participants at Columbia, Donaldson only required that a chapter have five dues-paying members, along with an elected representative, a “statement of purposes,” and a constitution to gain admission into the national organization. On May 14, 1968, Donaldson certified the Cornell SHL, making it “the second

¹⁴Moldenhauer to Donaldson, April 11, 1968, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

¹⁵Eckholdt interview with Moldenhauer, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Kelly interview with Roth, and Eckholdt interview with Moldenhauer, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; Layton, “A Short History”; personal interview with Jearld Moldenhauer, June 27, 2001. Because of his method of approaching “all the best-looking Freshmen,” Moldenhauer was not liked by many other gay students, which also hindered his ability to recruit members for an SHL chapter. Layton, “Why People Didn’t Like Jerry,” Layton Papers.

¹⁸Joel Morrison (Jearld Moldenhauer) to Donaldson, May 11, 1968, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

such chapter to be so chartered.”¹⁹ Five days earlier, the Scheduling, Coordination, and Activities Review Board had agreed to recognize the SHL without requiring the group to submit the names of members (the first time that an organization had been accorded this right at Cornell), which Moldenhauer hoped would encourage more students to become involved in the league.²⁰

Because the semester was ending, a membership drive had to wait until the following school year. “But getting rolling in the fall of 1968 wasn’t so easy,” according to Moldenhauer. Recruitment continued to be accomplished primarily through word of mouth, and following the Columbia model, prospective members had to be interviewed first by Moldenhauer or Berrigan. With the group consisting of only a handful of students, Moldenhauer was persuaded “to throw meetings open to the unscreened public,” and the first advertised meeting was held on November 21.²¹

“As hoped, it brought in new people who lacked social connections to Jerry’s little core group,” among them, Pauline Layton, a student who “felt stuck in a female body” and wanted to see “if there was anyone on campus who was just like me.” But as “transgender and cross-dressing weren’t much talked about circa 1968–1970,” Layton left disappointed. Nevertheless, despite being perceived as either a straight woman or “a closet lesbian who hadn’t come out yet,” Layton continued to participate and, just before graduating in 1970, became the vice president of the group.²²

Another person to join in the fall of 1968 was Janis Kelly, one of only a handful of women involved at the time. Although the SHL’s constitution stated that membership was open to “homosexuals, heterosexuals, and bisexuals of either sex,” there were few lesbians in the league; most of the early members were gay men or heterosexual supporters, primarily individuals whom Moldenhauer had personally recruited. In fact, Moldenhauer, believing that all of the women present at one of the first public SHL meetings were straight-identified, made a speech welcoming the heterosexual participants and had to be corrected by Kelly, who proclaimed, “I’m a dyke,” to stunned silence.²³ “As for providing opportunities to

¹⁹“Founding a Student Homophile League Chapter,” and “Charter,” Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

²⁰“SCARB Recognizes SHL,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, May 10, 1968; “The Student Homophile League of Cornell University,” Layton Papers.

²¹“Homophile League Unit Forms Here,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, May 9, 1968; Layton, “A Short History,” Layton Papers.

²²Layton, “A Short History,” and “A Personal History in the Bi-Gender Mode,” Layton Papers.

²³Haftan Eckholdt interview with Janis Kelly, July 29, 1989, and Eckholdt interview with Moldenhauer, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; Layton, “A Short History,” Layton Papers.

meet lesbians,” Layton remembers, “the group seemed a dismal failure for me.”²⁴

Although Layton and some of the women whom she thought were heterosexual actually had relationships with other women, and others did so in time, a number of those involved in the group truly were heterosexual.²⁵ As noted above, Cornell’s SHL chapter began with more heterosexual than gay students, and during its first year the league continued to stress that it was not an all-gay group. Partly this was done to attract more members, but it was also a deliberate strategy to protect the safety of gay participants. Being on “new, untried ground,” leaders of the SHL feared how the administration might react to an all-gay group, especially given the opposition encountered by Donaldson at Columbia and the traditionally heavy-handed approach of Cornell officials to student movements. “We didn’t know if we were going to be thrown out of school,” Kelly admits.²⁶

The presence of heterosexual members also “provided cover” to gay people who wanted to join but who were afraid to be open about their sexual identities. “In those early days, many who staffed the Student Homophile League table that appeared weekly among the other student activity tables in the Willard Straight lobby identified themselves publicly as being straight,” Layton recalls. “It seems likely that some of these brave people actually were straight, but one didn’t like to inquire too closely, leaving maneuvering room for people to change their minds later.”²⁷

Through staffing literature tables, holding open, publicized meetings, encouraging heterosexual participation, and not requiring members to label their sexual identities, the SHL was able to increase its membership dramatically by the end of the semester. When a December 1968 *Sun* article about the group’s growth characterized it as a “Homo League,” Moldenhauer responded that the SHL had thirty members and “consist[ed] of an almost equal number of homosexuals and heterosexuals.”²⁸ A year after it was chartered, the league continued to attract about twenty-five students to its weekly meetings, which alternated between a short business meeting and a longer discussion of a topic proposed by someone in the group.²⁹

²⁴Layton, “A Personal History,” Layton Papers.

²⁵Ibid., and Layton, “A Short History,” Layton Papers.

²⁶Kelly interview with Roth, and Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

²⁷Kelly interview with Roth, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; Layton, “A Short History,” Layton Papers.

²⁸“Homo League Expands,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, December 19, 1968; Jearld Moldenhauer, editorial (unpublished), n.d., Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

²⁹*SHL Newsletter*, April 28, 1969, Layton Papers.

INTERNAL DISSENSION

As often occurs in student organizations, conflicts over the league's philosophy, tactics, and activities increased as the group expanded. Acting on advice that Donaldson gave them even before the chapter was established, Cornell's SHL stressed that it was a civil liberties and educational organization rather than a social group in order to prevent possible criticism that it was serving as "an agency for personal introductions" or promoting homosexual behavior.³⁰ "People were not sure how far anything could be pushed," Kelly remembers, so we "[gave] a lot of lip service to it being a civil rights/civil liberties organization." Its first handout described the SHL as a student group "dedicated to educating the Cornell community about homosexuality and the homosexual, working to achieve full equality for the homosexual, and to be of service to the homosexual in achieving a healthy self-image."³¹

But during the spring 1969 semester, a split began to develop between heterosexual and more closeted gay members, on the one hand, who wanted the league to retain its focus on civil liberties, and more openly gay members, on the other, who wanted it to become an explicitly gay organization that would focus less on gaining mainstream acceptance than on building a gay culture.³² By this time, it was evident that the administration would not take punitive measures against students known to be gay, which encouraged some members to be more out about their sexual identities. "The majority of active gay students at that point were also actively in opposition to the Southeast Asian war," which helped politicize them and made them less willing to remain closeted and to conform to society's expectations. The growing influence of these activists was reflected in a revision to the SHL's objectives in early 1969; the group now stated that it sought "to be of service to the homosexual in achieving a healthy self-concept, whether it be within *or outside* the bounds of the existing society."³³

Although the revised mission statement continued to explain that the "SHL is not a social organization," gay students were becoming more emboldened in sponsoring social activities.³⁴ Initially, this support was

³⁰Donaldson to Hermann (Moldenhauer), n.d. (April 1968), and "Founding a Student Homophile League Chapter," Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; "The Student Homophile League of Cornell University," Layton Papers.

³¹Kelly interview with Roth, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; "The Student Homophile League of Cornell University," Layton Papers.

³²Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

³³Personal interview with Janis Kelly, February 22, 2002; "The Student Homophile League of Cornell University," Layton Papers, emphasis added.

³⁴"The Student Homophile League of Cornell University," Layton Papers; Kelly interview with Roth, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

largely informal. For example, Bob Roth, who was then the league's secretary, held regular parties at his apartment near campus to which he invited "everybody who he knew or suspected was queer." While not official SHL events, these parties helped familiarize nonmembers with the group and enabled them to meet other gay students. "The SHL made it possible for gay people to become acquainted with many gay people besides the ones they'd picked up and had sex with," Layton states, "and a sizable community began to form." Because lesbians and bisexual women did not have many places where they could meet and socialize on campus, such parties were especially valuable to female students.³⁵

Beyond private parties, few gay-supportive venues existed off campus for either women or men. At the time the SHL was formed, the only commercial establishment in the vicinity where people could be open at times about being gay was Hathaways, a restaurant about twenty miles from Ithaca that operated as an underground gay bar on Saturdays after hours. According to Kelly, gay people had to arrive there before 11:00 P.M. and present themselves as straight. At 11:00 the restaurant would close, and after its heterosexual clientele left, the owners would allow the gay patrons to socialize until early the next morning.³⁶

While openly gay Cornell students resented having to travel out of town and pass as heterosexual, opportunities to meet socially in Ithaca were even more limited. What Kelly calls "a little group of hearty souls" patronized the bars in Collegetown, a predominantly student neighborhood adjoining campus, but approaching people who seemed to be gay in any of these places could be dangerous. The most popular bar with the group, the Alt Heidelberg, had an eclectic clientele and a somewhat more tolerant atmosphere. However, it was destroyed in a fire in April 1968, leading "the little bar clique" to relocate to the Royal Palm, until increasing harassment from the patrons and management the following year prevented them from continuing to gather there.³⁷

The fact that gay students were starting to organize politically and be more open about their sexual identities at the same time that opportunities to socialize publicly were becoming even more narrowly limited was not lost on some league members who complained bitterly about having no place to go. Because they had come out and begun to find their voices, leaders of the SHL did not just lament the lack of social options; they took it upon themselves to create public gay spaces. In doing so, the SHL encouraged more students to come out and become politicized about their sexual identities. As a first step, they crafted a strategy to establish a "de

³⁵Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; Layton, "A Short History," Layton Papers.

³⁶Eckholdt interview with Kelly, and Kelly interview with Roth, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

³⁷Eckholdt interviews with Kelly and Moldenhauer, and Kelly interview with Roth, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; "Heidelberg Burns," *Cornell Daily Sun*, April 11, 1968.

facto gay bar.” Kelly remembers:

We were sitting around moaning about why we didn’t have a gay bar, and there was this notice that what had been the Eddygate restaurant [in Collegetown] was going to be reopening as Morrie’s bar. So Bob [Roth] said, “That would be the perfect place for a gay bar; it’s too bad it’s not a gay bar.” . . . And somehow Bob just had this inspiration, “Well, shouldn’t it be a gay bar? What does it take to make a gay bar? A bar full of gay people. This is not difficult. So then why can’t gay people just go to this bar? Why can’t we make it a gay bar? Well, because nobody ever did it before. And people will go in and it will be full of straight people.” So then he said, “Well, we’ll just call everybody we know of and tell ’em a gay bar is opening.” . . . So we all went home and spent the whole afternoon on the phone calling everybody we knew with a perfectly straight face and saying “Hey, I hear there is a gay bar opening. You want to go to the bar? We’re all going to go at 11:00 on Saturday.” And sure enough, when the bar opened, it was packed to the gills with queers. It was great.³⁸

Gay people remained the backbone of the clientele for the next year, with certain evenings of the week becoming known as “gay nights” and gays typically accounting for more than half of the bar’s patrons at 11:00.³⁹

Leaders of the league also sought to create social opportunities for gay students in early 1969 through SHL-sponsored events on campus, but this strategy was adamantly opposed by some members. Even though the Columbia chapter had recently rescinded its ban on social activities without incident, less openly gay members of Cornell’s SHL still feared a potential local backlash as well as the possibility that they would be outed if the group became more visible and began to hold events specifically for gay students. A number of heterosexual members also wanted the SHL to maintain its educational focus, since achieving greater acceptance of homosexuality and bisexuality was the principal reason they had joined, and, presumably, creating more social options for gay people was not as personally important to them. After much discussion and after some of the more conservative members left the group, a compromise between the sides was reached: the SHL would openly sponsor monthly dances but hold them “deep in the fastness” of Anabel Taylor Hall, where they were unlikely to draw the attention of straight outsiders. However, the secluded nature of the events also made them unknown to many gay students, so initially, the dances attracted few students and served neither side’s interests.⁴⁰

³⁸Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

³⁹Kelly interview with Roth, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; Layton, “A Short History,” Layton Papers.

⁴⁰“Founding a Student Homophile League Chapter,” Kelly interview with Roth, and Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; Layton, “A Short History,” Layton Papers.

The leaders of the SHL knew that ultimately, if the league and its events were to be successful, the group had to become better known and more willing to confront homophobia directly rather than trying to evade possible opposition. The strategy that they devised was to bring nationally known gay leaders to campus to give public lectures on gay rights, which would enable the group to become more visible while also satisfying the members who were primarily interested in educational activities. "It was hoped," Layton states, "that these events would increase our membership as well as inform the public about homosexual issues."⁴¹ The first speaker, Frank Kameny, the cofounder of the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C., and one of the leading critics of the illness model of homosexuality, was scheduled for April 24, 1969, in the main room of the union.

But what was to have been "the high point of this season" for the SHL never occurred.⁴² On April 19 about one hundred members of Cornell's Afro-American Society took over Willard Straight Hall to protest the administration's insensitivity toward the needs of black students, including the perceived mistreatment of African Americans in the campus judicial system and the slow development of a black studies curriculum. Following an attempt by a group of white students to retake the building and fearing further attacks, the protestors secretly brought in guns, and members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) formed a buffer zone around the building. After a tense thirty-four hours, the administration settled with the students, agreeing in part not to press charges for the takeover, to recommend to faculty members that proceedings against three African American students for an earlier protest be nullified, and to reexamine the campus judicial system. The next day, the faculty rejected the administration's recommendation, but after six thousand and later ten thousand students—including most of the leadership of SHL—occupied the main gymnasium, they reversed their decision on April 23 in what Roth called a "major step toward understanding between students and their universities."⁴³

Given this upheaval and continued tensions between black and white students on campus, the SHL decided to cancel Kameny's speech, set for the following day. According to Layton, "it was thought risky to hold such an event at a time when even heterosexuals were afraid to walk around campus in the dark for fear of being beaten up."⁴⁴ But for the leaders of

⁴¹Layton, "A Short History," Layton Papers.

⁴²*SHL Newsletter*, April 28, 1969, Layton Papers.

⁴³"Time of Crisis: April, 1969," *Cornell Daily Sun*, "Straight Takeover Supplement," April 19, 1989; Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; "Editor's Report," *SHL Newsletter*, April 28, 1969, Layton Papers. For a thorough history of the Straight takeover, see Donald Alexander Downs, *Cornell '69: Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999).

⁴⁴Layton, "A Short History," Layton Papers.

the group, the takeover of Willard Straight Hall and its aftermath became a groundbreaking moment similar to what they expected the lecture, the league's first major public activity, to have been. In the first issue of the *SHL Newsletter* published by the Cornell chapter, Roth, who served as editor, chose as the lead story a summation of the faculty's response to the student protests, "because it shows that an oppressed minority actually can get somewhere even facing a complacent or even prejudiced establishment." Kelly echoed this sentiment: "[T]he growth and militancy of what was [then] the Afro-American Society . . . inspired us."⁴⁵

The Cornell student uprisings helped to embolden SHL leaders and, along with news that summer of the Stonewall riots, convinced them of the ineffectiveness of continually trying to appease the more closeted members. "We [decided] to ditch the conservatives," recalls Kelly, who was elected president of the league in the summer of 1969. "They had to fish or cut bait because we couldn't take care of everybody, and we weren't going anyplace doing things that . . . they were comfortable with."⁴⁶ While the split was based in part on different levels of openness about being gay, it was also ideological. Kelly explains: "[I]n those days there was a piece of the Student Homophile League that basically wanted to be just like straight people but sleep with the same sex. They were like the gray flannel suit, IBM exec types. And there were others of us who were beginning to think that maybe there was something bigger out there that we could aspire to . . . [t]hat there was something wrong with the system."⁴⁷ The breaking point came when Kelly, Roth, and other SHL members who were involved in the antiwar movement sought to form a public alliance with the campus SDS in 1969–70, which they knew would mean "los[ing] the friendship of many who support SHL's demands for reform legislation but consider SDS too radical." Neither the Columbia SHL nor a chapter founded at NYU in the fall of 1968 had "attempted [a] liaison with a radical group." The danger of alienating some of the membership, what the Cornell SHL described as "the risk that SDS would decide to run your show for you, still acting in your name, and in the public eye homosexuals would get the blame," was considered too great.⁴⁸ The Cornell group itself, however, was not concerned with being used in this way. Several SHL members were involved in SDS, and others participated in its activities. David Burak, the leader of Cornell's SDS, was "tremendously supportive" of the league, even if some other heterosexual New Leftists were homophobic.⁴⁹

⁴⁵"Editor's Report," *SHL Newsletter*, April 28, 1969, Layton Papers; Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

⁴⁶Layton, "A Short History," Layton Papers; Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

⁴⁷Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

⁴⁸"Founding a Student Homophile League Chapter," Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

⁴⁹Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

One reason to form an alliance with SDS, according to a pamphlet that the Cornell group wrote on how to establish a Student Homophile League chapter, was that “SDS on most campuses is a large, well-organized body capable of anything from leafleting to taking over buildings and beyond, and if you wanted to call a strike, SDS could do a lot to make it effective.”⁵⁰ For leaders of Cornell’s SHL, working with members of the campus SDS was especially important because the Cornell chapter was the third largest in the country.⁵¹ Through it, SHL could gain access to a local leftist printing company for its newsletter and flyers. Having an inexpensive means to copy materials to post and distribute “really saved us,” Kelly contends, because the *Sun* provided little coverage of the SHL in its first two years and did not always list its meeting times. At fall registration in 1970, the league passed out thousands of copies of its newsletter to incoming students—a show of visibility that would have been inconceivable when leaders of the group were trying not to alienate more conservative members.⁵²

In another step toward visibility, the SHL also began to focus on what became known as zaps, “sessions at which openly homosexual people would answer students’ questions, trying to raise public consciousness about homosexuality.”⁵³ The first zaps were arranged by leaders of the group who made themselves available to classes, fraternities and sororities, and residence halls—“every place that would take us,” Kelly remembers. But “eventually people sought us out,” so that “we just did it all the time.” According to Kelly, “Bob [Roth] and I were speaking together two or three times a week during one really grueling six-month period” in 1970. Their hard work paid off, though, as zaps became the league’s “most effective organizing tactic,” enabling the group to educate many students about the lives of LGBT people and to recruit a number of new members.⁵⁴

FROM HOMOPHILE RIGHTS TO GAY LIBERATION

Beyond aligning with SDS, engaging in mass leafleting, and holding zaps, three key activities marked the SHL’s transformation into a more confrontational, militant organization in the fall of 1970: inviting a banned radical leader to address the league’s initial meeting, organizing a public protest campaign, and changing its name to the Gay Liberation Front. “Looking for a big kick off” that would call attention to the group at the beginning of the school year and wanting to express solidarity with the

⁵⁰“Founding a Student Homophile League Chapter,” Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

⁵¹Cushing Strout and David I. Grossvogel, eds., *Divided We Stand: Reflections on the Crisis at Cornell* (Garden City, N.Y., 1970), xi.

⁵²Kelly interview with Roth, and Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; Steven Boldt, *Static Creation: A Metaphor of Metamorphosing Lust* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978), 219.

⁵³Layton, “A Short History,” Layton Papers.

⁵⁴Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

New Left while “forc[ing] an alliance with all the homophobic leftists,” the SHL invited David Burak to speak at its first meeting. Burak had been barred from Cornell property for attempting to seize the microphone at the previous June’s commencement.⁵⁵ In announcing the event, the league also proclaimed its own militant position: “We planned this meeting with full awareness and in protest of the court injunction against Dave’s appearing on campus. If the University wants an open campus, it can’t close it to anyone. An open campus does not mean letting Dow Chemical on and keeping Burak off.” To press the group’s case, Roth sent a letter to the administration stating its intention to violate the ban.⁵⁶

As hoped, the event attracted large numbers of both gay students and SDS members and helped convince what Kelly calls “the macho [L]eft” that gay people were part of the movement and could be just as radical. “It was important in those days because people still thought queers were cowards [and] wimps,” Kelly states. “But the fact was, we were the ones who had the guts to openly invite David Burak to speak and publicize it.” Burak did his part by encouraging heterosexual leftists to support gay liberation. When questioned by SHL members, he argued that “if SDS members are serious about changing the world . . . the best thing they can do is all come to the dance that [the SHL was] throwing the next week. And they did,” Kelly remembers. “He guilted them all into showing up for our dances. And after that, our dances were the most wildly successful dances on campus for years.” It also helped that the league began to hold its dances in the main room of the student union, one of the most visible locations on campus.⁵⁷

The second event that indicated SHL’s greater militancy was a protest and subsequent boycott of Morrie’s bar led by leaders of the group. Although Morrie’s had attracted a predominantly gay clientele since opening in the spring of 1969, the bar never acknowledged this fact, and its gay patrons had to be extremely discreet; they could not show affection or dance together. The owner, Morris Angell, was willing to tolerate the bar’s gay customers but did not want his establishment to become publicly identified as a gay gathering place. Angell’s anxiety on this point may have been related to the fact that he was married to the chair of the county’s Democratic Party. Aware of Angell’s ambivalence, the SHL and the larger gay community “had knowingly, purposely, kept the name ‘Morrie’s’ out of all print.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵Ibid.; “Burak Set to Speak despite C.U. Ruling,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, September 16, 1970.

⁵⁶Boldt, 220, 222; Dale R. Corson to Roth, September 16, 1970, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

⁵⁷Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; “Coskey Arrests Burak Following SHL Meeting,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, September 17, 1970.

⁵⁸Boldt, 237.

Others, though, were not bound by this tacit agreement, and in October 1970 the bar's tolerance for gay patrons suddenly ended after a virulently homophobic writer for the *Sun* described the bar as a place to go to witness "fag aesthetics."⁵⁹ On the night the editorial was published, Roth and several friends were ordered to leave Morrie's by Angell, who told them "not to come back" because he did not want "their kind" in the bar. When Angell reiterated his comments the following day, the SHL, newly renamed the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), organized its own takeover by holding a sit-in at the bar. "At that point, people were seizing buildings all the time. There were strikes; we were always going on anti-war demonstrations and getting tear gassed," Kelly states. "So we thought, What the hell, [let's] close it down."⁶⁰

The protest and name change represented the culmination of the growing militancy of SHL and reflected the connections that had developed between gay liberation and other radical campus movements. By this time, most of the conservative members had left the group, and those who remained were willing to concede that "homophile" had become old-fashioned and that a name was needed that was "a little more confrontational."⁶¹ Although the first Gay Liberation Front had been formed in New York City the year before and chapters had spread to cities and colleges across the country,⁶² SHL leaders modeled their name after Cornell's Black Liberation Front, the name taken by the Afro-American Society following the Straight takeover. "We were quite influenced by the organizing among black students," Kelly remembers, although few African Americans participated in SHL/GLF activities. Through the name change, the group also hoped to form "closer ties with other movements on campus, especially Women's Lib."⁶³

While the Gay Liberation Front failed to involve many black students and had relatively few women members of any race to that point, the move toward greater militancy succeeded in bringing many radical activists to gay politics, which was most evident in the protest at Morrie's.⁶⁴ Despite having less than a day's notice, several hundred people, many from SDS and the newly formed Cornell Women's Liberation, demonstrated in front of the bar as about fifty GLF members and supporters sat inside, refusing to buy

⁵⁹Doron Schwarz, "An Open Letter to Janis Kelly," editorial, *Cornell Daily Sun*, October 14, 1970.

⁶⁰"GLF Holds Sit-In at Eddy St. Bar," *Cornell Daily Sun*, October 16, 1970; "Student Homophile League Now 'Gay Liberation Front,'" *Cornell Daily Sun*, September 24, 1970; Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

⁶¹Personal interview with Kelly, February 22, 2002.

⁶²Kissack, 107.

⁶³Personal interview with Janis Kelly, August 20, 2002; "Student Homophile League Now 'Gay Liberation Front.'"

⁶⁴The success of Cornell's GLF in rallying other activists to the cause of gay liberation was in marked contrast to New York City's GLF, which was rebuked in its efforts to make gay politics an important issue for most members of the city's New Left (Kissack, 107).

drinks or leave. Angell called the police, only to be told by the officer who arrived that “[y]ou can’t insult these people. You can’t just refuse to serve them.” Faced with a large, vocal crowd and having no recourse to the law, Angell pledged not to discriminate, and the protest ended.⁶⁵

As perhaps the first gay student sit-in, the demonstration at Morrie’s received widespread attention in the nation’s gay news media and was cited as one of the important early gay liberation events in Donn Teal’s chronicle of the movement.⁶⁶ But the protest was just the beginning of the struggle between Cornell gay activists and the bar. His assurance notwithstanding, Angell continued to harass gay customers. He began to refuse to serve patrons whom he thought were gay on the grounds that they were intoxicated, even if they had had nothing to drink. He also raised his prices, which he freely admitted was intended to drive away the gay clientele.⁶⁷ In response, the GLF filed a formal complaint with the local Alcoholic Beverage Control Board requesting a hearing on the revocation of the bar’s liquor license and called for the Cornell community to boycott Morrie’s “until some effective and permanent change is made in the treatment of gay people in the bar.”⁶⁸

The boycott received significant support.⁶⁹ To make up for the loss of his gay customers, Angell returned to selling drinks at their regular cost, then lowered prices dramatically, and finally began offering live bands to try to attract heterosexual customers. Leafleting by GLF and by “unknown” members of SDS who went into the bar resulted in patronage dropping off dramatically, as even homophobic students who did not support the boycott stayed away because of the publicity associating Morrie’s with gay people.⁷⁰ Unable to attract a new clientele and losing money, Angell agreed to negotiate with GLF, and three months after it began, the boycott ended with Angell apologizing in writing for any mistreatment that gay patrons might have experienced in the bar and a “personal assurance that pleasant and efficient service is available to all customers at all times.”⁷¹

⁶⁵“GLF Holds Sit-In”; Robert Roth, “The Lowdown on Morrie’s,” *Cornell GLF News* (November–December 1970), quoted in Boldt, 240–41.

⁶⁶Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants: How Gay Liberation Began in America, 1969–1971* (New York, 1971), 246.

⁶⁷Roth to Leslie Brown, Division of Alcoholic Beverages Control, December 7, 1970, quoted in Boldt, 261.

⁶⁸“Gay Liberation Front Calls Boycott against Morrie’s,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, December 3, 1970; “Boycott Morrie’s,” December 3, 1970, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; Boldt, 260.

⁶⁹For example, both the *Cornell Daily Sun* and the student radio station endorsed the boycott, with the latter refusing to air the bar’s advertisements. “Boycott Morrie’s,” editorial, *Cornell Daily Sun*, December 4, 1970; Boldt, 265, 268.

⁷⁰Robert Roth, “Buying of a Counter Culture,” editorial, *Cornell Daily Sun*, February 3, 1971; Boldt, 274; Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records.

⁷¹Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; “GLF Concludes Boycott of Bar,” *Cornell Daily Sun*, March 1, 1971; Boldt, 279.

THE IMPACT OF THE SHL/GLF

The success of the sit-in and boycott made the GLF “a visible power on campus” at the same time that Cornell’s SDS, like chapters elsewhere, was fragmenting ideologically and splitting along gender lines. In a sense, the two developments were not unrelated, as a number of the women who left Cornell’s SDS because of the chauvinism of its male leaders had begun to acknowledge their attraction to other women through attending gay political and social events and subsequently became members of GLF.⁷² While misogyny also affected some Gay Liberation Fronts, including the New York City chapter, Cornell’s GLF was largely free of gender tensions because the relatively small size of the group during its first two years led to close relationships across gender lines.⁷³ “We needed each other to survive,” Kelly states. “We were all members of a despised group. . . . Basically, whoever felt they could come forward and be open publicly was greeted with open arms, male or female.”⁷⁴ After Jearld Moldenhauer graduated in early 1969, SHL members chose a woman to replace him, and the following year, Kelly was elected president without dissension. Having women in leadership positions encouraged other women to join SHL/GLF and helped prevent the kind of gender divisions that led to the disintegration of its New York City counterpart in 1971.⁷⁵

Despite the demise of the New York group, by 1971 Cornell’s GLF had been joined by gay student organizations at more than 175 colleges and universities nationwide, including seven that had been established at New York schools besides Columbia and Cornell.⁷⁶ While not all of these groups advocated gay liberation, many did, and, as a result, the students who began to swell the ranks of the gay rights movement helped to make it more visible and more confrontational. In addition, by politicizing sexual identity and building ties to other political movements, the student groups convinced many nongay activists and activist organizations to support gay rights, developing a progressive coalition whose legacy continues today.

Another lasting effect of this student activism was the greater openness of many gay people. In the 1950s and 1960s, most homophile organizations, like the early Columbia and Cornell student groups, were very discreet because members feared being revealed as gay. Even the homophile demonstrations held in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia in

⁷²Eckholdt interview with Kelly, Cornell LGBT Coalition Records; personal interview with Kelly, February 22, 2002.

⁷³Kissack, 125.

⁷⁴Personal interview with Kelly, August 20, 2002; Layton, “A Short History,” Layton Papers.

⁷⁵Kissack, 127–28.

⁷⁶Boldt, 269–70.

the mid- and late 1960s were conservative events, with participants marching in formal attire and only designated people giving their real names and speaking to the press. Thus it was a historic moment when leaders of Cornell's SHL dropped their use of pseudonyms, held open meetings and dances, and began to speak publicly about their sense of pride in being gay. By discussing their lives in front of various audiences and countering the stereotypes of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, they and subsequent groups at other colleges helped make it possible for many more gay people to accept themselves and come out. In no small way, these efforts contributed to the development of a large-scale political movement in the years that followed.