



## **LGBT CAMPUS HISTORICAL COLLECTION**

**1980s Miscellaneous**

**1980-81 General**

**1980-81 Clippings**

**1981-82 General**

**1981-82 Clippings**

**1982-83 General**

**1982 Clippings**

**1983-84 General**

**1984-85 General**







**LGBT CAMPUS HISTORICAL  
COLLECTION AND PROJECT**

**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO**



From binder pocket



## Bob Lane and the UCSD Gay Students Union, 1976 - 1979

By Ed Brownson

*Merriam-Webster says remembrance is "an act of recalling to mind" of events long ago. This particular recalling describes experiences and events that took place forty years ago. Almost everyone from that time is dead or lost to me. I have few sources to ensure my remembrances are facts and not wishes. Any inaccuracies in what follows are my own.*

### University of California San Diego, 1976

Some months ago I received an email from UCSD's LGBT Resource Center celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Center's founding. Congratulations, Center, on the milestone! The last time I was in San Diego I went to a play on campus. Arriving early I wandered about, marveling at the changes since my time as a student, and came across the LGBT Resource Center office. How heartening to learn support for LGBT students and staff is ongoing and visible on campus.

I write to tell you of another LGBT organization at UCSD, quite likely the first, and about one of its founders, a unique and courageous young man named Bob Lane.

In 1976 I moved to San Diego to attend UCSD. This coincided with my coming out as a gay man. At that time there were no resources for gays on campus. Though simple math assured me other gay people<sup>1</sup> were there, theoretically hundreds, we had no way to find each other. In those days, closets were as deep and hidden from view as basements.

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1 Labels matter and in 2019 we have a lot of them. But in 1976, all sexually "deviant" people were commonly assigned just three: 1. "Gay", which included everyone not heterosexual, i.e., "normal", was as close to a positive label we had at the time. 2. "Homosexual", the "homo-" drawn out and the "-sex-" syllable accented, was used to politely disparage gays by those opposed to our existence and the timid media. 3. Finally, "queer" and "faggot" were slurs used in the usual disparaging ways. When I write of "gays" in this article, I'm using the term in its 1970s meaning, including lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders, questioning as well as gay men.





UCSD in the late '70s was a different world from the campus you know today. With just four colleges and a student population under 10,000 (there were over 35,000 in 2018), UCSD was a small isolated village on the enormous empty mesas and canyons of Torrey Pines, far from distant San Diego. Far even from La Jolla, a neighborhood not so welcoming back then of the newest UC campus.<sup>2</sup> Torrey Pines Road was more an empty rural byway than a vital thoroughfare. University City east of I-5 was only a plan on paper. UCSD was, in every sense of the word, alone.

This isolation reflected in UCSD's well-deserved reputation as the UC campus for nerds. We had no major sports teams. We were proud that no fraternities or sororities were associated with the campus. Frats were looked down upon as elitist and racist in the '70s.<sup>3</sup> This was all part of UCSD's radical ethos: we were to be a different sort of university, one removed from the sports and beer infested campuses elsewhere. Students came to learn, not party. We were expected to be modern versions of medieval monks, complete with academic rituals and underground cells.<sup>4</sup>

All this, the academic rigor, the times, the campus's isolation as well as its decentralized design – intentional, to prevent the riots that had been happening on other campuses over the previous decade – made it hard for students at UCSD to come together in the '70s. This was doubly so for gays.

### **The San Diego Gay Center**

Yet the city of San Diego had a vibrant gay scene in those days – if you could get to it. Though never acknowledged, the military had a lot to do with it. Several hundred thousand young men and women were stationed in San Diego during the Vietnam era

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2 Some La Jolla residents spent a fair amount of verbiage grouching about the "Marxists up on the hill." That "Marxist" reputation was mostly due to the presence on campus of one man, exiled East German Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse.

3 Later, when fraternities and sororities did arrive on campus, many '70s alumni were quite upset by the change. True to our time-stamp ethos, we protested loudly, but to no avail.

4 At its founding in 1960, UCSD was a research campus admitting only graduate students. The first undergraduates came five years later. When I arrived there was still an attitude among many in the faculty that undergrads were at best an unwelcome annoyance and at worst a disaster.



and of course a significant number of them were gay. The Navy in particular was rumored as being "gay tolerant" as long as you were never caught or publicly outed. If there were any restrictions on Sailors or Marines frequenting gay venues, you couldn't tell by the military-packed gay bars and dance halls, gay-friendly restaurants and "private clubs" where gay people went to be themselves. Though it existed mostly under the radar, the gay scene in 1970s San Diego was much larger and more sophisticated than one would expect for a city of its size and time.

Pride of place in gay San Diego went to a unique resource called the San Diego Gay Center, then located in a wonderful old house at 2250 B Street in Golden Hill just east of downtown. I went there to push open my own closet door. And there I met my first fellow gay UCSD student, Bob Lane.

The Center, as we called it, was a lifeline for everyone who didn't fit into society's cookie cutter expectations. It offered what we now call a "safe space" for people questioning gender and orientation. It gave positive support to parents trying to come to terms with their lesbian or gay child. And, in an era when anyone in uniform even suspected of "homosexuality" was escorted to the barracks door and booted out with an "undesirable" discharge, the Center offered an extensive network of services for gay members of the military.

In Autumn 1976 I joined a Center support group for people just coming out. The group was a mix of young and old, men and women, military, civilian, bisexual, transgender and questioning (though the last two groups didn't have agreed-upon labels yet). We talked of the pain of difference and the relief of honesty, our fears of discovery, and the extraordinary wonder of finding others like ourselves.

Finding kindred souls in the 1970s was a very different experience from today. There was no social media. There were no famous gay people, no gay characters on TV. The word "gay" was never uttered in polite conversation, and the media spit out a distasteful "homo-*sex*-ual" whenever they were forced to notice us at all. The few gays



who were public weren't famous, they were notorious. For those of us lucky enough to find it in the 1970s, the San Diego Gay Center opened new worlds.

One night during group introductions I gave my name and said I was a student at UCSD. So rare was it then for someone from our isolated campus to be spotted in town I repeatedly had to explain which college I meant: "No," I told the puzzled. "Not USD, not SDSU. The new one in La Jolla." "La Jolla?" they would often respond. "Isn't that up the coast somewhere?"

A young man across from me in the group smiled. When the circle came to him, he looked at me and said, "Hi, my name is Bob, and I'm a student at UCSD too". We all laughed. It was as if two members of an endangered species had been encountered by a researcher on a single afternoon.

Bob and I latched on to each other like refugees abandoned on opposite ends of an empty island suddenly finding each other. He told me he knew a couple other gay people on campus and he was trying to get them interested in organizing a Gay Students Union, the lingo of the day for a Resource Center. Bob and I traded numbers – landlines of course, mobile phones were science fiction in the '70s – and thus began the most important friendship of my college years.

Bob was 20 when I met him, living in a dorm on Muir Campus. He was slight, not tall, pale from both genetics and living like a mole in UCSD's labs. He had big blue eyes, a curious, friendly smile and thin brown hair that would soon desert him to his everlasting sorrow. He majored in Engineering, a subject he was truly born for. He was as comfortable hacking an old car's engine as he was running COBOL-coded punch cards through the campus computers. His family lived in Rancho Palos Verdes in L.A. Bob was a late life surprise to his parents; his two older sisters were nearly adults when he was born.



## The Gay Students Union

While wannabee-radical UCSD was about as far as you could get from a conservative university in the 1970s, with the exception of women's issues it was no more open minded about sexuality and gender than the rest of America. Bob and I met only three years after the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of pathologies, a decision that engendered loud howls of outrage among conservatives and religionists. That was to be expected, but even more reasonable folks were discomfited. Most of the world, including academia, was not comfortable with the idea of gays as humans, to hell with what the "experts" said.

If memory serves – and that is all I have left – the UCSD bureaucracy in charge of student groups did not give Bob and his handful of allies, now including me, grief about the idea of a gay students organization. Rather we were met with incredulity and indifference. Why would anyone need such an organization, they wondered? And why on earth would anyone willingly associate themselves with it?

This last question was no small matter. Though identifying yourself today as some variant of queer can still have risky connotations, many do come out and go about their lives. In the 1970s everything was stacked against you if you wanted to be out and live a "normal" life of career, family and friends. The brave souls who did come out – or were forced out – lost jobs, housing, families, even their lives. Before 1976, no laws anywhere in the country protected gay people's rights to associate, to love, even to exist.<sup>5</sup> Quite the opposite: anti-homosexuality ordinances littered criminal codes across the country. The only shelter we had from all this was anonymity. You gave it up at peril.

Our nascent group struggled to meet one of the University's requirements: a certain number of student signatures were required to form our gay "club" as the powers that be called it. That proved hard. So we set about increasing our numbers.

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<sup>5</sup> San Francisco passed its first gay rights ordinance in 1976, New York in 1980.



Printing was something else not easy in the '70s - no computers, no printers. You had to go to the campus print shop to get your documents or flyers typeset and printed. Hard to believe now, but document layout was a specialized skill. Bob and I, both familiar, took care of it. We littered the omnipresent campus bulletin boards - the social media of the day - with day-glo flyers imploring anyone interested in a Gay Students Union to show up to a planning meeting. Most of our flyers were ripped down within hours, with the ones near department offices often disappearing in minutes by disapproving staff.

Then as now, student groups required a Community Advisor. I'm not sure how or who Bob persuaded to sign on, but somehow he got someone on board. One ageless truism of academia: it's not hard to find someone who wants to poke the University powers in the eye. Who ever it was, they contributed only a signature. We never heard from them again. Finally, we managed to get the minimum number of students to sign on and in Winter quarter 1977 the UCSD Gay Students Union was born.

About ten people showed up for that first meeting, mostly men. We were a mix of nervous, curious, worried, delighted and scared. Bob spoke in his quiet, persuasive way, laying out what we wanted to create: a safe space on campus where gay students could gather without feeling intimidated - or reported upon.

Even associating was seen as a risk by some. An example: someone at one of the first meetings, pointing nervously at the Student Center's glass walls, suggested taking down the sign taped to the door proclaiming a meeting of the "Gay Students Union". Everyone understood the reasoning, even if some didn't agree. We replaced sign with one that said only "Student Meeting".



## The GSU: Goals and Aspirations

Identity was the focus of the GSU, not politics. At first we tried to run the meetings as an campus version of the Gay Center's drop-in groups: coping with being gay in a hostile world with emphasis on our ocean of isolation.<sup>6</sup> But it turned out few gay/questioning people wanted to open up about what they were feeling to strangers. Campus was a small town: where you went and who you associated with was noticed. Still, some friendships formed, other students were made aware of our existence.

Attracting women to the GSU was hard. Women were having "a moment" in the mid 1970s. UCSD was a "hotbed of radical feminism" (complained those conservative La Jollans) and some women actively disapproved of the gay rights movement. Among campus feminist groups, separatism from men, including gay men, even separatism from traditionally minded women, was the dogma of the day.<sup>7</sup> There was also a reluctance by some to align women's issues with those of society's outcasts, fearing to do so would tarnish or at least distract from the feminist message. Women did show up at our meetings but only a few stayed.

In the spirit of the egalitarian, non-hierarchical times and the campus ethos, the GSU didn't have leaders. We decided everything by consensus. The truth is we didn't need any. The GSU never grew beyond a small core; I don't think we ever had more than at that first meeting, usually half that. Still, the group managed to stay together for two years, witnessing and participating in a wondrous societal change.

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6 I mentioned earlier that getting to downtown San Diego wasn't easy. Not every student had access to a car. Freshmen and sophomores in particular were wheelless. Taking a bus from campus took up to two hours each way and still didn't leave you near any gay venues. If you wanted to go to the SD Gay Center from campus, your only realistic option was finding someone already planning to go.

7 This was not the case in the San Diego gay community. One of the things I loved most about the vibrant gay scene in '70s there was the mixture of sexes and genders. People of all kinds showed up at the clubs and dance halls, including quite a few of open minded straights. (In my last year in San Diego, straights taking over gay bars had become a problem much debated in the community.) The Gay Center was resolutely mixed and we all learned about and benefited from each other's experiences. One of my fondest memories was the "Gay Denny's" on University in North Park, where on weekends after midnight the entire restaurant would be filled with men and women in every conceivable form of drag, from butch lesbian to leather, and most especially, Rocky Horror.



## Politics Rears

The GSU may not have meant to be political, but like today, everything was political in the '70s. Also like today, politics refused to leave gay people alone. Our political moment began in early 1977 when our tentative steps out of the closet were loudly and rudely disrupted by Florida's reigning Orange Juice Queen.

In January 1977, Florida's Dade County<sup>8</sup> Commission passed gay rights legislation outlawing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, housing, and public service.<sup>9</sup> This infuriated the fundamentalists of the day. One of them, Anita Bryant, a former Miss America, minor celebrity and activist for right-wing Christian groups whose day job was the aforementioned "Orange Juice Queen," (it was a merch gig) decided to do something about it. She launched "Save Our Children", the first well organized, well funded anti-gay movement in America.<sup>10</sup>

Within six months, Bryant took her campaign national. She hooked up with the loudest right wing religionist demagogue of the day, Jerry Falwell, organized a recall election, ran the campaign and on June 7, 1977 with 70% of the vote secured the recall of the Dade County Commissioners who had voted for the gay rights ordinance. "Save Our Children" became the model for the never-ending anti-LGBT campaigns that fester in this country to this day.

Gay advocacy groups nationwide were blindsided. Anti-discrimination laws were just starting to be introduced in a few cities around the country when Bryant launched her crusade. After the success of the Dade County repeal anti-gay movements sprung up everywhere, especially in those cities considering non-discrimination legislation. Almost all of these movements were funded and helped, publicly or behind the scenes, by Bryant and Falwell, first under the cover of "Save Our Children" and

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8 Renamed Miami-Dade County in 1997.

9 This was cutting edge politics at the time. Wikipedia: <https://goo.gl/mjyTAU>

10 Bryant's first public activism for "morality" was in 1969 when she tried to stop Jim Morrison and the Doors from performing in Miami. She failed. That concert became notorious.



later, the organization Falwell created, the notorious "Moral Majority".

At UCSD our small GSU, put together to help students cope with their sexuality in a hostile world, suddenly found ourselves in a tempest. The Bryant juggernaut in Miami happened so fast - the span of a single UC quarter - we didn't know what to do. Suddenly we feared not only would we not be able to emerge into the world but instead would be driven deeper into hiding.

Spring quarter 1977 ended just as Dade County held its vote. Three weeks later the annual San Francisco Gay Pride Parade was scheduled. The call went out. The parade was remade to reflect the outrage at what Bryant had wrought. For gay women and men everywhere, going to San Francisco or New York in 1977 assumed the obligation of a Haj.

Five of us from the GSU piled into a van and drove up the coast. Arriving in San Francisco we were astonished to find a quarter of a million people there for that 1977 parade, more than double the size of any previous gay gathering held in the U.S. We could barely believe our own numbers. Again and again you heard people saying, "There are so many of us!" People networked, activists organized, speeches were given and even listened to. In a picture seen around the world - one that caused great outrage and glee - marchers carried giant pictures of Anita Bryant along side Stalin, Hitler, Idi Amin, and a burning cross.

The message was sent and received: gays in the U.S. weren't going back in the closet without a fight.

A few months later our new determination was put to the test right here in California.

During the Dade County debacle, other laws were proposed across the country designed to isolate and stigmatize gays. Among the worst were two in Oklahoma and Arkansas prohibiting gay people from teaching in public schools. This was even more pernicious than the misery Bryant had inflicted. These laws, passed in both states,



specifically revoked the existing rights of gay people to pursue a profession open to virtually anyone else. Just the (whispered) suspicion that someone was gay could – and did – cost a person their job.

On June 8, 1977, the day after the Dade County vote, John Briggs, an obscure Orange County politician, introduced legislation in the California State Senate similar to those Arkansas and Oklahoma laws. His proposal got no traction in the State Legislature, so a few months later he launched a campaign to put the proposal on the California ballot. Known as “The Briggs Initiative,” this was the first attempt to revoke rights for LGBT people by popular ballot.<sup>11</sup> Besides tossing anyone gay out of their teaching jobs, Briggs’ proposal mandated the firing anyone who even supported gay rights regardless of their orientation, a truly Orwellian attempt at thought control.

With the support of Bryant and Falwell and their minions, Briggs gathered over 500,000 Californians’ signatures, mostly from churches and conservative counties, enough to qualify for the ballot. Renamed Proposition 6, it was scheduled for a vote on November 7, 1978.<sup>12</sup>

Again we were horrified. Again we were afraid. ‘70s California was much more conservative than today. It was by no means assured the proposition would be rejected. Polls showed a vote in favor of Briggs’ codified hate was quite possible.

### **Bob the Activist**

Bob became an anti-Briggs warrior. Suddenly he was everywhere, using his organizational skills to spread the word about the horrors of Briggs’ proposition. Flyers went up on campus, meetings were held and coalitions were formed with other progressive groups on campus including, this time, feminist groups who also felt threatened by the women-beholden-to-their-men mindset Briggs-Bryant represented.

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11 The Dade County election was a recall of County Commissioners, not a referendum on gay rights - not overtly, anyway.

12 Briggs also tried to run for governor in 1978. Some say it was the reason he dreamed up his initiative. He only received 1.4% John Briggs was not well liked, even among conservatives.



Demonstrations took place on most UC campuses. The protests at UCSD weren't huge but they attracted campus-wide attention.

Campus was too constrained for Bob's activism, however. He hooked up with other anti-Briggs activists in San Diego, I'm fairly sure through the Gay Center. Now with his own apartment in Hillcrest on Fifth Street near Balboa Park, he stayed in San Diego that summer to work full time on the initiative. I remember a late summer conversation with him about his plans to appear on local TV opposing the initiative. We were stunned when he told us about it. It seemed suicide to come out so publicly.

He asked me to accompany him to the studio. All I remember of that day is a nervous Bob in bland shirt and tie being interviewed by a bland woman on a bland, decrepit TV set. The interviewer asked Bob a pointed question or two about "saving the children," which Bob refuted with a litany of facts. There was no counterpoint, the opposing pro-Briggs "point of view" was recorded separately. The interview itself didn't last five minutes and when aired was edited into the usual out-of-context soundbites.

I clearly remember the aftermath. Over the next weeks Bob received hate calls on his home phone as the interview cycled on and off the news. Callers made anonymous threats to beat up (and more) the "faggot" who dared speak up for "queers".<sup>13</sup>

Anti-gay invective was hurled at anyone publicly opposing the initiative all over California. Bryant's and Briggs' crusades "gave permission" for the bigots and haters to crawl out from under their rocks and as we know too well today, they never went back. Bigoted politicians and internet hate groups today still use the techniques honed in the Bryant-Briggs 1970s to push their anti-gay, anti-immigrant, anti-woman, anti-color ideologies.

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13 I too received a hate call in response to a letter I wrote to a local paper opposing Briggs. "How does it feel to tell the world you're a FAGGOT?" the (male, of course) caller yelled, quickly hanging up. I was rattled by the call, but even more I was mystified that someone would go to the trouble to dig up my number and make the call just to deliver a message like that. Today, waist deep in internet trolls, we know better.



Yet the Briggs Initiative marked a turning point. Just as Anita Bryant had unintentionally thrust gay issues into the national spotlight with her Florida crusade, Briggs' proposition raised gay issues and awareness all over California. An odd coalition of Californians came out against Proposition 6. Hollywood and San Francisco of course and many – but by no means all – Democrats opposed it. What would surprise today, a number of moderate Republicans (now an extinct species) spoke out against it. Even California's ex-governor and soon to be President Ronald Reagan came out against it.

On November 7, 1978, Proposition 6 was defeated 58.4% to 41.6%. It failed to pass in any coastal California county, including Briggs' home, Orange County. The anti-gay movement's momentum stalled after the resounding defeat of Briggs, and awareness of gays living and working in the world just like everyone else began to enter general consciousness. Still, Proposition 6 was only an early battle in what has become a very long war, one still going on today.

#### **After Briggs: The end of the GSU**

For those of us in the GSU, the defeat of Proposition 6 meant a return to the demands of college. Most of us were within a few quarters of graduating and we needed to double-down on our studies. But our world had changed. We no longer felt quite so isolated, either in the world or on campus. Gay students were an acknowledged part of UCSD now, and the fear of being "outed" lessened. For some.

The campus itself was changing. UCSD's academic rigor was putting it on the map. Empty mesas were being cleared for new colleges. Nearby, the first stage of University Town Center – then just a mall, much smaller than the current megatropolis – opened in late 1977. The number of students grew and those professors who bemoaned the arrival of undergrads retired. And the conservative La Jollans who complained about Marxists and feminists found something else to kvetch about as the campus slowly became integral to and ultimately identified with La Jolla.



Sometime during the 1978-79 school year the GSU folded. In truth we had stopped holding formal meetings. If we wanted to get together, it was easier to do it ad hoc. One thing troubled us about this though. No younger LGBT students on campus stepped up to carry the GSU forward. When asked, some felt there was no need, thinking the world had changed. Some didn't see a need to differentiate themselves. Others retreated deeper into their closet, uncomfortable by the publicity around gay people thanks to Bryant-Briggs.

Though it never attracted those theoretical hundreds of gays on campus, the Gay Students Union saw to it that for the first time the presence and interests of gays on campus were acknowledged by both the administration and other students. Bryant and Briggs had forced us to become both more "out" and more politically aware than we had ever intended.

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I could end this remembrance here. The GSU had folded, Bob was about to graduate and leave San Diego. But what happened to him next is worth telling because it is a variation on the theme of what many gay men who came out in the 1970s experienced.

### **Bob leaves college**

Bob was in a hurry to get on with life. During his last year at UCSD he was recruited to work at McDonnell Douglas in Huntington Beach. Normally a defense contractor, not a popular career prospect at the end of the Viet Nam War, MDHB was different. It built not war planes and missiles but the rockets that sent men to the moon, satellites, and the SkyLab project. Nerd to his core, Bob was over the moon (pun intended) at the prospect of being part of the space program.

Easily passing the interview on campus he drove the 100 miles north to Huntington Beach for the official grilling and tour. As it was a government job and a semi-secret one at that, he needed vetting and a security clearance. Papers were filed,



background, friends and family checked. I was a reference, so were other friends, co-workers and faculty. Who knows what those vetting him came up with about his social life, but nothing disqualified him. Somehow in those pre-internet days, his anti-Briggs activism went unnoticed, or at least unremarked upon, he never knew which. The recruiters called him back to Huntington Beach for interview round three.

Still, the dilemma for Bob was huge: what to do about being an out gay man applying for a government job in 1978?

Despite the changes in awareness resulting from the political fights of '76 through '78, the risk of declaring oneself gay to any job recruiter, much less a government contractor, was huge. Coming out had changed from being a guaranteed disaster to something more like Russian Roulette. Get the right recruiter and the right manager in the right department, and you'd likely have no problem. A hostile recruiter or manager could leave a permanent stain on one's life.

I remember long discussions with Bob about the pros and cons of coming out. It was a discussion no one should ever have to have. Besides the fear of what the outcome might be, he was angry that it was even a consideration. I knew him well by then and wasn't surprised when he made what he felt was the only honorable choice.

At the final interview he was asked if there was anything he could be blackmailed for.

"I'm gay," Bob told the interviewers.

Bob told me later that the interviewers gave him a sideways look, mumbled bland neutralities like "I see," scribbled more notes and continued with the interview. MDHB hired him shortly after.

Bob was no doubt not the first to present himself as an out gay man to a government contractor. But I am sure he wasn't the last. Each subsequent gay woman or man who followed found it, if not easier, slightly less fraught. Another act of courage



by an honorable, ethical, unassuming young man.

### **The real Bob**

The odd thing about Bob was, he wasn't a radical by nature, not even an activist. See him for the first time and you'd scream "Nerd!" with both the capital N and trailing exclamation point. He was happiest tinkering, whether with computers, electronics or cars. But that was just one of his sides. The man who stepped up to fight Briggs was another. Here's a third: Bob was an old fashioned romantic to his core. He knew exactly what he wanted from life. A cute house, preferably an old one he could restore with a white picket fence – he actually used the term, partly I think to tweak his friends – surrounding a rose-filled garden. A driveway with several cars in various states of restoration. A career he enjoyed. And most of all a true love, a man to share it all with.

Oh, and one thing more: he felt he should be able to marry this perfect man once they found each other.

It's impossible to explain today just how ridiculous the idea of gay marriage was in the 1970s. It bears repeating that homosexuality had only been taken off the "sick list" in 1973. Whenever Bob talked about gay marriage the rest of us choked and howled with laughter at the idea, saying "never in a million years" and "the world will end first." But Bob was Bob and he was quite serious. He did not accept that he couldn't have the exact same recognition for his perfect relationship that straight people had.

He was a romantic in the best sense of the word: someone who found life a gift, enjoyed living it, believed in the one true love and yes, the happy ever after. He was sure of his worth in a way that few gay people were then. His quiet certainty held all who knew him in awe. What we would today call his world view seemed impossible, yet there it was. There *he* was. We could only watch him, listen and learn.

### **Bob in the OC**

He graduated after Fall quarter 1978 (I think; I could be a quarter off) and moved



north to his new career. He found an anonymous apartment in an anonymous complex in the bleak hinterlands of Huntington Beach, far from the fabled surf. Bob hated it there. Orange County in the '70s had no gay community. It had no community at all really. It was just endless strip malls and walled-in housing complexes populated by the right-wing bigots for which it was infamous. I knew this all too well: my family lived there.

The closest gay area at the time was in Long Beach along the coastal strip just north of Belmont Shores. There were a few gay bars and restaurants there and gay friendly housing. After a year of suffering in the OC, Bob found a wonderful apartment in a building that could have been the set for *Melrose Place*. I loved it, all cool Spanish tile, dark wood and courtyards filled with exotic plants. But for Bob the apartment was a means, not an end. After a few years of working and saving he was able to buy a fixer-upper Queen Anne cottage in an "up and coming" neighborhood near Long Beach's derelict downtown. He moved in, leaving the beautiful apartment behind, and began plotting the cottage's renewal.

### **"Have you any dreams you'd like to sell?"**

Few things in life go according to plans, particularly the plans of an idealistic, romantic gay man in the 1970s.

Once through McDonnell Douglas's engineering boot camp<sup>14</sup> Bob did start work designing bits of rockets and satellites. But after little more than a year, as Reagan's "Trickle Down Revolution" was unleashed on America, space flight fell "out" and massive weapons systems became "in". Government funding shifted accordingly.

Bob was set to work on military systems, some of them long range cruise-type missiles. This troubled him. But the idealistic college student was now a full adult with a mortgage and bills, aging parents, and not much prospect of work outside the defense

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14 "Forget everything you learned at UCSD," he was commanded by his new MDHB masters. "We will teach you how to be an MD engineer." UCSD Engineering graduates had a reputation at the time of being brilliant in theory and woefully lacking in real world experience.



industry – engineers did not have the cachet they have now – so he stayed at MD and did what he was assigned. The weight of being a small cog in a very large, nasty machine bothered him more and more. His new bosses, mostly defense types, weren't as gay-neutral as the space program scientists had been. He told me they found ways to give him grief.

Bob faced other unexpected problems too.

Bob loved his little Queen Anne cottage in downtown Long Beach but the neighborhood did not love him back. In the 1970s the urban cores of cities were anything but the vital, friendly places they are today. They were horrors, half empty ghettos of racism, gangs, drugs and ruin, abandoned by governments and banks, despised by the mostly white descendants of those who had originally built them who fled to places like Orange County. Even within the context of troubled '80s Los Angeles, downtown Long Beach was an archetype of urban ruin.

Urban collapse led to the abandonment of zoning. Those who remained in inner cities did what they wanted. Next door to Bob's house a similar cottage had been torn down and replaced with eight trashed-out apartments stacked four on four. Inhabited by arms-toting, drug- and prostitute-dealing gangs, the building filled the long narrow lot edge to edge. Its inhabitants looked right into the windows of Bob's house, and the residents didn't like the slight, nerdy gay man they saw there.

His car was broken into constantly. So was the house. The yard was used as a dump. Residents of the apartment building played loud music 24/7, often setting their speakers out on the balcony aiming them at Bob. He was verbally bullied and his life was threatened. The police were useless. They refused to get out of their cars unless there was a body to be processed.

Bob tried to ignore all this but it was impossible. In a moment of despair, he admitted to me that the previous owner of his house used to sit on his porch with a loaded shotgun to keep the thugs at bay. Yet Bob did what he always did: he



persevered. Over the course of occasional visits I saw the house restored room by room even as he suffered the siege. He turned the attic into a hard-to-access safe haven with drop-down stairs, a sort of panic room for himself and his valued possessions in case things got really bad. Meanwhile the recession brought on by Reagan's trickle-down economy and the blind eye authorities turned toward the crack epidemic continued inner cities' decline.

The stress this put on Bob was huge. And it made what happened to him next all the worse.

### **Bob's end**

You have guessed by now why I am telling this story and not Bob. 1976 was also the year that a new health problem was first noticed in New York and San Francisco. What would come to be called AIDS was then a vague, rumor-ridden puzzle. When it first showed up in New York in the early 1970s the authorities called it the "junkie disease" because they were the first victims. Because IV drug users were despised, those early deaths went under-reported by the health and political classes. Then it moved into the community of gay men.

All we knew in the early 1980s was that we, gay men, were caught in an epidemic without a name, that it appeared to be 100% fatal, and we were showered in shame by the world for having caught it.

Bob did not take part in the gay community's party scenes of the 1970s. He preferred dinner dates with prospective beaux - that old fashioned romantic streak in him. He contracted the yet-unidentified virus from one of those beaux sometime in the early '80s. Because of his limited dating history, he told me he knew exactly who gave it to him. I shuddered at the thought. Knowing something like that seemed a burden too horrible to bear.

There is a perception that everyone who contracts HIV goes for years without becoming seriously ill. While true for some it is not true for all, and was especially not



true at the beginning of the epidemic. In those early days the virus was ferocious and some people were especially susceptible to it.

Bob, a late-life baby and never particularly robust, was mauled by HIV. Within a year he developed pneumocystis pneumonia, recovered partially, was plagued by secondary infections and continued to decline. The demands of an unsympathetic McDonnell Douglas, the stress of his housing situation and the horror of being an early victim to an incomprehensible plague with a near-certain death sentence wore him to his core.

Isolated in Long Beach, he continued to decline. He told me about mystery infections, clueless and prejudiced doctors, hideous drugs that did nothing but make him sicker. He suffered more bouts of pneumonia, each one leaving him weaker. As he grappled with mortality his goals narrowed, eventually settling on one: finishing the restoration of his dream home before he died.

On one of my trips south – they became rarer as the epidemic consumed my own life in San Francisco – I remember sitting in Bob's restored living room on kitchen chairs – he wanted to finish the house before furnishing it – while he tried to mask his desperation and dismay. The genial witty man I'd known at UCSD was gone. He was thin, drawn, paler than ever, the fight in him lost as the world he'd imagined and fought for abandoned him. Bob was fading into those dusty old Queen Anne rooms as the epidemic took away hope. We went to a nearby restaurant for lunch that day – he was as glad to get away from the neighbors' leering eyes as I was – but we didn't stay long. He needed to rest.

The last time I saw Bob his father was there. He was trying to help his unexpected, unexpectedly gay, always surprising son finish the house he'd so desperately wanted before he died, both of them hammering away to postpone the inevitable.



It didn't work. When Bob died his parents called me, distraught, not understanding how their child was suddenly gone from their lives. In tears, his father vowed he was going to finish the house himself to honor his son.

I hate that I do not have a date for Bob's death. I do know a last bout of pneumocystis pneumonia took him out. It was the mid-1980s, and by then the floodgates of AIDS deaths had burst. I hardly had time to mourn him, so distracted was I by the carnage around me in San Francisco.

### **Bob in the Afterlife**

Bob being Bob, his death wasn't the last I heard from him. A month later, the hurt and loss still acute, a letter came in the mail. Pulling it out of the mailbox an icy shiver went down my spine. The handwriting on the envelope was Bob's. No mistaking: I'd spent two plus years in the UCSD CAPE office reading his course-canvasing schedules and labels and marks on tray after tray of punch cards. How could this be? Bob was capable of a lot, but reaching out from the grave?

Inside was a short note from his parents. As they unpacked Bob's house to sell it, they found a stack of letters and cards Bob had written to friends and family before his death. They were stamped and ready to go. Oh, so very very Bob. I don't remember what my card looked like but I remember his words: "Dear Ed, What can I say? Love, Bob." He was right. In triage, there is nothing to say about any single death: You just move on to the next victim. You grieve later - if there is a later.

That letter, along with so much else, disappeared during the frantic two decades I spent on the front lines of the epidemic as both a fighter and a victim. There are few things from my past I regret losing more.

### **Coda**

Bob's story, as with the stories of all of us who came of age and came out in the 1970s is, finally, the story of AIDS. But his story - and ours - are so, so much more. We were the generation that took the first cautious steps out of the shadows and into the



world. The first generation to insist we were not mentally ill, that we are a normal variation of life's many themes. The first to insist we be treated humanely and properly, not based on ignorance, superstition and fear. And Bob was the best of all that.

All I have left of him is one picture, these memories, and a thousand what-ifs. What if the epidemic had spared Bob? What would he have done about it? Would he have leapt into action again to fight the prejudice and indifference of our shamefully negligent political and social leaders like he had with the Briggs initiative? I like to think so. I like to think that the brave 22 year old who exposed himself to hate and abuse in opposition to an evil law would have joined in the fight for our lives.

What I have instead is the memory of a man, forever young, with a crooked smile introducing himself as a fellow student at UCSD and suggesting we create a gay support group on campus. A young man who believed with all his heart in everything a romantic life had to offer.

**End**



STATEMENT OF NONDISCRIMINATION

The practices and policies of the Gay Students Association  
(Name of Organization)  
do not (1) exclude from being hired, or otherwise discriminate against any individual with respect to his/her compensation, terms, conditions or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex or national origin, or (2) exclude or expel from its membership or limit its membership because of such individual's race, sex, color, religion, or national origin.

Michael J. Carter

Signature of Authorized Representative

chairperson/member

Title/Position

Gay Students Association

Name of Organization

Wednesday 16 November 1977

Date