



Miami and Key West

by Linda Rapp

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Miami has been the site of contentious battles for glbtq rights, most notably the homophobic 1977 campaign, spearheaded by singer Anita Bryant, to repeal an ordinance that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation. Despite a stinging defeat on that issue, the Miami glbtq community was energized and remains vibrant, as is that in Key West, which has a long tradition of celebrating diversity. This spirit is reflected in the city motto, "One Human Family."

Miami

A gay presence has been visible in Miami since at least the 1930s. The bar scene at the time included various drag shows, among the best known of which was the interracial "Jewel Box Revue," which began performing at the bar of the same name in 1939, and then went on to tour nationally in the 1940s. The company did not disband until 1975.

Miami was the site of the United States Air Force's largest training base during the years of World War II, bringing many young men and women to the area. After the war some returned as visitors and others to become residents as southern Florida grew in popularity as a tourist destination.

In the post-war period Miami had a lively gay bar scene, catering to both locals and visitors. Given the increasing importance of tourism, city officials found it prudent to avoid harassing people who were spending their vacation dollars in the area. Beginning in the mid-1950s, however, glbtq Miamians became the target of several repressive campaigns.

In 1954 the mayor led a move to shut down the city's gay bars, citing them as a threat to children. After a brief but well-publicized drive--aimed at least in part at improving the city's image as a family-friendly travel destination--the bars were able to reopen.

Miamians, like other Floridians, suffered from the harassment and violations of civil liberties undertaken by the infamous "Johns Committee," named for state senator--later Governor--Charley Johns, who attempted to rid Florida universities of homosexuals, in the process ruining the careers and lives of hundreds and gay men and lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s.

By the 1960s Miami had a large gay population, but not an organized community. The cruising habits of gay men became occasional fodder for stories in the news media, and vice squad officers were sent into schools to warn children about the supposed threat.

Post-Stonewall Miami

It was only after Stonewall that glbtq Miamians truly began to organize. In 1972 the Gay Activists' Alliance staged pride events when the national Democratic and Republican conventions came to town. The following



Top: South Beach, Miami Beach.
Above: An aerial view of Key West.
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year the Transsexual Action Organization was founded in Miami Beach.

Activists made a successful push for a city ordinance outlawing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The passage of the measure--similar to statutes in about three dozen other cities around the nation--in January 1977 drew an outcry of protest from leaders of Christian churches and right-wing organizations.

The repeal effort was spearheaded by a group called Save Our Children, which had support from conservative Christians. The main spokesperson for this coalition was pop singer and former Miss America contestant Anita Bryant, who stirred up homophobia by calling the Miami ordinance "a religious abomination" and issuing dire warnings that homosexuals--schoolteachers in particular--would use it as a license to recruit children and possibly molest them.

Bryant was also the spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission, which featured her in nationally televised commercials promoting Florida orange juice. Her visibility in this position prompted a "Miami Support Committee" in San Francisco to call for a boycott of Florida orange juice. This action was somewhat controversial since some members of the gay community feared that potential allies might be alienated if a boycott cost citrus-industry workers jobs or income. But when the Florida Citrus Commission specifically endorsed Bryant's campaign, momentum for the boycott grew.

Gay activists, including discharged Air Force sergeant Leonard Matlovich, went to Miami to work to defeat the repeal, as did the co-executive directors of the National Gay Task Force--later renamed the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF)--Bruce Voeller and Jean O'Leary.

Pre-election polls offered hope that the ordinance might survive, but proponents of the repeal were able to turn out large numbers of voters, and prevailed by approximately a 2-to-1 margin.

Dade County Commissioner Ruth Shack, who had proposed the ordinance, commented, "They [i.e., opponents of the measure] came out of the woodwork," adding, "It was a huge step backward nationally."

O'Leary also deplored the result, stating, "The defeat for human rights in Dade County is all the evidence anyone could need of the extent and virulence of prejudice against lesbians and gay men in our society, and of the necessity to redouble our efforts to end such prejudice and the discrimination it inspires."

Despite the stinging defeat, the glbtq community in Miami and across the nation had been energized. Moreover, though she succeeded in defeating the gay rights ordinance, Anita Bryant herself paid a high price for her homophobia. She became a national symbol of intolerance and, in many quarters, a national laughing stock. The boycott of Florida orange juice had a discernible effect on national sales of the product; and in 1980, after Bryant announced her divorce, she was fired by the Florida Citrus Commission.

Amendment of Miami-Dade County Human Rights Ordinance

It was not until 1998, however, that the Miami-Dade County Commission amended its human rights ordinance to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation. Once again, conservatives launched a repeal drive. An organization called Take Back Miami-Dade, in conjunction with the Christian Coalition, attempted unsuccessfully to put the issue on the ballot in 2000. Two years later, however, it collected enough signatures to force a vote. The Family Research Council and the American Family Association's Center for Law and Policy joined the repeal campaign.

Fighting for the retention of the ordinance was No to Discrimination/Save Dade, with support from the NGLTF and the Human Rights Campaign. They were successful, and the repeal was defeated by six percentage points.

Election results showed that many Latino voters had supported the repeal, but political consultant Armando Gutiérrez attributed this at least in part to "misinformation" directed by the proponents of repeal at older Cuban-Americans. He found "a lot of confusion" among the group, many of whom believed that the ballot issue was about same-sex marriage.

Cuban-Americans were, however, also among the strongest in support of equal rights. Miami's generally conservative and Republican Cuban community is staunchly opposed to the regime of Fidel Castro, whose persecution and internment of gay men and, to a lesser extent, lesbians became an issue of grave concern, particularly in the mid-1990s, when many glbtq Cuban-Americans began coming out and taking leadership roles as activists.

Political scientist Juan Carlos Espinoza stated, "When people in their family came out, lots of Cuban-Americans started changing their minds" about homosexuality, which has long been stigmatized in Cuba.

Miami is now home to various glbtq attractions, including the very successful Miami Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, held annually in the spring. Two circuit parties--the White Party in November, which benefits an HIV/AIDS organization, and the Winter Party in March, in support of the Dade Human Rights Foundation--take place in the city.

The Art Deco South Beach district is the site of a number of popular gay clubs. There are no strictly lesbian venues in Miami, but many bars throughout the city feature a weekly lesbian or gay night.

Fort Lauderdale and Wilton Manors

Since the mid-1990s Fort Lauderdale, Miami's neighbor city to the north, has been emerging as an attractive glbtq travel destination as well. Fort Lauderdale has actively promoted itself as gay-friendly, spending over a quarter of a million dollars in marketing in 2004 to draw glbtq vacationers. With a variety of clubs, restaurants, and lodging places, it offers something for people of all ages. The city now ranks as America's fifth most popular site with gay travelers.

The nearby small city of Wilton Manors has many gay-owned businesses, including popular restaurants. An estimated 30 to 40 percent of its 12,600 residents are gay or lesbian.

Key West

At the very end of the Florida Keys, Key West has a long tradition of nonconformity. Its image as a place where individualism is not only accepted but celebrated has been an attraction to many people over the years.

The isolated island was a haven for pirates in the eighteenth century. In 1822 an American businessman, John Simonton, bought it, and the Navy established a base there with the aim of stamping out piracy.

With an economy based on fishing, salvaging shipwrecks, and cigar-making, Key West prospered in the nineteenth century. These industries faltered in the early years of the twentieth century, however, and there was a steady decline in the island's economy and population until the mid-1930s, when the Federal Emergency Relief Administration funded efforts to restore the city and make it an attractive tourist destination.

Among those drawn to Key West were several prominent writers. Ernest Hemingway was a resident in the 1930s, and Pulitzer Prize-winning lesbian poet Elizabeth Bishop and her lover lived together on the island from 1938 to 1946.

Tennessee Williams first visited Key West in 1941 and several years later bought a house that he retained

for the rest of his life. Gay and lesbian writers such as Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, and Carson McCullers visited him during his stays there.

World War II brought an influx of military personnel to the naval base and a boost to the island's economy.

President Harry Truman, hardly a bohemian sort, was nevertheless attracted to Key West and made a home there his "Little White House" for vacations while he was in office. Nattily (if somewhat improbably) attired in colorful Hawaiian shirts, he strolled the island's streets.

The closure of the naval base in the 1960s led to another decline in Key West's economy, causing many residents to leave. Gay and lesbian business people would prove central to the island's return to prosperity.

The 1970s saw an influx of gay and lesbian entrepreneurs who opened many guesthouses, clubs, restaurants, and other businesses. The Key West Business Guild, one of the first gay chambers of commerce in the nation, was founded in 1978 to promote gay and lesbian tourism. The organization also offers a trolley tour that teaches visitors about the glbtq history and culture of the island.

In the 1970s, the glbtq community became a force in local politics. Richard Heyman (1935-1994) became one of the first openly gay elected officials when he was elected mayor in 1983.

Gay clubs have long been a mainstay of Key West's social scene. One of the oldest is La Te Da, originally known as La Terraza de Martí but which acquired its more familiar, playful moniker when drag performer Holly Woodlawn mangled the name.

Key West's celebration of iconoclasm is nowhere more evident than in its declaration of itself as the "Conch Republic." In April 1982, in response to the Mariel boatlift, the U. S. Border Patrol set up a blockade on highway U. S. 1 and required everyone on the road to provide proof of citizenship in order to proceed to the mainland. This was a significant inconvenience, and so when pleas for relief were rebuffed, Mayor Dennis Wardlaw immediately took action: he announced that Key West had seceded from the union, declared war on the United States but immediately surrendered, and requested foreign aid.

The Conch Republic--whose motto is "The Mitigation of World Tension through the Exercise of Humor"--still holds a festive annual celebration of its independence day. Key West businesses sell the Republic's flag, stamps, and currency, as well as passports and same-sex marriage licenses.

Key West loves a party and holds a number of annual festivals including FantasyFest, a ten-day event with masquerade balls, pet parades, pageants, and other events that raise money for AIDS charities; WomenFest, which draws thousands of lesbians for art, entertainment, and cultural events; the Queen Mother pageant for drag artists; and PrideFest, always a high point of the year.

In 2003 PrideFest celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the rainbow flag in spectacular fashion. Designer Gilbert Baker was on hand as a three-ton, one and a quarter mile-long version of his creation stretched across the entire width of Key West from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. The flag had the eight stripes of Baker's original design, including pink and turquoise, two colors that had earlier been dropped because they were not available in commercially produced flag fabric at the time.

It is believed that approximately one third of male residents of Key West are gay, and a quarter of the women are lesbian. The city has an anti-discrimination ordinance and offers domestic partner benefits to its employees.

In 2004 the Key West City Commission passed a resolution that encouraged Florida and all other states to recognize same-sex marriages performed elsewhere, condemned George W. Bush's call for a constitutional amendment against such unions, and supported the provision of domestic partner benefits by both public

and private employers.

Key West resident Susan Kent summed up the philosophy of the community and sent a message to the rest of the world. "This island is unique," she said. "It's not tolerance, it's acceptance of diversity. You could do this too."

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.