



Signorile, Michelangelo (b. 1960)

by Kenneth Cimino

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Michelangelo Signorile is a prolific, and often provocative, writer and activist whose books and articles, radio show, newspaper columns, and website champion the cause of glbtq rights. He is best known for his practice of "outing" closeted conservatives and for advocating the redefinition of marriage to include same-sex couples. He has been called the heir to the "in your face" brand of activism pioneered by 1980s AIDS activist and writer Larry Kramer.

Signorile was born on December 19, 1960 in a blue collar Italian family in New York. He grew up in Brooklyn and on Staten Island. He attended the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, where he studied journalism.

Signorile returned to New York City in the early 1980s and proceeded to come out. He spent much of the 1980s working as an entertainment publicist and enjoying the perks that come with such a job. However, by the late 1980s he became involved in gay politics and AIDS activism. He ran the media committee of the direct action group ACT UP in New York, helping to publicize protests and bringing attention to the various issues surrounding AIDS.

Signorile and Gabriel Rotello, a New York party promoter, formed the New York-based magazine *OutWeek* in 1989. Signorile and Rotello felt that both mainstream media and gay media failed to cover the AIDS crisis accurately. Plus, they wanted to "shake things up."

In *OutWeek* Signorile often wrote about how invisibility and the closet hurt the gay movement and adversely affect efforts to contain the AIDS epidemic. Soon, he began taking aim at the media, which allowed gay public figures to remain closeted. To illustrate the point, in 1990 Signorile and *OutWeek* outed the recently deceased billionaire Malcolm Forbes, whose homosexuality was an open secret in New York media circles but had not previously been mentioned in print. Later, he outed gossip columnist Liz Smith because she promoted closeted actors' "heterosexual" relationships.

Although Signorile's practice of outing frightened many, who believed that their reputations and careers would be destroyed were they exposed as gay, Signorile argued that only by breaking down "the closet of power" could America's homophobia be challenged effectively.

In late 1990 a *Time Magazine* article cited Signorile as the originator of the practice of outing closeted celebrities and politicians. Signorile contended that the homosexuality of public figures (and only public figures) should be mentioned when relevant to a larger story (and only when relevant). While mentioning the homosexuality of public figures when it is relevant to a story is a common journalistic practice today, Signorile's position at the time was seen as radical. It was often criticized as being similar to Senator Joseph McCarthy's Red Scare tactics in the 1950s.

In 1991, Andrew Sullivan helped spark a backlash to Signorile's practice of outing when he published an



A publicity photograph of Michelangelo Signorile provided by Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau.
Courtesy Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau.

anti-outing column in *The New Republic* after his friend, then Pentagon spokesman Pete Williams, was outed. Sullivan's disagreement with Signorile ignited a feud between the two that continues to this day.

(In 2003, Signorile, along with Larry Kramer and Michael Musto, exposed Sullivan's unsafe sexual practices. Sullivan, who is known for criticizing gay men for their promiscuous behavior, had earlier revealed that he is HIV-positive; despite this status, Sullivan, using the screen name RawMuscleGlutes, posted a sex ad on a website for "bare backers," i.e., men who have sex without condoms. In a lengthy article in a New York gay newspaper, *LGNY*, Signorile skewered Sullivan for his hypocrisy. More recently, he has accused Sullivan, whom he dubs "Bareback Andy," of extolling "the virtues of having HIV and the wonders of being positive," and thereby encouraging others to practice unsafe sex.)

Signorile's seminal book, *Queer in America: Sex, the Media, and the Closets of Power* (1993), examines the three closets that keep gays invisible: the media in New York, politics in Washington, and entertainment in Hollywood. His book explores the devastating effects of homosexuals' remaining in the closet, and provides one of the first intellectual justifications for the practice of outing. The book was considered ground breaking for its willingness to expose the hypocrisy of the closet in the offices of New York's media elite, in the inner sanctum of the Pentagon, and in Hollywood's glitzy studios.

In 1996, Signorile published *Outing Yourself: How to Come Out to Your Family, Friends, and Coworkers*. In this work, he offers step-by-step tips on coming out. He describes a fourteen-step process of how glbtq individuals can come out to their families and friends. He presents a coming-out journey, and declares, "The stress of coming out will never be as hard on you as the stress of staying in was."

After having an unsafe sexual encounter in 1996, Signorile wrote *Life Outside: The Signorile Report on Gay Men: Sex, Drugs, Muscles, and the Passages of Life* (1997). In this book, he interviews and surveys hundreds of gay men living in cities with large gay populations as well as in suburbs and small towns. He bemoans the fact that a new gay male culture has evolved that seems obsessed with golden tans, muscles, and youthful appearance. He discusses "body fascism" and "circuit parties," which frequently feature recreational drug use. Again, Signorile explains the need for gay men to "come out" and free themselves of sexual oppression.

Throughout the 1990s Signorile worked for several gay publications. In 1991 he joined the *Advocate* as a columnist. Two years later he joined *Out Magazine* as a columnist. In 1995 Signorile returned to the *Advocate* as an editor-at-large and roving columnist. In 1998 he began writing and reporting for the international network of websites connected through Gay.com.

Signorile's columns and reporting in the late 1990s again sparked controversy. He cautioned that many younger gay men in the United States were not practicing safe sex and deplored the popularity of bare back sex. He warned of "circuit boy" culture and the popularity of designer drugs, such as Ecstasy, ketamine (also known as special K), crystal methamphetamine, and gamma hydroxybuterate or GHB.

Currently, Signorile hosts a four-hour radio show weekdays on Sirius Satellite Radio's Out Q. His guests run the gamut from newsmakers and community leaders to pop culture celebrities and politicians. In addition, he writes a syndicated column for the weekly *New York Press*. Many of his columns are archived on his website.

Signorile is a familiar face on television, advocating glbtq rights and offering a gay perspective on current events. He has appeared on such programs as "Today," "Good Morning America," "Larry King Live," "60 Minutes," "48 Hours," "The O'Reilly Factor," "Fox News Watch," and various MTV and VH1 programs.

Signorile deserves credit for helping change journalistic practices in the United States, especially in regard to mentioning the homosexuality of public figures. In doing so, he has also helped make it easier for ordinary individuals to be open about their sexuality in the workplace and in daily life. His is an articulate and provocative voice in the glbtq community.

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About the Author

Kenneth Cimino holds a Ph. D. in Political Science from Claremont Graduate University's School of Economics and Politics. He is the author of *Gay Assimilation: The Group Consciousness of Gay Conservatives*, as well as numerous articles for Advocate.com and other publications. He is a Visiting Assistant Professor of political science and policy at Drake University. He lives with his long-time partner, Wayne, in the Southern California area.