

PROFILE:

BARBARA GITTINGS

BARBARA GITTINGS has been in the Gay Movement since 1958. A long time, isn't it? A time when homosexuality was not spoken of in polite company. A time when our society was being destroyed by puritans. You and I remember what it was like in Texas a few years ago; well, think about 1958. It took courage and more guts than most of us have today to stand up for Gay Rights in 1958. But Barbara had the courage and the guts, not to mention the intelligence, to lay a path which began the movement we now have. If our movement had had a Declaration of Independence, one of the signatures would have been: Barbara Brooks Gittings.

Ms. Gittings was born in 1932 to a very devout Catholic family. In her primary and secondary education, she did very well. She entered Northwestern and then problems began. That was the year Barbara had to come to terms with her own homosexuality.

Barbara began ignoring her courses and spent many hours in the libraries at Northwestern and in Chicago. "I went to texts on abnormal psychology, to encyclopedias, to medical books, to every book dealing with sex, as well as to whatever I could find under card catalog headings like 'sexual perversion.' I was so anxious to get to the material on homosexuality, I didn't even mind looking in categories like 'perversion' and 'abnormal.' And I half believed them anyway."

"But everything I found was so alien, so remote. It didn't give me any sense of myself or what my life and experience could be. It was mostly clinical-sounding disturbance, pathology, arrested development — and it was mostly about men."

Barbara flunked out of Northwestern at the end of her freshman year.

It was difficult for Barbara to move into the gay world she longed for. "On weekends, dressed as a boy, I'd hitch rides with truckers up Route 1 to New York City to go to the gay bars. At first I didn't know of any gay



bars in Philadelphia. I had a lot of trouble getting plugged into the gay community. I spent agonized years trying to find a comfortable social life, and the bars were the only place I had to start looking. Since I didn't like to drink anyway, I'd hold a glass of ice water and pretend it was gin on the rocks. I'd get into conversation with other women but I'd usually find we didn't really have any common interests; we just happened both to be gay. I just didn't run into any lesbians who shared my interests in books and hostel trips and baroque music. They all seemed to groove on Peggy Lee and Frank Sinatra and nothing older! It was only later, in other settings, that I found gay people I was really congenial with. In those days I felt there was no real place for me in the straight culture, but the gay bar culture wasn't the place for me either. It was a painful and confusing time in my

life."

"I wore drag because I thought that was a way to show I was gay. It's changed now, but in the early 50's there were basically two types of women in the gay bars, the so-called butch ones in short hair and plain masculine attire and the so-called femme ones in dresses and high heels and makeup. I knew high heels and makeup weren't my personal style, so I thought, well, I must be the other kind! And I dressed accordingly. What a waste of time and energy! I was really a mixed-up kid."

"The only other models, the only other images of homosexual people I had to look to were in the books, and there, too, much was made of differentiating both lesbians and male homosexuals into masculine and feminine types. This differentiating is disappearing very fast today, not only for gays but for straights, too. Nowadays people generally feel freer to look and act whatever way they feel most comfortable, and they don't so readily follow set patterns."

"It was risky as well as inappropriate for me to be in drag. One night in Philadelphia, I left a mixed bar with a male gay acquaintance, and outside there were two marines who put on brass knuckles and attacked my friend. 'We'd beat you up, too, sonny, if you weren't wearing glasses,' one told me. When they left, I took my companion to the hospital where he had thirteen stitches put in his face."

Barbara since went on to join the Gay Movement. She formed the New York chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis and was editor of *The Ladder* for several years. While editor, Barbara published such prophetic gems as "The Invisible Woman" in 1965, whose author pointed out that *the lesbian is a dangerous subversive rebelling against the deepest injustices of our social order. Her existence brings up questions so uncomfortable that most people can't even bear to admit her existence. . . . To the frail male ego, the thought of a woman who has her own identity, instead of getting it from her relationship with a man, is so destructive it's unimaginable and must be ignored out of existence. . . . The modern woman has yet to emerge as a human being on her own rather than as somebody's wife and mother. The lesbian is that anomaly, a free woman, legislated out of existence by 3,000 years of patriarchal culture. . . .*

Bold words for that time! And Barbara is bold, and a qualified leader. She presently is on the Board of Directors of the National Gay Task Force and serves as coordinator of the American Library Association's Task Force on Gay Liberation.

View from the Front

By Allen Reid

Anyone who thinks that Gays are not better off in this state and this country than they were ten years ago either hasn't been around very long or else has had head planted firmly in the sand. We've come a long way, Baby!

Ten years ago the mere appearance of a man in blue in or near any of the gay bars was enough to clear the entire area within a few minutes. Very few of us even entertained the thought of telling anyone "outside" about our "gaity." By and large we were a people ashamed and fearful who didn't have enough faith or pride in ourselves and our identity as Gay People to even think about doing anything serious to better our situation. We didn't believe in ourselves . . . how could we expect anyone else to believe in us?

Today, we can effectively challenge oppressive laws, we can successfully fight job discrimination, we can win the right to have custody of our children, we can know that by nature we are neither sick nor sinful. We can even run for public office and have a possibility of being taken seriously . . . and in some cases even win

the election — not as make-believe heterosexuals, but honestly as ourselves, as human beings.

In our struggle for human dignity and legal equality, we now have the support of major religious denominations, powerful women's groups, the legal profession, the American Psychiatric Association and numerous other influential groups across the nation.

And not one of you reading this column has escaped being affected by all that has transpired around you. You, who have done nothing but enjoy the "gay" side of our lifestyle, will reap the benefits for years to come of the so-called Gay Movement.

The vote by the American Psychiatric Association reversing its position on homosexuality didn't come out of the goodness of their hearts. That decision came only because a small group of dedicated (even fanatical) women and men spent years of their lives working to educate the leadership of the APA to the truth.

Sodomy laws have been stricken from

the books in state after state; cross-dressing ordinances have been dropped; equal protection laws for housing and employment and housing have been passed in city after city. Why? Not because the public and law makers have suddenly come to love us . . . but only because a few dedicated individuals and groups have spent vast sums of their own energy, time and money because they cared not only about their own situation, but about your situation and the situation of generations of Gay men and women to come.

Why have you turned your back on your Gay Brothers and Sisters and been content to idly sit, and if you take notice at all, only criticize the methods, downgrade the results, question the motives and complain about how your own "security" has been jeopardized by the openness that has been created.

Nothing changes without producing waves . . . but I would willingly loose a hundred jobs and have a thousand pseudo-friends turn their backs on me, just for a glimmer of a promise of a brighter day for us all.

That day is coming — but it could come so much sooner, so much easier, if you could somehow begin to see yourself as a part of us . . . and no longer as just someone who is visiting here for his or her own pleasure.

MALE RAPE LAWS PASSED

Lancing, Michigan — Recently enacted revision of Michigan's rape law redefines rape as "sexual assault" and does not differentiate between men and women. The new law can now replace the current sodomy statute in cases of males raping males and may pave the way for eventual repeal of the sodomy law in Michigan. It is uncertain what effect, if any, the new law will have on prevention of the forcible rape of homosexuals by other prison inmates.

Boston — Gov. Frances Sargent has signed a bill which allows males to charge they were the victims of rape. Under the new law, males or females can charge assailants with forcible anal or oral rape. Previously rape statutes applied only to females attacked by males and forced to participate in sexual acts in the conventional "missionary" position. The Massachusetts Bar Association feels that the bill (sponsored by NOW and supported by the Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts) will lead to the repeal of the state's centuries-old sexual conduct statutes.

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT by Jay Alexander will resume next month.