

Remember Ray Hill

Houston's essential irritant deserves a permanent place in city history.

Every community needs a persistent irritant – a pebble in the shoe of civic consciousness. Someone must be willing to poke and prod the better angels of our nature, lest they lapse into slumber.

Ray Hill, who died Saturday at 78, ably filled that role in Houston for decades. A tireless champion of unpopular causes, Hill fought for the rights of gay and lesbian people at a time when they were widely despised. He worked for years to make life a little better for prisoners, an even more marginalized group.

He challenged authority, and not just for the sake of being ornery. His contrariness got results.

On the streets of the Montrose area in February 1982, Hill saw a friend engaged in a confrontation with a police officer. Most people would walk the other way, but Hill got in the officer's face: "Why don't you pick on somebody your own size?" he shouted.

Hill was arrested under a city ordinance that made it a crime to "interrupt" an officer performing his duties. An acquittal didn't satisfy him; he filed suit challenging the law, and in 1987 the U.S. Supreme Court struck it down, ruling that criticism of police officers was protected free speech.

One of the justices referred to Hill as a "citizen provocateur," a title he liked so much he had it printed on his business cards.

Hill played a foundational role in Houston's gay rights movement, which has broadened to represent other sexual minorities. In the 1970s, after serving four years in prison for burglary and larceny, Hill organized meetings and helped to create the community's first social and political organizations. Hill and his colleagues built an infrastructure for LGBT people to fight for the opportunity to live with dignity and participate fully and openly in society.

His work on behalf of prison inmates, inspired by his own incarceration, was equally groundbreaking. Countless in-

mates heard the voices of mothers, wives, brothers, sons and daughters who called into "The Prison Show," which Hill hosted for many years on radio station KPFT. Outside the studio, he advocated for inmates' basic rights, arguing that their crimes didn't erase their humanity.

Many a night, Hill was awakened by a phone call from someone in the community needing help with a legal or personal problem. Hill always knew the right person to call, the right strings to pull.

Above all, Hill was fearless. He came out as a teenager in the blue-collar suburb of Galena Park in the 1950s – before the Stonewall demonstrations in New York ushered in the gay civil rights movement, before city Supervisor Harvey Milk was assassinated in San Francisco, before Houston banker Paul Broussard was beaten and stabbed to death by teenagers out for a night of gay-bashing.

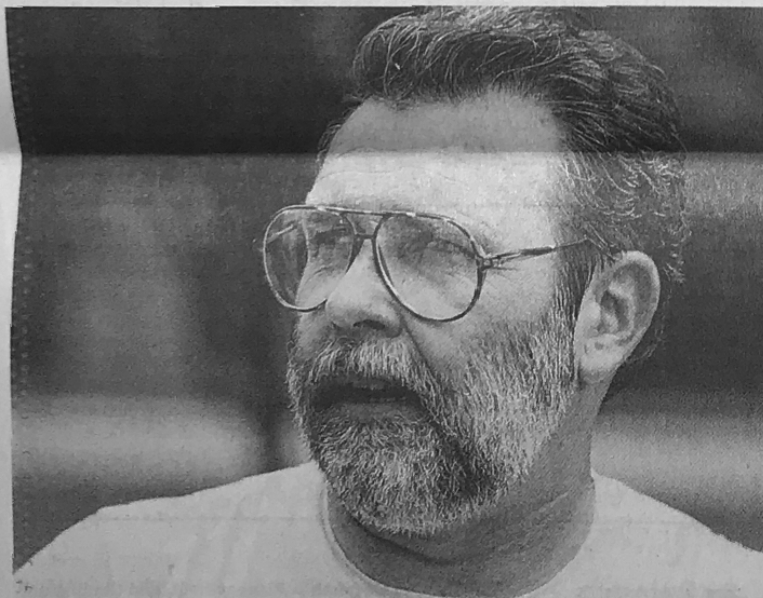
Years later, Hill surprised many when he argued for parole for one of Broussard's killers, demonstrating that forgiveness pairs well with righteous anger.

Hill's final years were marred by poor health and poverty. In an August Facebook post, Hill pleaded for help in finding an affordable home that would accommodate the walker and wheelchair he used after amputations related to his diabetes. He had three heart surgeries in 20 years. He had talked of panhandling to feed himself.

These misfortunes make for an unsatisfactory coda to a remarkable life. But don't feel too sorry for Ray Hill. He preferred adventure to comfort.

It's up to all of us to ensure that his legacy – a more open, inclusive and interesting community – remains intact.

As Texas argues about the content of textbooks, the school board debates the names affixed to campus buildings and the city contemplates erecting statuary that truly reflects Houston's most influential residents, all of us should channel our inner citizen provocateurs and agitate as Ray Hill did to give him a permanent place in our history.



Staff file photo

A Supreme Court justice once referred to Ray Hill as a "citizen provocateur."