



New book looks at impact of Gay Community News

What was life like for a queer activist in Boston in the late 1970s and early '80s? For Amy Hoffman, author of the new book, "An Army of Ex-Lovers: My Life at the Gay Community News," it meant becoming a journalist.

"In October 1978, I climbed the stairs to the Gay Community News office and my life changed forever. A shy idealistic 26-year-old, I encountered a group of politically committed, charismatic eccentrics, some of whom would be my 'gay family' for the rest of my life," Hoffman wrote in the book that is part personal memoir, part social history. "The AIDS epidemic was still in the future. 'Homosexuality' appeared in the headlines only when it related to scandal or crime. And coming out could mean losing your job, your home and your family – with no legal recourse."

Founded in 1973, Boston-based GCN is believed to be the first gay and lesbian weekly newspaper in the country, with a circulation reaching about 5,000, costing 50 cents a copy.

David Peterson, one of GCN's founders, said he "was thrilled to read the book. It captured the essence of what it was like then." Because GCN was the only thing listed under gay in the phone book, the paper also served as a hotline, a lifeline, even a gay community center – a place where people came to hang out. "It had a profound effect on so many people's lives," Peterson added. "GCN was so much more than a weekly publication."

A longtime gay community leader in Boston, Barbara Hoffman (no relation to the author) spoke of GCN's significance in her life. "It was the end of the information desert, one of the seminal events in our community. You can't imagine what it was like to live in the desert, with no books, newspapers, magazines, movies, TV, and no way to communicate to any numbers of us. Along came GCN, and we stopped being invisible. Suddenly, there was information and a way to connect. It was a monumental breakthrough."

Formed and run as a collective, GCN offered hard-hitting political analysis, cultural critique, gay history, personal stories, humor, gossip, occasional book and film reviews, and even crossword puzzles and recipes now and then. Critically important, the paper provided gay Bostonians with a centralized weekly calendar of community events.

From 1973 until 1992, only the blizzard of 1978 halted the presses, but only temporarily. Attracting scores of writers over its 19-year run, GCN was, as the Village Voice named it, the "movement's paper of record." But in 1992, the always financially struggling GCN ceased regular publication, holding on as a monthly periodical until 1999.

GCN emerged locally from a vibrant activist community, with an overtly left-wing editorial stance. GCN had a point of view; it was advocacy journalism. Organizers of demonstrations unabashedly wrote about themselves.

"With 10 full time staffers, GCN was at the time also one of the largest gay organizations in the country," said Richard D. Burns, who has served as executive director of New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Services Center since 1986. "I think of GCN as an engine of gay liberation and community, an engine to advance, to organize our journey to justice."

Burns, like any number of national GLBT leaders and activists, cut his teeth in the movement at GCN, first as a volunteer reporter and office manager, then as managing editor, and later president of GCN.

Other GCN contributors and staffers went on to head national gay organizations. They include a former executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) Urvashi Vaid, NGLTF's Creating Change conference director Sue Hyde, and the late Eric Rofes, an author, educator, and HIV/AIDS activist.

Hyde remembers first reading GCN while sitting in a St. Louis coffee house. "For me it was political and intellectual nutrition," she said. Hyde moved to Boston to become the paper's news editor in 1982. It was her first work experience with gay men. "It was an unusual configuration of lesbians and gay men, working on a project, practically unheard of at the time," she said.

Gay men and lesbians working together is one of several important legacies that GCN left the movement. "GCN was committed to grassroots pluralism where everybody's voice, from whatever fringe, would be heard. The range of gay experience was totally valued," said contributor Michael Bronski.

"Even though we didn't know it at the time," Bronski, a senior lecturer at Dartmouth College, continued, "GCN was the high school, university – the academy – for gay and lesbian and queer studies and politics for the next 35 years. The paper taught us skills: typing, distribution, layout, how to run a business, and how to run an organization. For me personally, I learned how to write quickly and well, to think publicly about a lot of things, and to have a public voice."

— Chuck Colbert