

Pride and Anger: Boulder, Colorado and Queer Rights in the 1980s

Throughout the 1980s, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals of Boulder, Colorado found new strategies to secure their rights, amid a hostile national climate. Under the presidential administration of Ronald Reagan, the HIV/AIDS epidemic led to a generational loss of queer men, showing on a national level the homophobic reluctance to protect gay people. In cities like Boulder, no protection existed in housing and employment to combat heightened levels of discrimination. Yet, gays and lesbians continued speaking out and acting up. In the mid-1980s, a group of lesbian-identified women came together to once-and-for-all pass legislation in Boulder that ensured protections for sexual orientation. These individuals formed the Equal Protection Coalition (EPC). The EPC reflected a change in queer political activity in the city: rather than allowing heterosexual allies complete the heavy-lifting, queer people took the torch of securing their own rights. This new strategy of grassroots activism paid-off. By a slim margin, Boulder voters amended the city code in 1987, expanding the anti-discrimination code on the basis of sexual orientation. For the first time, anywhere in the United States, by a popular vote did this type of referendum succeed. This chapter examines the motivations for the EPC, while also analyzing how Boulder's queer population had transformed its political identity since challenges in the 1970s. The resistance to the EPC will also contrast the support for the measure, with further contextualization into the national zeitgeist on gay and lesbian causes. Lastly, the lead into the 1990s will situate Boulder's expanding progressiveness on gay rights.

Across the United States, the 1970s continued the trend of gay and lesbian people becoming more public with their identities, ignited largely due to the Stonewall Riots in 1969. Following Stonewall, the 1970s witnessed a surge in organizations for gay and lesbian people, including Boulder's Gay Liberation Front (BGLF). In 1974, BGLF advocated for the "Sexual

Preference Amendment” (SPA) to the Boulder Human Rights Ordinance, which sought to bar discrimination in housing and employment on the basis of sexual orientation. Boulder City Council spearheaded the effort, with Mayor Penfield Tate and other liberal colleagues endorsing and campaigning for its passage in a special referendum in May 1974. This endorsement by Tate and others, though, led to political turmoil that entrenched the city, as conservatives railed it was the end of their traditional values. One woman, Hilma Skinner, went as far to say Boulder would be renamed “Lesbian-Homoville,” should the measure pass.¹ By a wide margin, Boulder voters quashed the measure, in the first of its kind referendum anywhere in the country.² In the aftermath, Boulder Mayor Penfield Tate II and City Councilman Tim Fuller, both of whom supported the SPA, lost their political careers. Boulder mimics a trend of the 1970s: though gay visibility and acceptance were forming, there were no strong political organizations designed to confront the complexities of electoral campaigns, while conservative activists employed more effective public strategies to induce fear and turn down gay rights. The queer community of Boulder was unprepared for the challenges ahead. In the 1980s, though, organizers adapted after learning mistakes from the 1974 campaign.

As AIDS became an epidemic in the United States, misconceptions saturated public thought; the disease was commonly referred to as the “gay cancer,” or at other times the “Gay-Related Immune Deficiency” (GRID), despite its ability to afflict anyone of any sexual orientation.³ Already confronted with homophobic attitudes, AIDS served as another reason that anti-gay organizers. Conservative politicians aligned with the religious right to ostracize and

¹ Barry Koltzow, “Show-Like Aura Pervades Sexual Preference Hearings,” *Boulder Daily Camera*, February 20, 1974.

² Amy L. Stone, *Gay Rights at the Ballot Box* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xx.

³ Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present* (New York: Alyson Books, 2006), 409-410.

demonize gay people. With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, figures like Baptist preacher and conservative activist Jerry Falwell Sr. found a welcome audience in the new administration. Falwell helped elevate anti-gay fervor to a national level. In 1979, Falwell formed the “Moral Majority,” a right-wing political organization dedicated to the promotion of conformity to traditional gender roles and family structures, opposition to abortion, and removal of social and legal protections for LGBTQ+ people.⁴ Falwell had also assisted with Anita Bryant’s 1977 campaign, and held experience in distributing anti-LGB fervor.⁵

Throughout the 1980s, groups like Falwell’s continued fomenting fear among straight people that had real consequences for the treatment of AIDS patients. Public health efforts, while topically aimed to help all people, employed coded language and select enforcement that specifically targeted and regulate gay, lesbian, and bisexual people’s sexual freedom.⁶ Moreover, with the lack of a cure for AIDS, social misconceptions allowed for a greater fear of unregulated sexual orientations that seemingly fueled the crisis. Conservative Evangelist Pat Buchanan, another prominent right-wing figure in the era, encouraged discrimination against homosexuals for their sexual practices. Buchanan claimed that gay people were dangerous to the public sphere: vectors of death that should be denied housing accommodations and work opportunities to stop the spread of their immorality.⁷ Buchanan was continuing with his anti-gay rhetoric; in the 1970s he had written on the topic of expanding gay rights, saying the struggle for more gay rights was like a war, and directly against Christian fundamentalists.⁸ As the Democrat Party became more receptive to the inclusion of gay rights, with more candidates endorsing adding it

⁴ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 379.

⁵ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 350-351.

⁶ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2011), 224-235.

⁷ Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 416-417.

⁸ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 374.

the party's national platform, Buchanan and other conservatives exploited fears that Democrats, in cahoots with gays and lesbians, were openly trying to destroy the United States.⁹

As the AIDS crisis rose to national prominence, pockets of the Boulder and Boulder County community made sustained efforts to reduce the impact of the virus. In 1985, the Boulder County AIDS Project (BCAP) was founded by two volunteers, working phone lines to assist dozens of community members. Over the next five years, BCAP grew to a few dozen volunteers, also providing a food bank for those afflicted by the virus and in need.¹⁰ On the political level, Boulder County was the second county in the nation to implement a needle-exchange program (year unknown).¹¹ The Boulder County Health Department worked to educate the public about the disease, educating people to alleviate panic about those with AIDS in the workplace, particularly. A local branch of IBM, between the cities of Boulder and Longmont, was used as a “progressive” model for other local businesses, treating AIDS like any other illness.¹² Throughout the same period, local school districts integrated discussions about AIDS into their curriculums, also working to dispel the myth that only gay men could contract the virus.¹³

In the 1980s, Boulder's LGB population employed a new and more bold method of activism. Rather than allowing straight allies, such as Penfield Tate, to do the public work of securing rights, gays and lesbians took direct action themselves for change. In 1986, the United States Supreme Court upheld an anti-gay law in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which prohibited consensual intercourse between same-sex partners. The majority opinion, authored by CU Boulder alum Byron White, held that “The Constitution does not confer a fundamental right

⁹ Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 416-417.

¹⁰ “Our History: A Brief Look Back,” Boulder County AIDS Project, <https://www.bcap.org/history>.

¹¹ Josie Heath, interview by Shirley Steele, April 21, 2004, held at Boulder Carnegie Library, Boulder, CO.

¹² Robert Gelchion, “AIDS hysteria may cause headaches for businesses,” *Longmont Time Call*, February 5, 1986.

¹³ Joyce Pierpont, “Schools to bolster AIDS education,” *Longmont Time Call*, February 11, 1987.

upon homosexuals to engage in sodomy.”¹⁴ In response, six Boulder women (apart of the Feminist-Socialist/Socialist-Feminist Collective) formed the mocking “Sodomy Patrol,” standing on street corners with binoculars as faux government agents.¹⁵ One of these women, Jeanne Winer, told a reporter that the group was affiliated with a Supreme Court hotline to stop sodomy on the spot. “We asked [people] if they had had any friends or neighbors they would like to turn in.”¹⁶

Instead of having heterosexual allies be the forefront of gay rights, gays and lesbians shifted their work to be on the frontlines of their own progress. Beyond the humorous efforts, though, serious efforts were equally abundant. Around 1985, a woman named Kat Morgan moved to Boulder from New York, excited to live in a self-described liberal and groovy community. Yet, despite progressive claims, Morgan, a lesbian, learned quickly that Boulder has no legal protections for sexual orientation discrimination.¹⁷ Upon learning of this nonexistent protection, Morgan set forth on a two-year campaign to include an amendment to the Boulder Human Rights Ordinance that protected on the basis of all sexual orientations.

In Boulder, Morgan was a member of a self-described radical lesbian feminist group, Sisters Inciters, comprised mostly of CU Boulder students and other college-aged women. Morgan was also a part of The Lesbian Connection, another lesbian-centered social group in the city. As Morgan thought more about the Boulder Human Rights Ordinance, she turned to the City Council to probe about how to fill the void in law. But with inspiration to create change

¹⁴ “Bowers v. Hardwick,” Oyez, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1985/85-140>.

¹⁵ Glenda Russell and Renee Morgan, “Out of the Shadows: A Timeline of Boulder LGBT History,” <https://www.colorado.edu/alumni/sites/default/files/attached-files/timeline-large-sm.pdf>.

¹⁶ Information about Jeanne Winder and the Boulder Sodomy Patrol comes from the collection of former Boulder resident Jim Davis-Rosenthal. Future references to this collection will be attributed as follows: Jim Davis-Rosenthal, Boulder queer history collection.

¹⁷ Kat Morgan, interview by author, October 2, 2020.

came a thought: “I’m twenty years old, new in town, who am I to think I can go talk to members of [Boulder] City Council?”¹⁸ However, determined to foster change in Boulder, Morgan proceeded to organize efforts to lobby for legal protections by meeting with every Boulder City Councilmember, with a universal rejection of her proposal. Fearful of pushback seen in 1974, City Councilmembers avoided any new amendments to preserve their political careers. After these rejections, Morgan turned to her fellow Sisters Inciters, to launch a grassroots movement for amending Boulder anti-discrimination codes. From this emerged the Equal Protection Coalition (EPC), a permeable group where membership shifted continually throughout 1985 to 1987. Within this group of grassroots activists, four members that helped sustain the movement included Kat Morgan, Casey Gardner, Tara Tull, and Sue Larson. Of the four, Morgan and Gardner worked on the campaign throughout the entire duration, while Tull and Larson worked for shorter periods. Other critical figures for the campaign included Wendy Boland, Nancy Grimes, Marcia Munson, Ann Scarritt, Prudence Scarritt, and Julia Willis, each serving in different capacities over the campaign duration.¹⁹

Starting in the spring of 1985, the EPC analyzed every article they could find about the 1974 fallout, as a method of understanding where to improve and adapt. Reflecting on this work, Gardner said “We printed everything up and decided we wanted to do this, but we would do everything opposite.”²⁰ Instead of the political fire in 1974, the EPC sought a quiet grassroots campaign, focused on educating and not drawing hell storms. Though pushback was expected, if not inevitable, the activists chose a strategy of reducing noise, rather than inviting conflict. Working through hundreds of microfilm spools, the group continued amassing ideas of how to

¹⁸ Morgan, interview, October 2, 2020.

¹⁹ Throughout newspaper articles, oral history interviews, and other sources, these names continually cropped up throughout the duration of research.

²⁰ Casey Gardner, interview by author, October 16, 2020.

improve the 1980s campaign. An emerging theme was education. Where the 1974 campaign did not extensively educate the public about the personal needs and challenges faced by gays and lesbians, a new generation of activists in the 1980s sought to raise consciousness on these topics. For Kat Morgan and Sue Larson, educating the public and harnessing empathy in Boulder was just as important as a win at the ballot box. They decided to focus on building a better city social environment. They believed education was a necessary step before any votes could matter.

For a variety of reasons, the political campaign for equal protection was sustained by younger activist women. Organizer Tara Tull reflected on the group's composition and remarked “that was a real weakness of what we were trying to do... We did not access the older generation and the gay male community... we were accessing our heterosexual, our tightknit heterosexual friends.”²¹ Despite Tull’s critique of the organization, though, social circumstances of the period explain why queer women were most central to the EPC’s grassroots labor. As AIDS consumed the lives of gay and bisexual men, they were unable to work in the public spotlight. Conservative religious groups ratcheted up anti-gay rhetoric, leading to an uptick in anti-gay violence. By extension of these prejudices against queer men, queer women became the next possibility for effective change. Moreover, accessing older generations posed multiple challenges. Older gay Boulderites with established careers feared that participating publicly with the campaign came with the potential of losing their jobs and housing.²² Giving money meant public records donning closeted names and speaking out directly provided even more obstacles. Within that dilemma, the younger organizers struggled to structure and propel the movement.

For organizer Casey Gardner, motivation for equal protection was personal. As the campaign began, she worked at the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), where she felt

²¹ Tara Tull, interview by author, September 30, 2020.

²² Gardner, interview, October 16, 2020.

she would be terminated immediately if she came out as a lesbian.²³ Though heavily involved with the campaign, she withheld her name from official documents and news reports, until the law was changed to protect people in her position. Gardner started as the campaign treasurer, yet stepped down from that post because her name would have been published in local news. “It was too risky for me,” she explained. Instead, Prudence Scarritt, another local woman, took the treasurer post, while Gardner continued in other, less public roles, including leading homophobia workshops with Morgan.²⁴ Over the two-year effort, the EPC held around eighty educational meetings within the Boulder community. The EPC sent invites to groups all across the city—student groups, religious organizations, and other social gatherings—with the intention of raising support for the ballot measure and raising consciousness about gay and lesbian issues. At these workshops, discussions about heterosexism and homophobia were central, with attendees asked to imagine a world where they could not hold the hand of their loved one in the hospital.²⁵ In the heart of the AIDS crisis, building this empathy was all the more critical to educating people on why LGBTQ+ needed their rights secured. For both Casey Gardner on the individual level, and gays and lesbians universally, the efforts by the EPC were personal and necessary for social and professional security.

So long as the Boulder City Council was unwilling to pass the amendment to the city’s Human Rights Ordinance, the EPC needed to collect enough signatures to get the measure on the November 3, 1987 ballot. On street corners and in front of supermarkets, members of the EPC spent hours working to collect petition signatures. Boulder law required five percent of registered

²³ Gardner, interview, October 16, 2020.

²⁴ Gardner, interview, October 16, 2020.

²⁵ Information about these workshops comes from Morgan, interview, October 2, 2020 and Gardner, interview, October 16, 2020.

voters to sign the petition.²⁶ If they met that threshold, one of two options would follow: either the City Council could immediately vote on the matter, or the question would be placed on the November 7th ballot. The EPC expected the latter. The language on the petition was inclusive, echoing the universality of the 1974 campaign, where straight people could also find benefits with its hopeful passage. Its stated intent was “to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations on the basis of a person’s sexual orientation, be it bisexual, homosexual, or heterosexual.”²⁷

Despite the inclusive language, signature collection was an uphill battle. On May 4, 1987, just over a month before the petition deadline, the EPC was 2,000 signatures short of the necessary five percent. As the June deadline neared, Morgan remarked “We’ll probably lose sleep over it. I’ve already had nightmares.”²⁸ To round up signatures the group stationed itself outside of one grocery store, Alfalfa’s, known for its left-leaning clientele (though, as the women described in their interviews, many shoppers did not bother signing the petition).²⁹ After restless weeks, the group squeaked by with the necessary signatures, achieving 2,844 of the required 2,838 (though, other sources suggest the group actually collected 3,553).³⁰ From there, the effort intensified: educating and churning out votes.

The Boulder City Council session met on August 18, 1987, to decide the fate of the petition. At this meeting, only four members of the community attended, all from the EPC.

²⁶ Dave C. Manzanares, Boulder City Clerk, letter to “Committee of Petitioners” (Equal Protection Coalition), June 26, 1987.

²⁷ A copy of the original petition exists in the Jacky Morales-Ferrand, Boulder queer history collection.

²⁸ Katheryn Potterf, “Gay rights petition short of signatures,” *Colorado Daily*, May 4, 1987.

²⁹ Information about collecting signatures from Morgan, interview, October 2, 2020 and Gardner, interview, October 16, 2020.

³⁰ A copy of the petition certification, which includes the legal specification of a five-percent threshold, signed by Boulder City Clerk Dave G. Manzanares, exists in the Jacky Morales-Ferrand, Boulder queer history collection. The final signature total comes from Clint Talbott, “Supporters call education key to gay rights victory,” *Colorado Daily*, June 2, 1987.

Organizer Marcia Munson spoke about the continued discrimination against gays and lesbians in Boulder, telling of story of an event around New Year of 1987. The Lesbian Connection, of which some members of the EPC were also a part, had been denied a venue reservation for a dance at a local hotel. The manager of the hotel cited security risks for the party, though Munson cried foul. “It seemed to be nothing but prejudice,” she said.³¹ From this episode of discrimination, Munson explained, she realized the urgent need to protect gay men and women. “To end discrimination in Boulder lets gay men not be so afraid to come out of the closet. Now, the vast majority are so totally closeted that they are afraid to get tested [for AIDS] because somebody might found out and they might lose their job.”³² In a 7-0 decision, the Boulder City Council agreed to put the EPC’s measure on the November ballot.³³

While getting Ballot Measure #1 (BM1) to voters was a major victory, the EPC remained committed to education as part of their political project. For organizer Sue Larson, education was the foremost pillar of the EPC, more so than winning the election. A lifelong resident of Boulder, Larson felt motivated to disarm hateful rhetoric, with the intention to make the community she always knew a safe haven for LGBTQ+ people. During the 1974 campaign, Larson was in high school and frequently heard teachers lambast the movement in favor of lesbian and gay protections. “To hear other people describe your private sexual functions... is just a ridiculous way to have to talk about your civil rights... It’s the dumbest thing to talk about and vote about.”³⁴ Larson hoped that regardless of the voting outcome, the educational efforts would circumvent the need to have definite legal protections. If the Boulder community learned to first accept, embrace, and empower queer people, then whatever happened at the ballot box was

³¹ Sally McGrath, “Discrimination real for gays in ‘liberal’ Boulder,” *Boulder Daily Camera*, c. 1987.

³² McGrath, “Discrimination real for gays in ‘liberal’ Boulder.”

³³ Sally McGrath, “Gay-rights law placed on ballot for Nov. 3 vote,” *Boulder Daily Camera*, August 19, 1987.

³⁴ Sue Larson, interview by author, January 31, 2021.

moot. Yet, with that belief, Larson continued helping with the EPC and making any progress for Boulder's gay, lesbian, and bisexual population. As Larson wrote in the summer of 1987:

It is an insult that we must have our humanness voted upon at all! (Yet, I remind myself, so have Blacks, and so must women still have their humanness voted upon, in order to be recognized as such in a country constitutionally founded by white males.) As a friend said to me, "Why do we even have to put this to a vote? If 'they' won't even 'give' us our basic human rights, just what will they do to us?" Clear in my heart, however, is the fact that the voting public will be measuring their own humanness — not mine; regardless of the decision, I know that I am an okay person.

I have lived in Boulder for almost thirty years. My family has lived in this area for several generations. This is my home. I am not going away. Neither are the rest of the lesbian and gay population going to go away. We are, have always been, and will always be a substantial part of the fabric of human society. It is time that we too are recognized as humans who experience oppression in an overwhelmingly heterosexist world.³⁵

People like Larson reflect the greater shift in queer activism in Boulder. Rather than residing in the closets, or passively in the public eye, the momentum urged for active integration of queer people into society-at-large. Grassroots activism was a new model that allowed queer people a more active presence in the community also detracting strong anti-government pushback. In 1974, the City Council had attempted to legislate anti-discrimination law, drawing fiery pushback from conservative critics. By citizen activists on the frontlines of campaigning, that hurdle resolved itself, allowing stronger focus on passing the measure and educating the public.

A quiet conservative backlash existed throughout pockets of Boulder. Alongside the EPC's efforts, City Council elections dominated political conversations. Of these candidates, Frank Cernich, a Republican, was the most openly anti-EPC candidate. His fears rung a similar echo of the previous decade, when Boulder would manifest as a gay and lesbian mecca: "They are trying to force their immoral way of life on everybody else. They want to take over. If they legalize it here in Boulder, it's going to be just like San Francisco - a homosexual haven."³⁶ Yet,

³⁵ Sue Larson, "Homosexual 'closet' status shows need for gay-lesbian rights," editorial, July 12, 1987.

³⁶ Renate Robey, "Years kill furor over proposed gay rights law," *Denver Post*, October 26, 1987.

despite Cernich's intensity, the flames did not spread and were more frequently rebuked in newspapers, if not ignored. Hilma Skinner, who the moniker "Lesbian-Homoville" in 1974, maintained a small presence in the community, heralding that the measure would be defeated on the ballot. "We're either going to reclaim our Christian heritage in this nation or we're going to cease to be a land of the free, the land of Lincoln, and become the land of Lenin," Skinner said. Zenin Raczkowski, who helped lead the recalls against Penfield Tate and Tim Fuller, also maintained a presence, saying the 1987 measure would fail due to a silent voting bloc.³⁷ All of the opposition figures in 1987 had been a part of the 1974 efforts, yet their own base had not grown, reflecting a shift in the city more favorable to LGB rights.

The City Council race also had a unique figure: Boulder's first openly gay candidate, David Esquibel, who ran on direct support for the EPC's efforts. Though Esquibel's campaign was short-lived, due to a lack of funds and public support (failing to gain the necessary number of signatories for his candidacy), he nonetheless took on Cernich directly. In a radio interview, two weeks before Boulder voted on the measure, the two men sat to discuss the issue. Cernich used the AIDS crisis to jolt fear into the public. "[AIDS] started in the homosexual community, and its prevalent in the homosexual community. How do they get it except through sexual contact? Don't give me this story that sex is not involved in homosexuality. That's the basic thing there is in it." Cernich also described Esquibel as "the first person who I know is a homo," an admission of ignorance about the people he railed against. Esquibel responded: "I'm not a homo, I'm gay. A gay man is politically aware and accepts what he is. A 'homo' can be so closeted that he may be married, he may have children, but every now and then he sneaks out to

³⁷ The entirety of the title of the following source was cut off in the Jacky Morales-Ferrand, Boulder queer history collection: Daryl Gibson, "Sexual preference law sparked...", *Boulder Daily Camera*, October 18, 1987.

have anonymous sex.”³⁸ While queer women were the primary organizers for BM1 and the EPC, Esquibel’s public rallying calls were notable with him being a gay man, with more social stigma against him due to AIDS.

Of the thirteen candidates for Boulder City Council (not including Esquibel who dropped out), six supported the sexual orientation amendment, while three opposed, and four offered no opinion. Those in support included Lance Bieber, Barry Morris, Kay Moser, Linda Radcliffe, Sally Martin, and Matthew Appelbaum. Along with Cernich, Ed Heath and Stanley Krasnodebski opposed the effort.³⁹ For Heath, his opposition came from a belief that gays and lesbians already had adequate protections from discrimination, and the issue was a matter of personal concern, not fit for civil rights.⁴⁰ For Krasnodebski, his thoughts centered that homosexuality was like religion: not fit for politics. Moreover, Krasnodebski believed that an LGBTQ+ identity was a psychiatric condition, which could be altered through therapy.⁴¹ Of the candidates who offered no opinion on the matter were Spenser Havelick, Annette Anderson, Bob Greenlee, and James St. John, the latter three who were incumbent to the council. With five seats up on the ballot, the three neutral incumbents retained their positions, while supporters Applebaum and Martin won. None of those who opposed the measure won.⁴² While the sexual orientation measure was not the make-or-break issue for Boulder voters, nonetheless, the wins by those who remained neutral or in support indicate a liberal shift from 1974. The fire that whipped up Boulder voters had been reduced, if not vanquished.

³⁸ Information from this paragraph comes from Sally McGrath, “Council candidate balance tips against gay rights ballot,” *Boulder Daily Camera*, October 13, 1987.

³⁹ Daryl Gibson, “Campaign quiet on gay rights law,” *Boulder Daily Camera*, October 18, 1987.

⁴⁰ Luke Cyphers, “Ed Heath: Air quality important in Heath’s campaign,” *Colorado Daily*, October 30, 1987.

⁴¹ Juliet Bourne, “Stanley Krasnodebski: Krasnodebski is after major policy changes,” *Colorado Daily*, October 30, 1987.

⁴² Margie McAllister, “\$14,000 spent on campaigns for sales tax hike, gay rights; Final campaign reports filed,” *Boulder Daily Camera*, November 14, 1987.

As Election Day neared, organizers of the Equal Protection Coalition were unsure of the potential results. They had no polling data, as funds were limited, and the coalition was entirely grassroots oriented. Yet the organization persisted, producing advertisements for local news media to run. “VOTE ‘YES’ on #1” proclaimed one brochure, with multiple bullet points listing out the need for Ballot Measure #1 to pass. Appealing to community values, the EPC cited Boulder’s inclusive reputation, and to open the door for gays and lesbians to feel welcomed. The group further cited a survey of over one hundred local lesbians, where over a third reported discrimination in housing or employment in the city. For gay men, organizers assumed, the measure was further necessary to combat the AIDS crisis and improve public health. If gay men felt comfortable coming out of the closet—without any retaliation or retribution—then they may have felt more comfortable getting screened for HIV. While the Boulder Human Rights ordinance already extended to physical disability, including illnesses, this measure would expand the mandate of social safety. Lastly, the group argued, for Boulder to maintain a healthy business environment, companies needed to see that any employees they hired from out-of-state would be integrated well into the city. If the community wanted bigger companies to locate in the area, such as IBM did in the 1960s, a culture of LGB acceptance was conducive to that goal. The EPC also pushed to overturn the narrative that the gay and lesbian community was in opposition to the religious institutions. In one advertisement, the EPC laid out the case of how the communities intersected, citing seventeen national organizations that affirmed anti-discrimination measures for gays and lesbians. Where Frank Cernich and Hilma Skinner saw a division between the two camps, the EPC sought to bridge the parties together.⁴³

⁴³ All advertisements from the EPC are located in the Jacky Morales-Ferrand, Boulder queer history collection.

Come election night, the organizers for the EPC sat in a Boulder apartment eating pizza. Freshly back from the Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, the group was exhausted and elated for results to finally come in. Unlike the 1974 battle, this campaign had been relatively quiet. Yet, where that quietness dominated, behind-the-scenes a years-long endurance challenge was coming to the end. For Kat Morgan, the night was riddled with anxiety:

It was a roller coaster, and I remember sitting on the sofa and just feeling sick, and feeling like... if we lose, it's all my fault. And I would recount all of the things I had not done right. All the mistakes I'd made. All the things that didn't get done... And if we won it wasn't about me, it was about all of these amazing things that the other people had done. And I just remember this feeling the whole night of my sense of identity with it because I had seen it all the way through.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, for Sue Larson, her anxiety was absent. Having helped with the education aspect of the EPC's mission, regardless of the ballot results, a form of victory had been made.⁴⁵ Come just after midnight, after watching each Boulder precinct come in, the EPC learned they had won, by 295 votes. Out of twenty-two precincts, twelve favored Ballot Measure #1, the strongest support coming from areas with higher CU Boulder student concentrations.⁴⁶

Compared to the drama of 1974, the campaign of 1987 was relatively noiseless. Where pro-equality activists in 1974 hoped for a surge in student votes to uphold the Sexual Preference Amendment, conservatives in 1987 hoped for a silent mass of voters to quash Ballot Measure #1. In both cases, no surge ever formed. Instead, the 1987 vote produced lower turnout than even the special election in 1974 - only 27% of registered voters turned out.⁴⁷ The strongest support for the measure came from precincts near CU Boulder, favoring the measure 3 to 1.⁴⁸ In the 1974

⁴⁴ Morgan, interview, October 2, 2020.

⁴⁵ Larson, interview, January 31, 2021.

⁴⁶ "Election results by precinct," *Boulder Courier*, November 5, 1987.

⁴⁷ Daryl Gibson, "Gay rights nearly lost in Boulder," *Boulder Daily Camera*, November 5, 1987.

⁴⁸ Steve Rinehart, "Gay rights issue close," *Boulder Courier*, November 5, 1987.

special election, over 20,000 votes were cast. In 1987, around 15,000. The quiet campaign from the EPC had been effective, if not risky for a reduced turnout that may have halted the effort once more. The 295-vote victory indicates little about Boulder's progressive move towards gay and lesbian equality. Had just one or two precincts had higher opposition turnout, Ballot Measure #1 would have failed. A newspaper analysis found that neighborhoods opposing Ballot Measure #1 had higher turnout than supportive precincts, lending to the close call.⁴⁹ While grassroots activism had worked, it was not a victory of great proportions. Though the first time anywhere in the United States this sort of measure passed by electoral popularity, nonetheless, Boulder was not a haven of homosexuality, much less "Lesbian-Homoville," for which conservatives dreaded. While the fire and zeal of the 1970s had ceased, the pendulum did not swing far to the left, instead simply cooling off the flames of before.⁵⁰

In the same year that Ballot Measure #1 stood on Boulder ballots, a new moment in queer activism was emerging across the United States. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) formed as a grassroots organization, with boisterous and public activism that demanded equality in civil rights, health care, and American society in general. Years of pent-up frustration about the devastation of AIDS fomented anger among gay men. Unlike Boulder's Equal Protection Coalition, ACT UP did not seek to be quiet. Where the EPC conversed in classrooms, ACT UP marched in the streets. Despite these differences, though, both organizations sought the guarantee of equality and remaking history for the benefit of queer people through grassroots efforts. ACT UP sought mass change on the national level, led by activists with larger platforms and more resources to pull from. Meanwhile, the EPC was locally organized by a younger generation with limited resources. The EPC also had a unique challenge ACT UP did not: the

⁴⁹ Gibson, "Gay rights nearly lost in Boulder."

⁵⁰ For the precinct-by-precinct results from the 1987 campaign, see Index B, on page 78.

federal government had not explicitly denied helping on queer causes, rather taking an approach of ignoring. In Boulder, the City Council made it clear through their meetings with Kat Morgan and other activists that the only way to advance gay causes was through the work of activists, not government intervention.

Following 1987, Boulder's queer population set forth to exercise the full extent of the newly amended Human Rights Ordinance. An example of this came from Sue Larson, fresh off the excitement from passing Ballot Measure #1. Around 1988, a Boulder health club, The Flatiron Athletic Club, denied same-sex couples membership discounts for joining as a pair, under the excuse that "Everybody would just couple up [and we would lose too much revenue-," and that the fear of AIDS transmission would overwhelm visitors. Yet, for differently sexed couples, these concerns were not present. The club had a bulletin board for single heterosexual people to find partners, and thereby have access to the club's discount for couples.⁵¹ For Sue Larson, who was now a part of the Colorado Gay and Lesbian Task Force, this discrimination was a clear and direct violation of the law. After threats of boycotts and picket lines by the Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the club reversed course, creating dual memberships in place of couples.⁵² Larson, reflecting on this incident and the post-1987 era, described a jovial time for Boulder's queer population, filled with great fun.⁵³ In testing that the law was verifiable in practice, not solely in code, queer people ensured their voice and safety in Boulder.

In 1989, the tensions surrounding the humanity and equality of queer people in Boulder spilled into the editorials of the *Colorado Daily*. As National Coming Out Day neared (October 11th), Colorado resident R. Jorgensen wrote about the illness they believed was homosexuality,

⁵¹ Mike O'Keeffe, "Working Out the Kinks," *Westword*, c. 1988.

⁵² Mike O'Keeffe, "Exercising Their Options," *Westword*, c. 1988.

⁵³ Larson, interview, January 31, 2021.

spreading falsehoods about the orientation: for men, compensation for molestation as a child, for women, a supplement for the lack of male empathy.⁵⁴ Over the next few months, more degrading editorials came in. “Will Vill Bigot” decried “homosexual whining,” elaborating that “Instead of ‘coming out,’ the homosexuals should ‘hide out’ because the heterosexual students are tired of hearing your pitiful and ridiculous complaints.”⁵⁵ Another letter from “Benjamin ‘Ben’ Dover” addressed the “faggots” of Boulder and that for future National Coming Out Days to “please advertise in advance so those of us who are not fags won’t have to put up with weird look from those who didn’t wear jeans.”⁵⁶ National Gay Blue Jeans Day coincides with National Coming Out Day, where anyone wearing blue jeans gives out a silent, visible calling card to their queer identity. “Happily Heterosexual” Erik A. Anderson wrote to say “Rather than bitching about deserving rights, why not research your ‘sexual orientation’ as you so call this disorder.”⁵⁷ Across these letters, writers attacked every aspect of queer identities: from the validity of discrimination claims to the origins of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Anti-gay writers comfortably elevated their opinions to the public, though, few used their name to promote their beliefs.

For as many anti-gay letters came into the *Colorado Daily*, an equal amount came in decrying the harmful language perpetuated by people like R. Jorgensen. On October 10th, a day before National Coming Out Day, an anonymous queer writer offered insight into the daily lives of queer residents in the United States and Boulder, specifically:

In San Francisco, the lesbian minister of a church that serves the gay community was kidnapped and brutally beaten last month. Right here in Boulder, several women received threatening phone calls when they successfully campaigned for protection from

⁵⁴ R. Jorgensen, “Gay Rights? Come On,” editorial, *Colorado Daily*, October 6-8, 1989.

⁵⁵ Will Vill, officially named Williams Village, is a student neighborhood on the campus of CU Boulder. “The Will Vill Bigot,” “Homosexual Whining,” editorial, *Colorado Daily*, October 31, 1989.

⁵⁶ “Benjamin ‘Ben’ Dover,” “Fagophobic,” editorial, *Colorado Daily*, November 29, 1989.

⁵⁷ Erik A. Anderson, “Gay Rights?” editorial, *Colorado Daily*, October 18, 1989.

discrimination on the basis of sexual identity in the city human rights ordinance. People leaving bars after a few beers with friends have been attacked by gangs of men out to prove their masculinity to each other. No one knows how many gay people are murdered each year by individuals who believe the same hateful propaganda I believed when I was growing up.

...So, this year, on National Coming Out Day, I must ask that my name be withheld. I also ask that you look inside yourself to see if you believe the lies. Ask yourself — whether you are straight or gay — if you are ready to say hatred of homosexuals must stop. Now. With you.⁵⁸

Other letters, by heterosexual allies, similarly invoked the trauma-induced on queer people, calling for a cease of intolerance and discrimination seen time and again.

The concept of National Coming Out Day further sparked a further fracas in Boulder in 1989. A group of gay and lesbian Boulderites collected money to place advertisements on city RTD busses that proclaimed “Take Your Next Step! Celebrate Lesbian/Gay Visibility!” Yet, quickly these advertisements were vandalized with homophobic remarks, including one that wished to “Celebrate AIDS!” Kat Morgan, still involved with Boulder’s queer social scene and the Co-Chair for Colorado’s National Coming Out Day Committee, wrote that

I am proud to be a lesbian, proud of the Boulder community which so quickly raised the \$2,500 needed to pay for these ads. And it is because of my lesbian pride that I am sorry.

I am angry that despite the anti-discrimination law in Boulder, despite the year (nearly 1990), homophobes so freely flaunt their ignorance, fear and bigotry. Homophobia, the fear and hatred of lesbians and gay men, is alive and kicking in Boulder as it is throughout Colorado and beyond. This is no surprise to me or any other member of the lesbian/gay community here. Is it disappointing; it is angering.⁵⁹

For all the progress Boulder had made — from the open and vocal battles of 1974 to the dwindling and anonymized hellraisers in 1987 and beyond — the city was far from a safe haven for queer residents. In the 1990s, these trends carried on.

⁵⁸ “Name Withheld,” “Why I Still Can’t Sign My Name,” editorial, *Colorado Daily*, October 10, 1989.

⁵⁹ Kat Morgan, “Proud and Angry,” editorial, *Colorado Daily*, October 12, 1989.

The Equal Protection Coalition of Boulder was instrumental in 1987 in changing the Boulder Human Rights ordinance to extend to sexual orientation, creating a legal barrier against sexual orientation in employment, housing, and public services. Contrasted to national grassroots organizations like ACT UP, the EPC's style of activism reflected a quiet, soft approach to queer rights and liberation. The EPC was created and maintained by a fluid group of young lesbians, who had no prior political experience, and relied on education to change hearts, and avoid tensions ingrained in Boulder's history. Following the small-margin victory by the group in November of 1987, the strength of the newly passed law was tested by organizers, ensuring it worked in practice and finding the limitations of a "progressive" Boulder. Leading into the 1990s, the challenge of securing gay rights was not over. With cities like Boulder and Denver adopting such measures, and Colorado Springs considering similar legislation, a tidal wave of religious conservatism overtook the state, in the same period the nation saw gay-stigmatizing measures including Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and the Defense of Marriage Act. For queer people in Boulder, these tensions poured onto the campus of CU Boulder, and created a grim atmosphere across the city. By consequence, grassroots activism lost its power, forcing the queer community to adapt once more to evolving politics.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Anderson, Erik A. "Gay Rights?" Editorial. *Colorado Daily*. October 18, 1989.
- "Benjamin 'Ben' Dover." "Fagophobic." Editorial. *Colorado Daily*. November 29, 1989.
- Boulder County AIDS Project. "Our History: A Brief Look Back." <https://www.bcap.org/history>.
- Bourne, Juliet. "Stanley Krasnodebski: Krasnodebski is after major policy changes." *Colorado Daily*, October 30, 1987.
- "Bowers v. Hardwick." Oyez. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1995/94-1039>.
- Cyphers, Luke. "Ed Heath: Air quality important in Heath's campaign." *Colorado Daily*, October 30, 1987.
- Davis-Rosenthal, Jim. Boulder queer history collection.
- "Election results by precinct." *Boulder Courier*. November 5, 1987.
- Gardner, Casey. Interview by author. October 16, 2020.
- Gelchion, Robert. "AIDS hysteria may cause headaches for businesses." *Longmont Time Call*, February 5, 1986.
- Gibson, Daryl. "Campaign quiet on gay rights law." *Boulder Daily Camera*, October 18, 1987.
- Gibson, Daryl. "Gay rights nearly lost in Boulder." *Boulder Daily Camera*, November 5, 1987.
- Gibson, Daryl. "Sexual preference law sparked...." *Boulder Daily Camera*, October 18, 1987.
- Heath, Josie. Interview by Shirley Steele. April 21, 2004. Held at Boulder Carnegie Library, Boulder, CO.
- Jorgensen, R. "Gay Rights? Come On." Editorial. *Colorado Daily*. October 6-8, 1989.
- Koltnow, Barry. "Show-Like Aura Pervades Sexual Preference Hearings." *Boulder Daily Camera*, February 20, 1974.
- Larson, Sue. Boulder queer history collection.
- Larson, Sue. Interview by author. January 31, 2021.

- Larson, Sue. "Homosexual 'closet' status shows need for gay-lesbian rights" Editorial. July 12, 1987.
- Manzanares, Dave C. Boulder City Clerk. Letter to "Committee of Petitioners" (Equal Protection Coalition), June 26, 1987.
- McAllister, Margie. "\$14,000 spent on campaigns for sales tax hike, gay rights; Final campaign reports filed." *Boulder Daily Camera*, November 14, 1987.
- McGrath, Sally. "Council candidate balance tips against gay rights ballot." *Boulder Daily Camera*, October 13, 1987.
- McGrath, Sally. "Discrimination real for gays in 'liberal' Boulder." *Boulder Daily Camera*, c. 1987.
- McGrath, Sally. "Gay-rights law placed on ballot for Nov. 3 vote." *Boulder Daily Camera*, August 19, 1987.
- Morales-Ferrand, Jacky. Boulder queer history collection.
- Morgan, Kat. Interview by author. October 2, 2020.
- Morgan, Kat. "Proud and Angry." Editorial. *Colorado Daily*. October 12, 1989.
- "Name Withheld." "Why I Still Can't Sign My Name." Editorial. *Colorado Daily*. October 10, 1989.
- O'Keeffe, Mike. "Working Out the Kinks." *Westword*, c. 1988.
- O'Keeffe, Mike. "Exercising Their Options." *Westword*, c. 1988.
- Pierpont, Joyce. "Schools to bolster AIDS education." *Longmont Time Call*, February 11, 1987.
- Potterf, Katheryn. "Gay rights petition short of signatures." *Colorado Daily*, May 4, 1987.
- Rinehart, Steve. "Gay rights issue close." *Boulder Courier*, November 5, 1987.
- Robey, Renate. "Years kill furor over proposed gay rights law." *Denver Post*, October 26, 1987.
- Talbott, Clint. "Supporters call education key to gay rights victory." *Colorado Daily*, June 2, 1987.
- "The Will Vill Bigot." "Homosexual Whining." Editorial. *Colorado Daily*. October 31, 1989.
- Tull, Tara. Interview by author. September 30, 2020.

Secondary Sources

- Bronski, Michael. *A Queer History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2011.
- Faderman, Lillian. *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015.
- Herman, Didi. "(Il)legitimate Minorities: The American Christian Right's Anti-Gay-Rights Discourse." *Journal of Law and Society* 23, no. 3 (1996): 346-63. Accessed February 15, 2021. doi:10.2307/1410716.
- Miller, Neil. *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History, From 1869 to the Present*. New York: Alyson Books, 2006.
- Russell, Glenda and Renee Morgan. "Out of the Shadows: A Timeline of Boulder LGBT History."
<https://www.colorado.edu/alumni/sites/default/files/attached-files/timeline-large-sm.pdf>.
- Stone, Amy L. *Gay Rights at the Ballot Box*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2012.