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**Beth Chayim Chadashim
Drash by Jerry Gerash**

THE ORIGINS OF THE CENTER- HOW AND WHY IT CAME ABOUT

In 1972, my lover, Lynn Tamlin, was getting weary of my ranting and raving. It was 3 years since Stonewall and still nothing was happening in Denver. What the hell was I doing here- when all the Gay liberation action was in New York City and in California?

In Denver, apart from the bars and bath houses, there was only one place where Gays could socialize-the Rocky Mt. Motorcycle Club. For Lesbians, life was more diverse. Activated by the women's liberation movement, some were already involved with groups like NOW, both in leadership and in its Lesbian Task Force and in Big Momma Rag, a feminist newspaper, mostly run by Lesbians, with a national circulation and very supportive of Lesbians and Gay rights. Lynn told me he found a Lesbian at Metro State, Jane Dundee, who was interested in Gay Liberation. I immediately phoned Terry Mangan. A few days later, we had our first meeting at our apartment. Jane brought her house mate, Mary Sassatelli, and with Lynn, Terry and I, we created the Gay Coalition of Denver. It would, over the next 3 years, change Gay life in Denver forever. The amazing story of how the Gay Coalition of Denver came to grow and flourish is also the story of how and why The Center came about.

The Coalition grew quickly. A few of us had participated in the black civil rights, women's and anti-Vietnam war movements. Inspired by these earlier struggles, we were ready to "come home" and use our skills to work for Gay liberation. Most of those who later swelled our ranks, had never attended a political meeting, let alone joined a militant Gay liberation group. All of us, however, came to understand from the 60s that injustice can be exposed and that change can come from below, from the grass roots, from the people's heart beat for self- determination and dignity. From the very beginning, The Coalition, although without a fixed space, acted much like a community center. We had a hotline, counseling referrals and a speaker's bureau. Our coffee house, "Approaching Lavender" was a healthy alternative to the bars and bath houses. Denver Free University donated their building on the weekends, where we offered evenings of movies, guest speakers, women's nights, poetry, readings, live music and a variety of entertainment. Early in 1973, the Coalition's political and legal committees, took on the fight to end harassment of Gays by the Denver police which had been going on for so long it was almost an ingrained way of Gay life. For example, the police arrested people at the bars for slow dancing or kissing (that was "lewd and lascivious" according to the cop's view of the city's ordinance of that name). It was not uncommon for the cop's to later inform the slow dancers' employers.

More pervasive was the practice of targeting thousands of Gay men, over the years, by undercover cops approaching Gay men and initiating explicitly detailed sexual conversations and then convincing them to go home with them. Mere agreeing to it, was a misdemeanor under the city's law. Something changed in 1972: the state of Colorado repealed its Sodomy law. Suddenly these proposed acts by the undercover cops were perfectly legal. But the city still retained its law and the cops were still arresting and charging. The Coalition met with a City Council member about this injustice and illegality and we were told that the City was in the process of reviewing its entire criminal code to conform to the new the State criminal code (which prevailed over city law) and there was a public hearing set for October.

We began to prepare. It would be easy to develop written educational and legal material, which we did for each council member, and to meet with them, only some of whom agreed (one saying that he feared any change of the law would "lead to an increase of the homosexual population"),

but how could we awaken the somnambulant and deeply closeted Gay community to show up en masse to the public hearing?

Then an opportunity to expose the police tactics came upon us- by bus. A bus with the sign "Johnny Cash Special" painted on it. It pulled up to the State Capital grounds, which at night was a busy Gay cruising area. Its driver, an undercover cop invited Gay men onto the bus and began his routine of entrapping and arresting Gays. After the words of agreement were uttered, 2 cops sprung up from the back of the bus, and the man was taken to the back, and there instructed to lie down and be stay put. The driver proceeded to hunt for the next victim, and when the back of the bus had a sufficient number of arrested men, it drove off to the city jail. The Coalition held a press conference and the newspapers featured the story. It was just the publicity we needed.

As a second prong of attack, I and 7 other lawyers filed a lawsuit, The Gay Coalition of Denver v. the City and County of Denver. What we might not get at the public hearing at city counsel, we would try to get from the court. One advantage of a civil lawsuit is broad discovery which allowed us to research the court records to show that the police were targeting mostly Gay men, in order to support our claim of discriminatory enforcement of the law, a violation of the equal protection clause of the U.S. and Colorado Constitutions. In the evenings, in the tomb-like quiet of the vast court records room, we researched the records and found that 98% of all arrested were Gay men. Armed with these statistics, we were ready for the public hearing!.

On Oct. 23, 1973, 300 Gay men and Lesbians and their supporters, overflowed the City Council chambers. At the start of the hearing, President Koch announced that if anyone applauded our speakers, we would be arrested and loaded onto the 3 Sheriff buses waiting outside. I panicked. I thought people, many already apprehensive and edgy about being there, would surely leave. But I was wrong. No one left and their silence was a demand to be heard. We won't applaud, their silence said, but you will hear our voices! 30 speakers and 3 hours of testimony about unjust laws and police practices and personal stories, turned the hearing into an unforgettable Teach-In about who we were as a people. Our speakers were articulate, knowledgeable and effective and came from all walks of life. The council was impressed and even President Koch reversed his earlier ruling and allowed applause, which, when it came, was thunderous. As a result, 2 laws were repealed the next month (loitering in a "lewd, wanton or lascivious manner" and a cross dressing law). The Rocky Mountain News and Denver Post featured the story with photographs. At that time, no other city in the nation had witnessed such an outpouring of support and such success with their legislature. Word spread throughout the community- there was a new civil rights movement in Denver- and they're calling it, "Gay Liberation".

That same evening, I was given a \$2,000 cash donation from a bath house owner from San Francisco, telling me how impressed he was at our performance. With it, we opened an office at 1450 Pennsylvania St, which quickly, by the needs of people who dropped in, resembled a community center. Cordell Boyce was our more than full-time, barely paid, co-ordinator. We created a library with books and periodicals, counseling (peer and referral), coming out "classes", discussion groups, a 24 hour hot line, a meeting place for the Coalition's many committees, as well as being a general resource center. The office was open for a year, but then, sadly, closed because of lack of funds.

That doesn't end the story here. The Coalition continued on with many of its programs. The Civil Rights Committee together with the Lesbian Task Force of NOW submitted proposed laws to the Colorado legislature to include "sexual orientation" in the civil rights laws. One of the best kept secrets of Colorado Gay history is that, in 1975, one bill passed the House by 18 votes and then lost by only 3 in the Senate, 17-14. No other state came even close to that, until more than a decade later. The second prong of attack, our lawsuit, was a resounding success, another first in

the country. On Oct. 24, 1974 (a year and a day after the City Council hearing), the court approved a settlement of our lawsuit with the city and made it an order of the court- the police shall no longer enforce the criminal laws in a discriminatory manner against Gays, shall not "tolerate oppressive and harsh police activity against homosexually oriented persons or establishments where (they) gather", that "kissing, hugging, dancing, holding hands...shall not be a basis for arrest" and that a liaison be appointed by the Police Dept. available to Gays and Lesbians, through the Coalition. Yes, indeed, what we couldn't get at city council, we got from the court.

As an activist and as a lawyer, I knew that favorable laws and court decisions were necessary. But it was also a little like trying to smash a rock with an egg. The oppression of most Gays was too deep to be affected by the legal system. Alcoholism, drug addiction, low self esteem, suicide, low political awareness were rampant in our community. I believed the best way to deal with these oppressions was to create our own institutions to serve our needs which only we can determine to be necessary for our survival and growth. And for sure, no one was going to do it for us. From the experience of the Coalition's office (and inspired by the success of the Los Angeles Gay Community Center), I decided to now work to create a community center. I also remembered Cordell's view expressed in his last Coalition brochures of 1974, as sort of a subliminal charge that doggedly trailed me ever since: "Hopefully, a full-fledged gay community services center will be available by the fall of 1976".

In 1975, I tried to figure out how I could get support for the concept of a Center. I knew we needed a broad base of support. I knew there was a need for the new groups that were springing up all over all over the place, to network and coordinate. So I wrote a proposal for the formation of a new group, and called it "Unity"- for organizations only and for 2 purposes only: exchange of information between the groups and creating a Gay Community Center. At the first meeting, I was sure people would agree to the exchange of information idea, but held my breath about the Center. I was wrong. All were positive and enthusiastic. The unity we needed was really out there, even though the Coalition didn't reach out as much as it could have and many called themselves "social and not political" and refused to participate with us n at the City Council hearing.. However, a sense of cohesion and confidence came from our victories at City Council and in the court. More and more people were joining new groups. In that room, I saw what I believed to be our finest achievement- a mobilized community. Before the Coalition, it was so limited and bleak and so deep in the closet, but now, together, we had at least a sense of power, and since we had just accomplished what people thought was the impossible, some of the other impossibles might now well be the possibles. At the end of the meeting, we linked arms and sang a rousing "United We Stand, Divided We Fall", a song that became the closing ritual of "Unity".

20-25 groups eventually became members of "Unity". All we had to do was work together, and without the need for approval of a City Council, a Judge or the Colorado House and Senate. This was easy and a lot friendlier. I was elected president of the Interim Board of Directors and over the next year, and together with many people working diligently on many fronts, we also raised enough money, entirely by small donations at the many low or no budget fund raisers, to hire our coordinator, and to take up where the Coalition's office left off.

That is a short history of the origins of the Center, found in the formation of the Gay Coalition of Denver by 5 people, at an apartment in Denver in 1972. Little did we dream how the fervor of a few and the solidarity of the many would create such a powerful community, including the GLBT Community Services Center of Colorado, now 25 years old.

Gerald A. Gerash, June 12, 2001, Revised Oct. 12, 2001

This is dedicated to the men and women of the Gay Coalition of Denver, many gone, whose memory is of a distant past, but whose bravery and laughter are always at my side.