

Barbara Gittings (1932-): Independent Spirit

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Photo by Kay Tobin Lahusen

Barbara Gittings was standing tall as a gay activist long before Stonewall. She walked in the first gay picket lines and edited a national lesbian magazine in the 1960s. She went on radio and TV shows when producers first invited gay guests, and launched her public lecturing career at Bucknell University in 1967. She was an early consultant for the National Council of Churches and other religious groups. She helped challenge the federal government's denial of security clearances for gay people.

After the Stonewall uprising in 1969, she tackled psychiatrists for their gay-negative positions. For fifteen years she crusaded against "the lies in the libraries" and in the literature that commonly slan-

dered gay people decades ago. Today she is still marching, still tackling bigotries and barriers, and still smiling!

I have been her life partner since 1961. She's a hero to me, as she is to many others. How did she get to be one of the pioneers who got the gay tide rolling?

Barbara was born in 1932 in Vienna, Austria, where her father was in the U.S. diplomatic service, so she was automatically a U.S. citizen. Her father was a strict Catholic and his three children attended Catholic schools in Annapolis, Maryland, Montreal, Canada, and Wilmington, Delaware, where the family finally settled for good. Their big old house was filled with books, which fed Barbara's natural bent for reading.

Barbara first felt different when she was attracted to other girls during her eighth to twelfth grades in public schools. Throughout four years of high school, she carried the torch for one particular girl and was too naive to hide

her feelings even though she sensed that her attraction was considered wrong. There was a near-total taboo on mention of homosexuality. She first heard the word in her senior year when she qualified for the National Honor Society but was rejected on grounds of "character," and a sympathetic teacher explained that was probably because of Barbara's "homosexual inclinations."

In high school Barbara had enjoyed the concert, drama, and glee clubs. She chose to attend Northwestern University for its theater department. Upon delivering her daughter to her college dormitory in 1949, Barbara's mother left her with a warning to avoid certain kinds of women she might meet. Although Barbara didn't encounter other homosexuals in college, she herself was labeled a lesbian because of a close but platonic friendship she had with another student. She was the last to hear this rumor—from the dormitory director. Suddenly it made sense to Barbara. No, she didn't have homosexual feelings for "X" but yes, she was homosexual. She had to find out: What does this mean? What will my life be like? Meanwhile her "friend" rejected her.

With no one she could talk to, Barbara naturally turned to books for information. She began combing libraries at Northwestern and in nearby Chicago. That was little help. She struggled to dig up information under headings like "Sexual Perversion" and "Abnormal Psychology." She felt, "That's me they're writing about—but it's not like me at all."

While doing this research, Barbara neglected her studies, except for Glee Club; singing sustained her. Flunking out at the end of her freshman year, she returned home in disgrace, unable to tell her parents what had happened. She felt very alone. Again she turned to the library, and got a boost when she stumbled on gay fiction, novels such as *The Well of Loneliness*, *Dusty Answer*, *Nightwood*, *Claudine at School*, and *Extraordinary Women*. The stories mostly had unhappy endings, but at least the homosexual characters seemed to her like flesh-and-blood human beings with real lives and times of happiness. They made her feel better about herself.

She acquired her own copy of *The Well of Loneliness*, and when her father found it hidden in her room and told her to burn it, she hid it better. She signed up for a course in Abnormal Psychology, which led to more than book learning; she had a short love affair with another young woman in her class.

She took off for Philadelphia at age eighteen, without explanation. She settled in a rooming house, did frugal cooking on a hot plate, got a job clerking in a music store, and found a choral group to sing in. She took up hiking and biking and canoeing. She was making her own life. Even her father admired her spunk and wrote a formal note "relieving you of the onus of your disobedience" in running away from home. Despite his moralistic views,

she seems to have been his favorite child. (He died in 1961 before becoming aware of Barbara's involvement in the gay rights movement.)

Although now free from parental control and the influence of Catholicism, Barbara still was lonely. She needed to find her people. By persistent hunting she got to some gay bars, first in Philadelphia and then in New York, but they felt alien to her. In the lesbian bars, most patrons looked butch or femme, and Barbara herself tried the butch role. But the role-playing so common in the 1950s wasn't congenial to her. Nor could she find in the bars others who shared her tastes in music and books and outdoor activities.

All those years she haunted libraries and secondhand bookshops to read more about homosexuality. She discovered Donald Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America*, the first American book to proclaim the radical idea that gay people (although psychologically flawed as he saw it) are a legitimate minority group and should demand their civil rights. As a bonus, Cory had included a long list of fiction works with homosexual characters. Barbara was intrigued and arranged to meet Cory in New York. He told her about an early gay organization, ONE, Inc., in Los Angeles. With vacation time coming, Barbara flew out to the West Coast, went right to ONE's office with a rucksack on her back, and was hospitably received.

When told about the Mattachine Society, Barbara flew up to San Francisco to visit there, again got a welcome, and heard about a year-old lesbian organization, the Daughters of Bilitis. DOB members were about to hold a meeting to launch their magazine, *The Ladder*; Barbara got herself invited. In the congenial atmosphere of someone's living room, she met Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon and a diverse group of gay women who were serious about helping others. At last she'd found other lesbians she felt she had something in common with.

That was 1956. By 1958, Del and Phyl tapped Barbara to organize DOB's first chapter on the East Coast, in New York City. The Mattachine Society of New York gave encouragement and meeting space in its tiny office. Mattachine notified the handful of women on its mailing list, DOB in San Francisco notified its few *Ladder* subscribers on the East Coast, and with no more than ten women in attendance, DOB's New York Chapter got started and Barbara became president. She served for three years, taking the bus from Philadelphia twice a month to keep the chapter rolling with Gab-n-Java discussions, potluck suppers, business meetings, and lectures (often in conjunction with Mattachine). Turnouts were small—twenty was a crowd!—but Barbara wasn't discouraged. She composed, stenciled, and mimeographed a chapter newsletter and sent it out in sealed envelopes to ensure security.

In 1961, at a picnic in Rhode Island to explore starting a New England chapter of DOB, Barbara and I met each other. I was living in Boston then.

After a brief courtship, we settled into her efficiency apartment in Philadelphia. We've been together in the gay cause ever since.

"I've always been a joiner," she says. "If the gay rights movement hadn't come along, I might today be active in wilderness conservation—but the gay movement is a lot more fun!" In the late 1940s when our tiny groups began meeting behind locked doors, homosexuals were viewed as sick, weird, perverted, and immoral. Just banding together in those years helped gay people to overcome their feelings of inferiority. Having found her people, the community she belonged to, Barbara realized she could act with others to remedy the group's problems. The early 1960s were right for gay people to start pressing for our rights in an organized fashion. And in 1963 Barbara met Frank Kameny, an astronomer and physicist who had been fired from his federal job for being gay, had appealed his case to the U.S. Supreme Court which declined to hear it, and had then started the Mattachine Society of Washington as an activist group whose key mission was to reverse the antigay policies of the federal government.

Barbara was fired up by Frank.

He had such a clear and coherent position about our cause! He said that homosexuality is fully the equal of heterosexuality and fully on par with it. He said that gay is good and right and healthy and moral, and those who claim otherwise are wrong. He said that homosexuality is not a sickness and that we must stand up and say so and not wait for so-called experts to do the right research and eventually persuade the public we aren't sick. Indeed he declared that *we* are the experts on homosexuality!

These were not the prevailing views in our movement at the time. But Frank's bold vision made sense to Barbara: "Until I met Frank, I had only a muddled sense of what we could do as activists. Frank crystallized my thinking."

In 1963 DOB again tapped Barbara, this time to take over editing its magazine, *The Ladder*. The appointment was to be temporary until a new permanent editor was found. Barbara agreed to help out for a few months; instead she was editor for three and a half years. "I discovered the power of the press, the power to put in what you want in order to influence readers," she says. She continued the magazine's popular fare of fiction, poetry, news items, readers' letters, book reviews, biographies of famous women known or thought to be lesbians, and essays. But she also expanded reporting on gay groups' early conferences, especially ECHO (East Coast Homophile Organizations). Barbara featured debates in *The Ladder* on controversies of the day. For example, in 1964 she published a lively exchange between

Frank Kameny and DOB's research director about gay groups' support of research into homosexuality. Then when organized gay picketing began in 1965, she printed pro and con views. A favorite back-and-forth of hers is the 1964 report "Act or Teach?" covering a close debate on whether we advance our cause better by pressing for favorable laws or by trying to change attitudes first. Barbara stretched the magazine's reach beyond its small list of a few hundred mail subscribers. No distributor would agree to handle sales, so Barbara and I personally delivered copies every month to a handful of progressive bookstores in New York and Philadelphia.

The most dramatic change in *The Ladder* was its covers. Barbara added the subtitle *A Lesbian Review*, and we moved to glossy photo covers. At first, we solicited photos of art works by professional artists and photos from the entertainment world. Then we persuaded lesbians to be pictured back to camera or in shadowy profile. Finally we had full-face photos of lesbians, a breakthrough!

Barbara felt strongly that tearing the shroud of invisibility was crucial to all our efforts to change social conditions for gay people. She used her own name from the start, while many activists still used pseudonyms to protect their jobs and their families. "At every point where I had to decide: shall I go on this radio show, and if so, shall I use my real name? Shall I talk to this newspaper reporter, and give my name and a picture if wanted? Shall I walk in the picket line, or work behind the scenes getting the signs ready? I felt I had less to risk than most gay people."

And walk the picket lines she did, in demonstrations in 1965 at the White House and the Pentagon in Washington, and at Independence Hall in Philadelphia every July 4th from 1965 to 1969. The picket lines were small. Barbara says, "It was scary to demonstrate for our rights and equality. Picketing was not a popular tactic in the 1960s. Certainly our cause wasn't popular. Even most gay people thought our efforts were foolish and outlandish." She adds,

Only a tiny handful of us could or would take the risk of being so publicly on view. What if my boss sees me on the 6 o'clock news and fires me? What if my picture appears in my parents' hometown paper and causes shock waves? What if a bystander throws insults at us—or worse, bricks or stones? And what is the government going to DO with all those photographs and tape recordings they're making of us?

Still it was a heady time for the picketers. Barbara notes, "We all felt, as one of us put it, 'Today it was as if a weight dropped off my soul!'"

Barbara was fired as editor of *The Ladder* in the summer of 1966. She had had a number of frictions with DOB's governing board. She tried to

drop "For Adults Only" from the cover, but it wasn't allowed. She wasn't allowed to change the magazine's name to *A Lesbian Review* so she added that as a subtitle. But the reason the board cited for firing her was her tardiness in shipping the monthly issues' mock-ups and covers to DOB headquarters in San Francisco. Mea culpa, says Barbara; she agrees her lateness was a hardship on the members there who physically produced the magazine.

There was plenty of other activism in the late 1960s. Barbara helped Frank Kameny challenge the Defense Department's moves to revoke security clearances held by gay people working in private industry. She teamed up with Jack Nichols for her first public lecture engagement beyond late-night radio shows, and then went on to make hundreds of appearances as a speaker and workshop leader. She encouraged her friend Craig Rodwell in 1967 when he opened the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, the nation's first bookstore devoted to better books on gay themes. She worked in the national umbrella association North American Conference of Homophile Organizations which was launched in 1966 and which peaked in 1968 with adoption of "A Homosexual Bill of Rights," and the adoption of the slogan "Gay Is Good" coined earlier by Frank Kameny.

Suddenly in late June of 1969 came the Stonewall rebellion. For the first time, gay people fought back physically against police harassment of a gay bar. Barbara and I cheered them from a vacation spot as we read about the riots, in *The New York Times*—a major breakthrough in media coverage of gay events. The Stonewall uprising itself was a turning point for the gay community, a leap in audacity and visibility. Out of three days of rioting in Greenwich Village emerged the loose-knit Gay Liberation Front, comprised mostly of Johnny- and Janie-come-latelys who proclaimed that all oppressed people must hang together to tear down "the system." Out of curiosity, Barbara attended two or three meetings in New York but was not sympathetic. Gay people who went to those chaotic GLF meetings were recruited to picket for the Black Panthers, women prisoners, and other nongay causes. Barbara, Frank Kameny, and others who had worked for years against great obstacles to change conditions for gay people were denounced as "dinosaurs" and "the enemy" and "lackeys of the establishment" by those wanting not reform but revolution.

Fortunately the veteran activists weathered GLF's storm of criticism and upheavals. GLF eventually fizzled out, replaced by Gay Activists Alliance, which was single-issue and reformist, yet militant and adept at daring confrontation tactics. The dignified pickets of the 1960s were replaced by the boisterous, free-wheeling Gay Pride marches that began in 1970. Barbara joined in, moving with the times, and was asked to be a main speaker at the 1973 march in New York.

Barbara and Lilli Vincenz were the first lesbians to go on a nationally syndicated TV show, the *Phil Donahue Show*, then out of Dayton, Ohio, in May 1970. Barbara remembers the live audience as "hostile housewives." She and Lilli appeared together again in the fall of 1971, with other lesbians, on PBS's nationwide *David Susskind Show*. At the supermarket a week later, a middle-aged couple recognized Barbara from the show and the wife told her, "You made me realize that you gay people love each other just the way Arnold and I do."

In the fall of 1970, Barbara acted as one of the newscasters on *Homosexual News and Reviews*, the pioneer gay radio show on station WBAI-FM in New York. One day a press release in her box excited her: gay librarians had organized within the American Library Association. Barbara turned up at the fledgling group's meetings in New York. Her enthusiasm and activist talent were welcomed; the group was a natural home for her even as a nonlibrarian. She spent the next sixteen years campaigning in the American Library Association to change attitudes about gay people as library patrons and employees, and to promote good gay materials.

She traveled at her own expense to ALA conferences around the country. At her first conference, in Dallas in 1971, the Task Force on Gay Liberation (later, the Gay Task Force) put on an ambitious program including the first Gay Book Award; a talk on discrimination by a gay librarian who had lost his job when he came out as gay; and a talk about changes needed in the way materials on homosexuality were classified. But few librarians outside the Gay Task Force showed up. So the gay group's founder and first coordinator, Israel Fishman, set up a publicity stunt in the exhibit hall, called "Hug a Homosexual," offering free same-sex kisses and hugs.

It was the first-ever gay kissing booth. Barbara and two other women were on the "Women Only" side of the booth and the GTF's leader with another man on the "Men Only" side. But there were no takers, only lots of ogglers. Unflapped, Barbara and the others gaily showed the crowd How It's Done. For two hours they kissed and hugged each other, called out encouragement, handed out copies of the GTF's gay reading list, then kissed and hugged each other some more. "At last they noticed us!" says Barbara gleefully. "Also, our kissing booth made the point that there shouldn't be a double standard for love, that we gay people are entitled to be just as open as heterosexuals—no more, but no less—in showing our affection."

The Gay Task Force was now on a roll. Barbara became its second coordinator in 1971 and served until 1986. She joined the ALA so she could handle the GTF's bureaucratic needs, and she eagerly recruited other non-librarians to work in the group. Programs such as "The Children's Hour: Must Gay Be Grim for Jane and Jim?" about negative gay stories in novels for teenagers, and "It's Safer to Be Gay on Another Planet," about gay

themes in science fiction, drew big crowds. One failure was the group's 1986 program, a fine presentation on "AIDS Awareness: The Library's Role." It drew only thirty-five persons, all core members of GTF. Most librarians and laypeople didn't yet want to confront the subject of AIDS.

Gay reading lists were a pet project of Barbara's. When GTF started, gay-supportive materials were so few that Barbara's first list of thirty-eight books, pamphlets, and articles fit onto a single page. But the 1970s signaled an explosion of gay materials, especially by gay and lesbian authors. Barbara's last edition of *A Gay Bibliography* in 1980 had almost 600 items including periodicals and audio-visuals. She also produced special lists of gay materials for use in schools, for professional counselors, for religious study, for parents of gays, and for start-up collections in small libraries. In 1986, Barbara's last act as GTF coordinator was to announce that the Gay Book Award had become an official award of the American Library Association.

Barbara had a key role in gains in another major arena in the 1970s: the American Psychiatric Association. "The sickness label was an albatross around our necks in the first decades of our movement. It's hard to explain to anyone who didn't live through that time how much gay people were under the thumb of psychiatry." That began to change in the 1960s. Barbara recalls,

The pivot point was, we realized we'd have to wait forever for the researchers with accepted credentials to do studies that showed we are normal and healthy and then get the public to accept such unpopular findings. So we stopped deferring to the professionals and began to speak for ourselves.

At the American Psychiatric Association's 1970 meeting, a session on aversion therapy to change "undesirable" behavior was broken up by a group of gays and feminists who demanded, "Stop talking about us and start talking with us." Anxious to avoid future disruptions, APA set up a panel at its 1971 conference titled "Life Styles of Non-Patient Homosexuals." Barbara says, "We jokingly called it 'Life Styles of Impatient Homosexuals.' This was the first time the psychiatric establishment formally acknowledged that there were gay people who aren't in therapy and have no need for it."

Barbara and Frank were asked to join two psychiatrists at APA's 1972 convention for another breakthrough panel on "Psychiatry: Friend or Foe to Homosexuals? A Dialogue." Barbara felt strongly it wasn't right to just have two gay people and two psychiatrists pitted against each other, that the panel really needed someone who was both a psychiatrist and gay. But in 1972 it proved impossible to find a gay psychiatrist who would come forward.

Finally Barbara found one who said, "I'll do it—provided I can wear a wig and a full-face mask and use a voice-distorting microphone." Dr. H. Anonymous was born, despite the vehement protest of Frank Kameny who felt that a disguised gay person went against all we were fighting for.

Barbara smuggled Dr. H. Anonymous in his mask and wig through back corridors into the packed lecture hall. "He really rocked the audience," she says, "a masked gay psychiatrist telling his colleagues why he couldn't be honest in his own profession, how his career would be ruined." Barbara backed him up by reading poignant excerpts from letters she had received from other gay psychiatrists who had turned down her invitation to appear.

While this high-visibility panel was taking place, behind the scenes a few persistent gay activists were pressing APA to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, as part of APA's overall revision of the profession's diagnostic manual. Contrary to some accounts, Barbara was not directly involved and can't be credited as a prime mover of that change. In late 1973, homosexuality was officially struck from APA's roster of psychiatric illnesses. Barbara relishes her local newspaper's headline: "Twenty Million Homosexuals Gain 'Instant Cure.'"

To spur changes in psychiatrists' views about homosexuality, Barbara set up and ran gay exhibits at APA conventions in 1972, 1976, and 1978. Her last display, "Gay Love: Good Medicine," emphasized gays as healthy and happy, and this time she was thrilled to find five gay psychiatrists willing to be shown in the exhibit with their pictures and credentials. The tide had turned. She also encouraged the emerging official group of gay and lesbian psychiatrists in the APA. "I think of myself as their fairy godmother."

Barbara loves fairy-godmothering; it gratifies her to stir up gay gump-tion. She also inspired nurses to form the Gay Nurses Alliance in 1973 and advised start-up gay groups in the American Public Health Association and the American Association of Law Librarians.

But she's not shy about being a public face for the cause. Since Stonewall she has been a Grand Marshal at Gay Pride celebrations in several cities (including New York, with Congressman Barney Frank as co-Grand Marshal). She continues her public speaking, including her illustrated lecture "Gay and Smiling: Tales from Fifty Years of Activism," and enjoys doing a bit of theater too. In 1986, gays staged a "Burger Roast" at Independence Hall to protest the decision by the Supreme Court under Warren Burger to uphold Georgia's sodomy law. Barbara, draped in a white sheet, played the allegorical figure of Justice in a tableau, but instead of the traditional scales, she held a Bible, and instead of a blindfold, she had binoculars "to peer into the nation's bedrooms." For a gay cabaret in 1998, Barbara donned other costumes to read a piece by Gertrude Stein and to sing a duet with the cabaret's lead drag performer.

Singing is actually Barbara's favorite activity. She began choral singing in junior high school in the mid-1940s. Today she sings second tenor with the Philadelphia Chamber Chorus which she joined in 1952. Her favorite music is Renaissance and Baroque, but she also enjoys the gay choruses and marching bands. A key event for her was a concert during the 1987 March on Washington when more than 500 gay men and women from all over the country sang and played at Constitution Hall, the very auditorium from which the great American singer Marian Anderson was excluded in 1939 because she was black. In summer 2000, Barbara spent an entire week hearing over 5,000 singers at the GALA international festival of gay and lesbian choruses. "All that gay energy, that fine singing, the great camp humor—it was thrilling!" In Barbara's view, gay music groups are not only fun for their members and fans, they're an important part of the drive for gay rights. "Amateur choruses and bands are a great tradition in this country," she points out, "and it'll be harder and harder to deny us a place in the parade."

She has done major political advocacy as well. She served on the charter board of directors of the National Gay Task Force, founded in 1973, later renamed the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. She was on the first board of the Gay Rights National Lobby, launched in 1979; GRNL was the forerunner to the Human Rights Campaign. Boosting checkbook activism also appeals to her; she served on the initial board of the Delaware Valley Legacy Fund, which promotes philanthropy to benefit the gay community in the Philadelphia region.

Beyond group efforts to advance our goals, Barbara also strongly endorses individual action. "Each one of us can do something to make a difference. For example, in 1997 I got AARP, the American Association of Retired Persons, to treat Kay and me as spouses for membership and health insurance. I had to push for it. But every personal breakthrough opens the way for others to benefit."

For many years after we met in 1961 Barbara and I lived in small apartments, cramped by stacks of materials from our movement activities. We lived frugally; Barbara scraped by on low-paid clerical jobs so she could put her main energy into activism. Finally in 1980 we bought a house, a small row home in Philadelphia's University City, and for eighteen years enjoyed a succession of friends, gay activists, writers, historians, and documentary filmmakers who came to call. Barbara says: "We originally bought the house from a gay man friend, then finally we sold it to a gay couple. That house has gay spirits!"

And Barbara's spirit? What's she really like? "Just don't make me out to be a movement grind," she says. Her mother called her character "golden," and I agree. Plus she has the disposition of an angel—until she's crossed. She's mad about music and music comedians such as Anna Russell and Vic-

tor Borge. She loves reading mystery novels and *The New Yorker* and stories of whimsy such as *Ferdinand* and *Wind in the Willows*. She loves old movies and gay film festivals, rare books and prints, museums, theater, cartoons, ice cream, aerobic walks, sunsets, wilderness, parades, political satire. She loves to laugh, eat heartily, sip a little wine, and be merry with friends. She loves the gay cause and promoting it. She loves life, she loves her people, and thank heavens she loves me.

In spring 2001, a new branch of Philadelphia's public library opened near Independence Hall. It features the Barbara Gittings Gay/Lesbian Collection, a popular assortment of 2,500 books, periodicals, and audiovisual items. Financed mainly by gay community members, it was named to honor Barbara's longtime activism in the library field. Barbara is touched by the tribute. "This prominent special collection means that our work is bearing fruit," she says. "How exciting to see results! For me it's like a bit of heaven brought to earth."

As for her personal accumulation of over forty years of gay movement correspondence and materials, Barbara plans to organize it for donation to a gay archive to enhance gay history. Looking ahead, she says,

I'd like to see us go out of business as a social change movement. Then we can be ourselves without special effort. Meantime, it's a wonderful experience, working with thousands of gay women and men to get the bigots off our backs and to show that gay love is good for us and for the rest of the world too!

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