

## Morris Kight (1919- ): Community Activist

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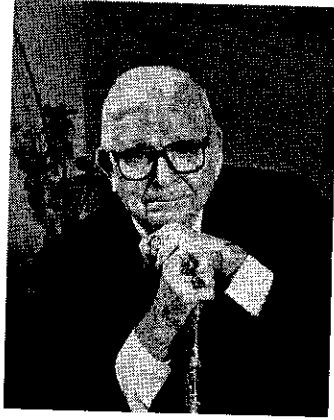


Photo by Tom Bianchi

Any volume of important gay rights figures in our time would be incomplete if it did not include Morris Kight. A simple listing of the organizations, groups, and events he has begun, spearheaded, or revived makes it immediately apparent how dynamic and how effective Kight has been in seeing that gay men and lesbians achieved political and social rights and recognition. Kight founded the Gay Liberation Front; he was cofounder of the Gay Community Services Center of Los Angeles; founder of the Christopher Street West; founder of the Stonewall Democratic Club of Los Angeles; cofounder of the Lesbian and Gay Caucus of the California Democratic Party; cofounder of Asian and Pacific Lesbian/Gays; Commissioner of the National AIDS vigil in Washington, DC, in 1983; leader of the 1987 March on Washington; organizer of the 1988 March on Sacramento; cofounder of the Van Ness Recovery House for Alcoholism and Addiction in Los Angeles; and founder of the nationally celebrated twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion March in New York City in June of 1994. Before and since, he has been involved with many nongay organizations.

These activities and successes, however, must be weighed against other factors: Morris Kight remains one of the more controversial, scrutinized, and at times criticized of our gay leaders. He calls himself a feminist, a pacifist, a generalist, a universalist, and, above all, a humanist. Unquestionably, personal, philosophical, and political opposition to Kight coming from many sides within the gay-lesbian-transgender community has arisen and become a constant in his life.

Partly this has come about as a result of the inherent combativeness within any revolutionary movement. Partly it has been exacerbated by the extreme individualism, even orneriness, of many in the community toward any leader: More than one gay psychologist has noted that for most gays, growing up in an overwhelmingly homophobic society often leads to a tendency to internalize that hatred. By extension, it also leads to fierce self-analysis and a willingness, even an eagerness, to apply the same harsh critique to other gay men and women, especially those who ask for trust and power. As the old saying goes: He who rises high makes the best target.

On the other hand, Kight himself has—either unconsciously through his personal exuberance or by design—left himself open to attack. The most frequent points made against him have been the scattering of his force into areas outside the gay community and his support of sometimes unpopular ideas and causes. Yet the most egregious of his shortcomings noted have been Kight's instinct for grabbing attention and personal publicity whenever possible and, to some critics, his seemingly infinite capacity to receive—and even negotiate receiving—honors, even when they are most deserved. Kight himself perceives those accolades far less personally than do his critics. He sees himself an exemplar: whenever he receives another kudo, he feels he is standing in for many other gays who do not wish to be or who through circumstances cannot be as highly recognized.

To many in the community, Kight is an imperfect person in need of corraling: an unrelenting activist, at times running over or eliminating those in his path. To others, he is a bright and charming person, one of the most astonishingly effective leaders we've had. As his field of endeavor for half a century, Los Angeles in particular owes a debt to him.

Morris Kight was born November 19, 1919, at 11 p.m. into a poor farming family in Comanche County in central Texas. Because his parents didn't have the entire fee for Virginia Morris, the midwife brought from town to help birth him, they named him after her, using her last name as his first. Kight's father died in an accident when he was seven years old, and the boy was forced to grow up quickly as an around-the-house, then an around-the-farm worker.

He felt from a young age that he was "different" and said that he was "never invited into the games" of other children. He found solace in nature and in books. He also began collecting art in the form of fine art prints, and his many years of collecting eventually resulted in a substantial collection. His childhood reading was so extensive that later on, at Texas Christian University, he was passed through freshman literature class and promoted ahead.

But Morris wasn't "arty" and impractical. As a boy he planted seeds, and experimented in botany and also with local water control. He also taught

himself, through trial and error, how to keep the engine of the family's Model A Ford running. Kight's older siblings departed the farm while he was still a preteen. Left with the support of himself and mother during the difficult mid-1930s, and years of poor weather and extensive drought in the region, he opened and operated a roadside diner when he was sixteen years old. This enterprise led to Kight's first encounter with hatred of difference and with institutionalized prejudice. He was witnessed serving food to a traveling African-American family who could not get fed anywhere else and was arrested for "mixing the races." Young Kight was tried in court and avoided serving time only when friends of his deceased father intervened. Asked if he had "learned his lesson," Kight said he had. The rebellious boy would thereafter throw himself into various forums of intense civil rights activism.

Another crucial life lesson Kight says he learned was from the girl in his tiny high school graduating class who was forced to leave school in her final year to have a baby. Her anger at the teacher who made the pregnant teen leave and at her poor treatment by the authorities led the boy to begin to think for himself about issues such as the lack of women's privileges—especially their lack of abortion rights.

Kight worked his way through college, first as a gardener and later in the dean's office. He also took the rigorous test for the Roosevelt administration's U.S. Career Services Training Academy through which those needed to operate the various New Deal agencies were enlisted. He won a spot over many thousands and graduated from the Academy in 1941, in the process forming an acquaintance with the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. During World War II Kight served as a civilian administrator adjunct to the military in the Pacific Theater, where his task was to plan governments and policies for the islands reoccupied or recently conquered.

After the war he lived in various areas of the Southwest, on his own and with his mother, opening and running hotels and restaurants. He briefly worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but the institutionalized inequality and substandard treatment of Native Americans he witnessed led him to quit. He soon joined local tribal leaders in organizing social services and public health services for New Mexico's indigenous people.

Despite the fact that by the time he was in college Kight was sexually active with other males, he resisted accepting the identity of a homosexual, an understandable action shared by millions of closeted American gays at the time. A few years later, in Albuquerque, Kight married a woman with whom he had two daughters. He remained married only five years but stayed in contact with his family thereafter.

By the time Kight moved to California in 1957, he was already a seasoned and dedicated activist, and was considered a radical. First the civil

rights movement, then the movement against the war in Vietnam were his chief arenas. As part of the latter, in 1967 he formed and headed the Dow Action Committee, dedicated to stopping that chemical company from manufacturing the napalm that was being sprayed from U.S. warplanes, with lethal effects upon both the population and the environment of South Vietnam. He also worked for gay causes—not as an openly gay man but as part of his struggle for civil rights for all.

Out of the Stonewall riots in New York City and the subsequent days of political action that swirled about their confrontation with the authorities, was born the Gay Activists Alliance and eventually the entire gay rights movement. Precursors to the GAA and Stonewall had existed for decades: the small but daring openly homosexual Mattachine Society, formed in Los Angeles during the 1950s, picketed the U.S. Post Office and other government offices for discriminating against homosexuals, and it sponsored the first homosexual publication, a newsletter called *ONE*. The Daughters of Bilitis was a comparable organization for lesbians. Although few gays were actually organized within cities such as New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Los Angeles, openly gay lives were being led by thousands of men and women, and their choice of neighborhoods, so-called “gay ghettos,” were already solidly established.

It was only a few months after Stonewall, during a massive demonstration by mostly young, educated, and middle-class people against the Vietnam War in San Francisco’s Polo Grounds that Kight realized that homosexual rights could also be made to attract large numbers of “clean, well-bred, ordinary men and women” who, in his words, “saw their dentist twice a year,” and who, he recognized, constituted the mass and character of gay life. Kight recognized that—like the groups of students and professionals who marched against the war and who influenced public opinion sufficiently to end the conflict in Southeast Asia—their lesbian and gay counterparts should also be able to sway public favor to their cause. Kight, the closeted activist for gay causes, came out in the open.

Shortly afterward, Kight moved from Albuquerque to Los Angeles in part because it had the large middle-class gay population. However, because it also possessed an official environment hostile to homosexuals—predominantly due to an outspoken homophobic police chief—Kight judged the southern California city prepared for some incisive political action. Kight moved to the Westlake area of the city, which was close to downtown and popular with many gays who lived there. Once there he soon formed the Gay and Lesbian Resistance. Unlike the Gay Activists Alliance in New York City, the GLR dealt not only with the issue of gay and lesbian rights but also with social issues such as health care and poverty in general, which were problems of interest to a wide variety of politically active groups. By

1969, the GLR and its activities were subsumed under the banner of the Gay Liberation Front, or GLF.

At the time of his move to Los Angeles, Kight was fifty years old and already a longtime experienced activist on many social and political fronts. At that same age, many other men are thinking of how to solidify their career position, even considering retirement; for Kight it was the start of an entirely new life.

Kight's first target for the Gay Liberation Front was a West Hollywood restaurant named Barney's Beanery. That neighborhood had become increasingly populated by lesbians and gays; police activity against establishments serving homosexuals had correspondingly increased. The owner of Barney's Beanery put a sign on the door reading "Faggots Stay Out." In January of 1970, the GLF began holding actions—"shop-ins," "change-ins," and "sit-ins"—inside the restaurant, and they continued until the management agreed to take down the sign.

The success of that action led to 175 more protests and demonstrations by the GLF in the next two years. Kight became such a thorn in the side of Los Angeles Police Chief Ed Davis that official retaliation ensued, including three police raid/searches of Kight's home. Many gays were convinced that the worst was yet to come. Kight held to his constitutional guns; hearing that, in New York City, gay activists had made plans for a parade to celebrate the previous year's Stonewall bar riot, Kight quickly formed plans for a corresponding West Coast version. Chief Davis was unsuccessful in his attempts to stop the parade and, although Kight received multiple death threats, the parade went on nonetheless. Like its East Coast version, it was small and dowdy, but it was also brave and it raised many people's spirits and raised gay awareness: achieving—many people feel—exactly what the huge festivals of drugs, dancing, shirtless torsos, and commercialism that today call themselves gay parades cannot achieve.

In 1971, Kight joined Don Kilhefer and several other men to form the Gay Community Services Center in an old clapboard Victorian house. The first such focal point, it provided social, medical, and legal aid to gays, as well as giving them a place to gather, feel at home, and air their grievances. The structure has since been razed, but its descendant, Los Angeles's current Gay and Lesbian Center, consists of two enormous, well-funded, well-equipped, well-staffed, up-to-date Hollywood locations, with one campus given entirely over to the arts. Other American cities such as New York, Chicago, most recently San Francisco, and many foreign cities, from Vienna to Tel Aviv, have used the Kight-Kilhefer pilot as a model for their own lesbian community centers.

As much work as all that was, soon enough Kight and colleagues had their hands full with other more pressing, specifically political matters. In

the late 1970s, singer-spokesperson Anita Bryant's war against lesbians and gays in Florida under the cynical disguise of "saving the children" quickly led to various imitations around the country, the most significant being John Briggs, who managed to get gay discrimination clauses onto the state of California's ballot. Seeing how serious the threat was, Kight and other gays sprang into action, calling for aid from homosexuals, heterosexuals, friends, celebrities, business groups, and individuals across the country.

The national effort that Kight and others helped develop to defeat the Briggs Amendment displayed for the first time to opponents and adherents alike the true financial and organizational power and reach of lesbians and gays—in effect, proving that Kight's original thesis, when he'd relocated to Los Angeles, had been correct. It also showed that consequential civil rights associations, such as the distinguished American Civil Liberties Union, would join the fight for gay rights.

In an interview he gave to *The Advocate* a few years later, Kight provided a few reasons why a man such as himself, who had worked for the NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Council, and other national forums, would concentrate all his efforts toward the issue of gay rights.

No matter where I am in the world, when I meet another gay person I feel recognition. We're a new race of people, writing our own script. . . . We have a chance to be the first people in history to define itself. We can break the heterosexist mode and create something entirely different. (Sarf, 1974)

Possibly because that potential is so general, Kight has branched out from the specifically political, leaving several civic issues to younger people. Meanwhile, his interest in art, his collecting of various souvenirs from the many demonstrations and protests he was involved in, and his personal relationship with friends who died and whose own collections of GLBT memorabilia were destroyed or disposed of, led him to open the McCadden Place collection, containing work ranging from Southwest folk art to documentary film and photos specific to the beginnings of gay activism. Every year, Kight hosts an exhibit of parts of this collection at Christopher Street West's Gay Pride Festival in West Hollywood.

He has also become reinvolved in the needs of others besides gays, chiefly the homeless: Kight was president of the board of directors and consultant on housing beginning in 1978. He aided in forming the County of Los Angeles Commission on Human Relations in 1980 and has served on its board as commissioner, secretary, and vice president. Officials of City Hall who snubbed him for years, hoping he would just go away, have instead

gone themselves, replaced by people his activism has influenced, who now honor him and appoint him to municipal positions.

In recent years, as he has aged, Kight has become increasingly aware of the predicament faced by many of the elderly. That new interest has retied him to the gay community, where he sees ageism and the disregard of senior lesbians and gays as an acute current and future ongoing anxiety. He recently involved himself with a photographer putting together a book of portraits of seniors from our community. Will Morris Kight's work ever be done?

Over the past decades as an activist and politician, Morris Kight may very well have been humanly imperfect, but he has also been perfectly humanitarian, a model for future activists. And that's just how he'd like to be remembered.

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