

In honor of Gay Pride Month, the Dedham Human Rights Commission shares the following:

## STANDING UP AND SPEAKING OUT: THE LESSONS OF STONEWALL

In his 2013 inaugural address, President Obama referenced an historic event of fifty years ago:

“We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall....Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law—for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well.”

Obama’s words preceded one of the signature moments of his second term: the June 2015 determination by the United States Supreme Court that America’s gay and lesbian citizens must be allowed to enjoy legal marriage and all of its civil and cultural benefits.

In his statement, President Obama referenced three historic locations. Seneca Falls, New York was the site of the very first women’s rights convention in July 1848, where a movement was launched that led to women’s suffrage and the right to vote, and the ongoing struggle for equal pay, among other important efforts. Selma, Alabama, is where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led an historic march to Montgomery, Alabama, to draw attention to efforts in the South to prevent African Americans from voting. Publicity surrounding the march led directly to the establishment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – a key piece of civil rights legislation signed by President Lyndon Johnson.

The third location mentioned by Obama, Stonewall, references a bar in New York’s Greenwich Village where another major civil rights movement, for gay liberation, first gained mainstream attention. This month, the events of Stonewall are fifty years old.

It’s hard to imagine today, but just fifty years ago, gay men and lesbians were subject to regular police raids whenever and wherever they gathered; they were regularly fired from their jobs and risked losing their housing, simply for being true to themselves. The FBI maintained registries of ‘known homosexuals,’ and the post office kept lists of addresses that had received mail with possible ‘homosexual content.’ Entrapment was a standard police practice of the time, in which officers would pretend to be romantically interested in suspected gay men. If the targeted man responded positively, he would be arrested.

This was the environment in which the Stonewall rebellion took place. The Stonewall was a dive bar in the heart of Manhattan, one of several mafia-owned bars known to cater to gay men and women, and its clientele were used to regular raids. When a police raid took place (about twice a month), the bar’s management would shut off the music and turn on the house lights, signaling to everyone that the police had arrived. While some clubgoers would attempt to flee through back doors or out windows, others would be forced to line up and present their identification to the police. Sometimes, patrons would be arrested, and sometimes those

arrests would be publicized, which could lead to job terminations and evictions. Meanwhile, bar management were expected to 'pay off' the officers with cash.

At about 1 a.m. on June 28, 1969, the Stonewall was crowded with patrons. Raids typically happened earlier in the evening, so no one was expecting it when police arrived at that late hour. They began cuffing some patrons while lining others up for ID checks. Many hurried out of the Stonewall onto Christopher Street, but instead of heading home, they remained to watch. Passersby joined them, and soon hundreds were gathered outside the bar watching as police began dragging their targets - some of the most flamboyant patrons, including drag queens and 'butch' lesbians - from the bar toward waiting police wagons. One woman, handcuffed for being gay, yelled to the crowd, "Why don't you guys do something?" and the spark was lit: years of abuse led to an explosive riot, in which police vehicles were trashed and the outnumbered police took refuge in the bar, while those they'd attempted to arrest climbed out of the police wagons and instead, joined the rebellion.

The riots went on for days, with the crowd, fueled by years of pent-up rage, growing in numbers. For many gay people in New York, and around the world, it was a startling reminder that they weren't alone, that they didn't have to accept abusive treatment, and that proclaiming their identities and demanding equal treatment under the law was their civil right and human privilege.

After Stonewall, the gay rights movement grew quickly. One year later, on June 28, 1970, the first gay pride marches in US history took place in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, with Boston, Dallas, Milwaukee, London, Paris, West Berlin, and Stockholm participating the next year. Today, most major cities around the world host gay pride parades and related events in the month of June.

But of course, the rights movement that emerged following the Stonewall Rebellion brought more than parades; it led to activism across the board and the eventual elimination of restrictive practices and prejudicial laws against gay people in terms of housing, employment, education, adoption, healthcare, marriage, military service, and more.

Fifty years after finding their voice, gay men and women here in the U.S. and in countries around the world are enjoying the benefits of standing up and speaking out — an inspiring example for everyone.

-Chris Kelly, for the Dedham Human Rights Commission