

I was the executive vice president of the University Student Council in 1966–67, when I was a senior at the School of General Studies. One day the president, David Langsam, said to me, “You probably don’t know this, but you are on the committee that recognizes student organizations. A group of students want to start something called the Student Homophile League. Usually such groups would be approved pro forma, but for this group, because of its nature, the vote is split two to two, and you will be the deciding vote.” He told me that the committee consisted of a faculty representative, the coach, the chaplain, and a University vice president. And of course, as I had just learned, there was a student representative — as it turned out, me. We met. Two of the students organizing the group attended the meeting: a man from the College and a woman from Barnard. For the petition to be approved, there needed to be five bona fide student signatories. I asked the University vice president if the signatories were registered as students. He said yes. So I said we should approve it. Why? I saw it as basic civil rights. All we were doing was affirming that a legitimate number of bona fide students wanted to start an organization. General Studies students are different; they have been out in the world. My world was then the East Village, mostly, and a little of the West Village, where there were many gay people living as happily as any of us might be living, definitely out of the closet. Friends and neighbors, even roommates had been gay; that year, living near Columbia on the west side, my landlords, who lived in the building, were a gay couple who had met in a foxhole during WWII — or so they said. Who cared? It was their life, and it had no negative impact on mine. And while I did not appreciate getting hit on by men, sometimes even in classes at Columbia, this seemed to me to be a separate issue entirely. Soon the committee reconvened. One of the signatories was now missing from the list (the result, I imagined, of a heart-to-heart with a parent). Now there were only four. I sat there thinking. The charter of the Student Homophile League specifically stated that its purpose was to encourage openness and acceptance; there was no requirement that one be gay to be a member. That meant I could be a member. If needed, I decided, I could be the fifth name. So once again, I voted for recognition. To their credit, the other members of the committee accepted this decision. It was only later in my life, as I heard stories of attempted and successful suicides, as I learned how unaware I was of the many people who lived in closets, as I understood the story told to me by a fellow student about his incarceration by his parents in a mental hospital to straighten him, that I came to appreciate the good we had really done.

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