

History is Gay Podcast  
Episode 11: Rainbow Rising - Gilbert Baker and Brenda Howard

## Introduction

**Gretchen:** Hello, and welcome to *History is Gay*, a podcast that examines the underappreciated and overlooked queer ladies, gents, and gentle-enbies that have always been there in the unexplored corners of history... because history has never been as straight as you think.

♪ [Theme music plays] ♪

**Gretchen:** I'm Gretchen!

**Leigh:** Hey, I'm Leigh.

**Gretchen:** And in this episode, we have a very special episode today. We are going to be talking about Pride.

**Leigh:** Pride! Happy Pride, everyone! Woo!

**Gretchen:** Whoo! Yeah, happy Pride!

**Leigh:** Yeah!

**Gretchen:** Yeah, it is the month of all the gay. [Leigh laughs]

**Leigh:** All the gay, forever and always—except, I guess, in those places where people have Pride in, like, October, 'cause it's too hot in June.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, in Madison, actually, we have our Pride march in August... and I don't know why, because [Leigh laughs] Milwaukee PrideFest was two weekends ago or was last weekend. So I don't know why Madison's weird. [mumbles] I don't know. Whatever.

**Leigh:** That's strange.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, it is really strange. So, speaking of Pride parades, that's what we're going to be talking about today! We will be talking about where the Pride march came from, and about the Pride flag.

**Leigh:** Yes! Yeah. We wanted to really focus on the trailblazers that came before us that have made it possible for us to be able to go around, and dance, and celebrate, and be our queerest selves among community. We really wanted to highlight some of those folks.

**Gretchen:** Right. To me, especially because it feels like Pride can be very... [sarcastic] What's the word—capitalist?

**Leigh:** [sarcastically] What? Capitalist? Big corporations getting our money and putting it on rainbow floats?

**Gretchen:** Right, like merch-focused—like buy: in the month of June we'll put rainbow flags on things, so you'll buy them. Very corporate, "corporate" is the word I was going for.

**Leigh:** There we go.

**Gretchen:** So we wanted to get back to what Pride was really all about. Let's talk about the people that were involved in making Pride a thing, and what was their focus and goal. As we celebrate ourselves. It's cool to buy rainbow merch—no judgment. I've got Pride stuff, too.

**Leigh:** But we want to get to the root of things.

**Gretchen:** Bring them back. It's more than a sticker.

**Leigh:** Mhmm. We're going to be specifically about two individuals. We're going to be giving a little bit of context about what was going on in the United States around the time that Pride first kind of kicked off. Then we're going to talk about two individuals. We're gonna talk about Brenda Howard and we're gonna talk about Gilbert Baker.

## Content Warning

So, let's see. Do we have any sort of content warnings, anything like that? I think this is pretty tame this week, unless you're squeaked out by discussions of BDSM—

**Gretchen:** It's not explicit.

**Leigh:** But it's a very, very cursory discussion of it.

**Gretchen:** Right. Right. It's a thing.

**Leigh:** Like: This is a thing. This person was into it. Yeah. If that's not your jam, don't listen to this one. But it's not like we're gonna, you know, be teaching you the ways [Gretchen laughs] and all of these--lovely things of the BDSM community

**Gretchen:** Right. This is not like a primer. Like it just comes up.

**Leigh:** That's a different podcast. We'll do...

**Gretchen:** Yeah, that's a very different podcast... [laughter]

It feels like this episode is kind of a mixed. I mean it's primarily a people-focused episode. So we're going to do a very brief rundown, as Leigh said, of what was going around the time period pre-Stonewall, Stonewall itself—nothing super in-depth, again, just kind of a basic overview. And then we're going to get into the biographies of Gilbert Baker and Brenda Howard, and then we'll end with our "How Gay Were They?", which is our personal ranking. And, I mean...

**Leigh:** We're omitting the "Why Do We Think They're Gay?" section from this episode, mostly because this is kind of our first episode really focusing on folks who were directly involved in specifically queer activism—it kind of comes with the territory. So if you missed that—

**Gretchen:** Why do we think they're gay? They were self-professed [laughter] members of the queer community and activists.

**Leigh:** Yeah, no one can take that away from them and try to erase their identity 'cause that's primarily what they were known for.

**Gretchen:** Right.

**Leigh:** So let's launch in!

We don't have a specifically like "Queer Word of the Week" for you today, but I do know that I learned a fun new word, just as somebody who likes adding things to their lexicon. I learned about "vexillography", which is the profession of flag-making, which is what Gilbert Baker is. He is a vexillographer, which I didn't know that there was a name for, other than 'flag-maker.' So—

**Gretchen:** Right, right. It's one of those things that, like on the one hand doesn't surprise me, because it's back in the day when they used to have fancy words for specific—

**Leigh:** Like "cartographer."

**Gretchen:** Right. Right. Of course there would be a name for a flag-maker, because flags were made prior to automation, [agreeing noises] so they would have had a specific name for someone who makes flags as opposed to

**Leigh:** Yeah, that craft.

**Gretchen:** "Craft" that's a good way of putting it.

**Leigh:** So go out, tell the world about Gilbert Baker after you listen to this episode, and make all of your friends jealous because of how smart you sound by using big words.

**Gretchen:** The famous gay vexillographer, Gilbert Baker..

**Leigh:** [in tranquil, monotone voice] Oh, yes, mmmm, and you have to use the NPR voice and get very close to the microphone.

**Gretchen:** [laughs] Exactly.

**Leigh:** I don't care if you don't have a microphone, you can still use your NPR voice. [Laughs]

**Gretchen:** Oh, yeah. It's like the "customer service" voice. Like there's just certain voices that you can just do.

**Leigh:** Oh, yeah. I use my "customer service" voice all the time. It's about an octave higher. [Laughs]

**Gretchen:** [Laughing] Yep, yep, exactly.

**Leigh:** This is my "gay" voice. My "straight" voice is often very similar to my "customer service" voice.

**Gretchen:** [snorts]

**Leigh:** It doesn't come out a lot, but, you know, in certain situations when I just don't feel like going on a long tirade about the ways in which I specifically identify, I'll use my "straight" voice. [Sing-song] Code switching, hey!

## **Historical Context: Brief Discussion of the Stonewall Riots and Aftermath**

**Gretchen:** Woo-hoo! Alright, let's dive into the historical context for this time period. Leigh, do you want to get us started with a brief rundown of pre-Stonewall activism?

**Leigh:** Yes. This is going to be the briefest little breakdown of like pre-Stonewall U.S. queer activism. The reason why we're just doing a little, tiny breakdown is not because we don't care or don't find it fascinating; we have plans to cover this in the future. So don't worry about it. But basically, the Stonewall police raid in 1969, and we're gonna talk about, is the event that a lot of people think of as the thing that had kick-started Pride—and we're going to talk about that—but it was not the first event, or gathering of

people, or creation of organizations working to change the status of queer people in the United States.

It's a long history. Going back to the Society for Human Rights in the 1920s (which is actually something that was inspired by Magnus Hirschfeld's work, which is really fun), you also had this movement in the 1950s: the homophile movement, mainly headed up by a group called the Mattachine Society, which was like a secret organization of gays. And then you had the lesbian counterpart, the Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s.

There were riots that actually came before Stonewall where queer and trans people, some of the most marginalized—you know, trans women, drag queens, hustlers, you know a lot of other sex workers—there were riots where these folks fought back against police brutality and harassment. You'll eventually hear us talk about events like the Cooper Do-nuts Riot of 1959 in Los Angeles, the picketing of Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966, and then again in Los Angeles at the Black Cat in 1967. These things built a foundation of resistance and attitude shifting that led to the response on that fateful summer night in 1969 at Stonewall that would change how the queer community demanded to be treated from now on. It didn't come out of nowhere.

In the meantime, until we bring you episodes on these events, you can get some really, really wonderful stories about a lot of these events and organizations by listening to a couple of other really wonderful podcasts. There's [Making Gay History](#), which has oral histories from a lot of the people involved in these, as well as [The Mattachine Files](#). So go ahead, go listen to those. We will cover them eventually, but in the in-between times when you're wanting to listen to *History Is Gay*, go check those out.

So, yeah. Now we want to transition into another brief rundown of Stonewall, for those of you who don't know about it. So, the Stonewall Inn Bar on Christopher Street in New York City was an institution that welcomed gay people and specifically catered to patrons who were the most marginalized in the queer community: trans people, drag queens, hustlers, homeless youth, butch lesbians, effeminate gay men. A lot of folks found home in the Stonewall bar, and this is at a period of time where police are constantly raiding gay institutions.

And so, this night, on June 28th, 1969, at 1:20 A.M., the police barged into the bar and began to arrest patrons. And they came because the bar was operating without a liquor license—and they were actually owned by the mafia, so that’s fun [laughter] (mafia, protecting gays—woo)! It was kind of a last-minute thing. They barged in on foot.

And then—Squad cars hadn’t arrived yet, so they put folks they had arrested in handcuffs, and they were sitting out on the sidewalk, standing in the street, and all of this commotion started to draw a crowd. And this crowd started onlooking, and one of the folks who was arrested, a woman named Stormé DeLarverie I think, she was in handcuffs, and she was actually hit over the head by the officers. And she pleaded to the crowd, “do something,” which prompted the onlookers to start throwing objects at police: bottles, pennies, a whole bunch of different things. And this began a huge riot with hundreds of people involved, which led to police officers barricading themselves inside the bar, and then the crowd set fire to the barricade.

But unlike other events that had happened in the past, like the Black Cat riot, like Compton’s Cafeteria riot, these demonstrations continued— they continued for the next, like, six days after that night. And so, essentially, a metaphorical fire was started. These riots—All of the actions following that night made it clear that the LGBT community needed to be louder and more visible. This kind of put a fire under everyone’s butts to say that nothing was going to change if we continued passive, non-threatening tactics, you know. “Queers fight back” was the message that started to gain traction after Stonewall. And so with that...

**Gretchen:** Yeah. Immediately after Stonewall, you have the founding of things like the Gay Liberation Front, which was founded in 1969, very soon after Stonewall. It was a society that advocated for sexual liberation of all people and believed that heterosexuality was a remnant of cultural sexual inhibition. They believed that true and lasting change would not come about without dismantling social institutions and rebuilding those institutions without sexual roles.

So, one of these things that they wanted to get rid of, for example, was the nuclear family, which they sought to replace with, you know, more of a loose affiliation of people, like the “chosen family” model of people coming together without biological subtext involved.

Like our con fam. Hey, shout out to con fam— commune. Woo!

Anyway, so prominent members of the Gay Liberation Front also addressed other issues, like racism, sexism, anti-war efforts—we have to remember that Vietnam was still ongoing during this time, so there was lots of anti-militarism movements going on—and there was a lot of crossover between people who were involved in, say, the racial civil rights and queer civil rights as well as, you know, anti-Vietnam protests—

**Leigh:** Second-wave feminism, too.

**Gretchen:** Yep, you have all that—really, this kind of perfect storm of people who were marginalized in society fighting back and making their voices heard in much more aggressive, visible ways, kind of all around the same time.

So the Gay Liberation Front didn't last super long; they ended in 1972 due to internal rivalries. One of the spin-off, or splinter, groups (which was actually founded six months after the founding of the Gay Liberation Front) was the Gay Activists Alliance. Its stated goal was to form a

*"single-issue, politically neutral [organization]" whose goal was to "secure basic human rights, dignity, and freedom for all gay people."*

It was most active from 1970–74, but it did publish what they called their *Gay Activist* newspaper up until 1980. They were known for "zaps," which were these raucous public demonstrations designed to embarrass public figures, celebrities, while also calling attention to both gays and straights of issues of LGBT rights.

**Leigh:** Wow, that just reminds me of, you know, what we have now, which is just glitter-bombing. That's, like, the precursor to glitter-bombing—I love it!

**Gretchen:** Yeah, it really was! They would protest episodes of popular TV shows. They would stage these very public protests of public figures, people involved in government, of just like surrounding them and really yelling at them, making their voices heard.



Some of these activist groups—both of the ones previously mentioned, both the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance—were sometimes known for forced outings of celebrities, or, again, public figures. As a way—that was their—Their intent was—I mean, it’s not that dissimilar the arguments that Hirschfeld or the arguments that Hirschfeld got into with some of the more militant gay rights activists of the late 19th century in Germany where they were really (or in the early 20th century), like they were really pushing for publicity— And so what they wanted was to out, you know, high-ranking public figures and celebrities to show that, kind of, the gays are everywhere, therefore, were normal. And you have similar kinds of impulses within some of these activist groups to do the same thing, which was... The goals were good, but, you know, the means...

**Leigh:** Methods, not so... not the most helpful.

**Gretchen:** Right—those of us who have forcibly outed can attest that it is... Um, not pleasant, to put it mildly. And there can be a lot of problems that come with that. So we’re not advocating for any particular methodology, we’re just saying— these are things that they did.

So, in March 1970, the Gay Activists Alliance organized protests against the police raid on the Snake Pit bar in Greenwich Village. So this was primarily in New York. The Gay Activists Alliance was a New York thing—as I believe the Gay Liberation Front was originally as well, because that’s where Stonewall was (and violence suffered by Diego Viñales in the aftermath of the raid on the Snake Pit bar)—so these protests in March of 1970 actually sparked interest in the upcoming Christopher Street Liberation Day, which brings us to... the first Pride parades!

**Leigh:** Yes! So, about five months after the Stonewall riots, activists Craig Rodwell, Fred Sargeant (who was his partner), Ellen Broidy, and Linda Rhodes proposed a resolution at the Eastern Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations, or ERCHO. This is actually— it was basically a coalition of different queer organizations originally actually set up by the Daughters of Bilitis, and they met up in Philadelphia and decided to organize a march in New York City to commemorate the first anniversary of the Stonewall raid.

They proposed this to be very different than the previous and current methods by a lot of queer activists, which were silent walks and vigils, and they did a proposal specifically for an

*“annual march on the last Saturday in June, with no dress or age regulations.”*

So, previous actions had people in strict, heteronormative, very formal dress codes: men in slacks, trousers— women in dresses, you know, trying really hard to enforce this kind of assimilation of, “hey, gays are just like other people.” But the concept of these parades, this march, was to be, “we’re going to celebrate as we are.”

**Gretchen:** Right, “let’s be as visible as our true selves as possible.”

**Leigh:** Mhmm. Because, obviously, you know, anything prior to this, you know, it still led to Stonewall. It still led to us being chained by laws about how many pieces of clothing of the “opposite gender” you could legally be wearing, [agreeing noises] and so they really wanted to make this demonstration something that was without that kind of stigma and judgment.

**Gretchen:** Yep, yep. So, the proposal was approved, and Brenda Howard—who we will get to —planned the first event and also proposed to make the Christopher Street Liberation Day more than just a day, but a week-long event of celebration. She’s also the creator of the concept of Pride as a festival and celebration. And again, we’ll get to that more when we get into her biography, [agreeing noises] but Brenda and Craig Rodwell got the word out using the mailing list from Rodwell’s bookstore, the Oscar Wilde Bookshop on Christopher Street. And that leads us...

**Leigh:** Yeah, I just thought that was a really nice, like, “oh, they got it out using Oscar Wilde! Thanks!”

**Gretchen:** Aw, aw, man, Oscar Wilde—just... so much.

**Leigh:** I’m so excited for when we finally do our episode on him.

**Gretchen:** [sighs] Oscar Wilde,

**Leigh:** He just keeps coming up

**Gretchen:** Yes... there are so many delightful things. Oh yeah. Yep. So much.

So, June 28th, 1970 was the Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day in New York City, which was the first, I mean I guess, "official" Pride event that we can talk about. [agreeing noises] But like, it wasn't—There were actually some demonstrations leading up to it.

**Leigh:** Yeah, Chicago actually took to the streets the day before New York City, and so they had a week-long celebration that included a gay dance, workshops and speeches, and 150 people marched from Washington Square Park to the Water Tower. And it was organized by the Gay Liberation Movement, and the official slogan of that march and that event was, "gay power."

Days later, you also had other cities that followed, to commemorate the first anniversary of the Stonewall riots alongside New York. So, you know, in LA, they held a march on June 29th, and in San Francisco, they had a "gay-in"; San Francisco wouldn't have its first official, like, Pride parade until two years later. [agreeing noises] There were marches in Boston and other places as well.

**Gretchen:** So the march in New York City was fifty-one blocks long, from west of Sixth Avenue to Central Park, where activists held a gay-in (which we just previously mentioned in San Francisco), which is a protest and celebration that prompted the *New York Times* to run the headline:

*"Thousands of Homosexuals Held a Protest Rally in Central Park."*

**Leigh:** Yeah, you know, so this event, while it was partially, you know, remembrance, and partially celebration, there were no floats, there was no music, no dancers. Pride was meant to be a political statement and a test—you know, what would happen when queers made themselves visible and out in numbers? Fred Sargeant, as we mentioned before (one of the activists, one of the marchers), actually said to the *Village Voice* magazine decades later:

*"There were no floats, no music, no boys in briefs. The cops turned their backs on us to convey their disdain, but the masses of people kept carrying signs and banners, chanting and waving to surprised onlookers."*

Yeah, so—In New York City and Atlanta, the marches were called Gay Liberation Marches and the day was Gay Liberation Day. In Los Angeles and San Francisco, they became known as Gay Freedom Marches and Gay Freedom Day.

So that is kind of where, you know, where we're starting from. This is what Pride was originally meant to be. It came from riots, it was a political act, it was still celebration, but it wasn't meant to be something, originally, with floats and with music and big dance parties. Like, some straights will be like, "Oh, I just want it to be a big, gay dance party." And it's like, yes, but we're also trying to, like, fight for the ability to not get killed when we walk out our door, or like, have housing and employment discrimination and— all of these things. You weren't interested in it when it was a riot; why are you now only interested when it's a dance? But that's a whole other soapbox I can go on... [chuckles stiffly]

**Gretchen:** Right. Right [sarcastic laughter] Suddenly, when it's a party...

**Leigh:** All the straights want in

**Gretchen:** Everyone wants to come...

**Leigh:** Yeah. But there's really fantastic photos from the gay-in in Central Park. You know, people just laying on the ground together, kissing, playing games, and having this whole celebration. These were things —That culminated after this march, and so with that, we're going to start talking about how that came to be. How did this organization of Pride as a festival come to be? Who is the mastermind behind these things?

### **Brenda Howard: Mother of Pride**

**Gretchen:** Hmm, well, the mastermind behind planning the events of the Christopher Street Liberation Day was Brenda Howard, also called the

Mother of Pride. [cheering] What's been intriguing as I've been researching her is how—there's not as much about her, and she is frequently left out of a lot of the conversations, especially about Stonewall. I have a book that's all about, like—it's called *The Making of Queer History*, and it's literally about, like, gay and lesbian liberation from, you know, 1950 to 1990, and she's not in it.

**Leigh:** Wow, really?

**Gretchen:** Yep. Yep.

**Leigh:** It's like— I really appreciate that the conversation around Stonewall, around Pride, has really started shifting to really focus on, you know, Sylvia Rivera, Marsha Johnson, who were really, really involved in these things, but also, we want to make sure that we don't erase other people at the expense of lifting up, you know, voices that have also been erased. We want to make sure that we're providing a full picture. For someone who is literally the person who maybe is not one of the people who was, like, directly, directly involved in Stonewall—which is the thing that kick-started Pride—is the person that literally gave us Pride. We wanted to specifically talk about her.

**Gretchen:** Right, Pride the event.

**Leigh:** Yeah, Pride the event.

**Gretchen:** Even the name, even calling it that, can be traced back to Brenda Howard. So, who is Brenda Howard?

Brenda Howard was born on December 24th, 1946, in the Bronx, and grew up in Nassau County, New York— in a Jewish family—so, woo-hoo, more queer Jews!

**Leigh:** More queer Jews!

**Gretchen:** I love it! When she was in college, she got a degree in nursing, and she—this is one of my favorite descriptions of her, from one of her memorials after she died—was

*"troublemaker, strategist, editor, Jew, friend, lover, and distinguished phone sex worker."*

**Leigh:** I love this, ah. I love her..

**Gretchen:** Yes, tells you so much about her!

In the late 1960s, Brenda Howard was involved in the anti-Vietnam movement, even living in a commune of war resisters and draft-dodgers in Brooklyn.

**Leigh:** Hell yeah!

**Gretchen:** [laughs] I know! That's a thing. That was a thing that happened.

**Leigh:** Yeah, you're going to see that with Gilbert Baker, too. Gays and anti-war efforts have gotten along pretty well together.

**Gretchen:** —For a long time. So, she became frustrated with the male dominance within the anti-Vietnam movement, and therefore joined the feminist movement as well. While she wasn't at Stonewall, she was actually very close friends with many of the people who were in the bar— during the Stonewall riots. She was active in the Gay Liberation Movement—which, as I mentioned earlier, was founded immediately after Stonewall—and was the chair of the Gay Activists Alliance Speaker's Bureau. She might not have been at Stonewall, but was very quickly became heavily involved with the activist groups that spun off of Stonewall and was close friends with the people who were there.

So, "Mother of Pride," where does that come from? So she helped coordinate and plan the rally for the Christopher Street Liberation Day March. She was the one who originated the idea of a week-long series of events around Pride as a festival and celebration, rather than more of a memorial, which became the basis for not just Pride week, but Pride month. That we have like a month of such events, or even individual events in your town that might—Milwaukee has PrideFest, which is a weekend—like a four-day weekend with music festivals and all of the other things attached to that—you can trace that idea directly back to Brenda Howard. She's also credited alongside Stephen Donaldson and L. Craig Schoonmaker with

popularizing the term “Pride” to describe this event, rather than the Christopher Street Liberation Day—which I’m sure most people haven’t actually heard of that phrase.

**Leigh:** Yeah. It’s also a bit of a mouthful.

**Gretchen:** So invented Pride.—Yeah, right.[laughs] Takes a long time.

**Leigh:** It’s very localized, too. It doesn’t make a lot of sense, you know, in LA, or.. you know, Uganda, after many, many years.

**Gretchen:** Right, to call it that. A good summary of her involvement— so he’s a system admin, and he’s a bisexual activist as well— his name is Tom Limoncelli—said:

*“The next time someone asks you why LGBT Pride marches exist, or why Gay Pride month is June, tell them a bisexual woman named Brenda Howard thought it should be.”*

**Leigh:** And then made it happen.

**Gretchen:** And then made it happen. [agreeing noises] She was active in the Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Rights, which helped pass the New York Gay Rights Law in 1986. She was also active in ACT UP—which, for those of you who don’t know, is the advocacy group for AIDS—and Queer Nation, which was another activist group of people from ACT UP that spoke out against violence. And they were known for their even more aggressive and controversial tactics, like public outing and being confrontational with police and public figures.

According to her long-time partner, Larry Nelson—He says of Brenda Howard:

*“You needed something done to help organize some kind of protest or something in social justice? All you had to do was call her, and she’d just say when and where.”*

She was very, very active in everything. Her friend Hayyim Obadyah said of her:

*"She knew that her lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews to pray together as Jews and as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people—it was both spiritually fulfilling and politically revolutionary."*

So, while she was not a practicing Jew, she understood the value of praying together as a community, and that one's religious experience wasn't separate from their experience as being a queer person, even though those things can be, you know, very, very complicated— when they intersect together.

Uh, at the same time, she was also famous for driving people crazy on the details of grammar and punctuation placement in flyers. [laughs]

**Leigh:** A woman after my own heart.

**Gretchen:** I know, right? I just love it that she's like, super active in all these different things and was also the one to be like, "Hey, guys, you spelled that wrong. You need a period there."

**Leigh:** "That's not how you use apostrophes." I love that she's just, like, also a grammar nerd.

**Gretchen:** Yes, yes. [laughter] Love that for her.

**Leigh:** It's fantastic!

**Gretchen:** Yep, she was pretty great.

While she advocated on the topic of her advocating and being involved in so many different activist groups, the closest thing to her heart really was bisexual activism. So she helped found the New York Area Bisexual Network in 1987, which helped service the bi community there. She was a member of the early Bi Political Activist Coalition, BiPAC—which is now called Biologue, after it merged with the Coalition for Unity and Inclusion.

**Leigh:** That name makes me so happy! [together]"Biologue"?  
Oh my god! Ah, it's a queer activist group that's a pun!



**[Together]** Yes! Bialogue!

**Leigh:** That's my favorite!

**Gretchen:** It's great.

**Leigh:** This is such a great discovery. Gretchen did all [Gretchen sighs] the research for Brenda Howard, so, like, most of this is I know cursory stuff, hit this is all, like, me discovering this and being excited while she talks, so you guys get to go along with me on this journey.

**Gretchen:** Yep. And then we'll do the same—except the opposite—for Gilbert Baker, I just listened in— because he's delightful, too, but I only know cursory things.

So anyway, I loved "Bialogue," too, I was like, "oh my gosh!" Can I call anything I say now "bialogue"?

**Leigh:** Can we make a shirt that says, "Let's have a bialogue"?

**Gretchen:** Yes! Okay, gonna write that down. [murmurs] Let's have a bialogue.

**Leigh:** [giggles] Eventually, we'll have a store.

**Gretchen:** Oh my gosh, we will, we've got so many ideas.

**Leigh:** We have logistics to figure out, don't worry about it. [laughs]

**Gretchen:** Yeah, I'm gonna start saying now anything I say is technically bialogue.

So, yeah, she was—that was the— what was formerly the Bi Political Activist Coalition. She's also a regional organizer for Bi Net USA, and a co-facilitator of the Bisexual S&M Discussion Group, and a founder of the nation's first Alcoholics Anonymous chapter for bisexuals. {agreeing noises} Yep. She worked on both the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights and the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights

and Liberation, where she was the female co-chair of the leather contingent, and Stonewall 25—the Stonewall 25, I think it was a march—in 1994.

**Leigh:** Yeah, it was —It was to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Stonewall in 1994, which Gilbert Baker was also a part of as well.

**Gretchen:** “Leather,” for those of you who are unfamiliar— leather, leather in the queer community typically refers to BDSM culture, though it can also refer to leather-wearing as a fetish in itself, but that’s just a heads-up up for those of you who don't know what the leather contingent would have been.

She also successfully helped Lani Ka'ahumanu to lobby for inclusion of bisexuals in the 1993 March on Washington, which, at the time, was primarily focused on gay men and lesbians—as you can tell from the fact that, in 1987, it was called the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, whereas in 1993, it was the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights.

**Leigh:** Woo! Fuck bi erasure! Tear it down! I love it.

**Gretchen:** [sighs] She was arrested several times, because of all her activism, unsurprisingly she was arrested several times. In 1988, she was arrested in Chicago while demonstrating for national healthcare and the fair treatment of women, people of color and those living with HIV and AIDS, which we are still fighting for thirty years later. [operatic voice] Fuck this shit! [sighs loudly] I read that and I was like, “Fuck.”

**Leigh:** Bring her back!

**Gretchen:** This is still a thing that we’re fighting for, thirty years later!” God!

**Leigh:** Can we just bring all our faves that we’ve spoken about back and fix shit?

**Gretchen:** Right, that would be nice. I’d love that.

**Leigh:** Or maybe just sick Anne Bonny on some people, until they fix shit?

**Gretchen:** [laughs] Anne Bonny and her murder buddy—

**Leigh:** And her bloody axe.

**Gretchen:** Yes!

**Leigh:** I'm like, "who would we want to bring back that we've talked about?" Everybody! Actually, I don't know if releasing Anne Bonny on the world with like unbridled anything would be a good, safe thing to happen. Anyway...

**Gretchen:** Ah, anyway, Brenda Howard was also arrested in Georgia in 1991. This is my favorite. So she was arrested while protesting the firing of a lesbian from the state attorney general's office due to Georgia's anti-sodomy laws. So this is the best: while she was in jail, her partner Larry remembers her

*"reading steamy novels aloud to the assembled girls and being as much of a pain in the rear as possible so they'd not want to hold us any longer than absolutely necessary."*

**Leigh:** And that's "girls" spelled "G-R-R-L-Z."

**Gretchen:** Yes, grrlz, because I assume it was more than just cis women, which is just like... God, I love her! Like, "I'm arrested, so what am I gonna do? How about I read some smut aloud and make the police really, really, really uncomfortable so they let us go." Just, like, oh, honey...

**Leigh:** That's like Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore telling the Nazi, "Oh, no, I'm sorry, we don't have any coal. Are you cold? I'm sorry you're so uncomfortable." Then, "Get the fuck out."

**Gretchen:** Right? Suddenly, we don't have blankets...

**Leigh:** Oh, gosh! What is a blanket?

**Gretchen:** So I don't know. Suddenly, actually, it was announced soon after — She started doing that that the jailer was going to be releasing them, a few at a time. With the most irksome going first. [laughter] She was one of the first people released because she was so obnoxious! [laughs]

**Leigh:** Activism by obnoxiousness. Activism by annoyance! I love it.

**Gretchen:** Right, so, so, if you are ever at a protest, make sure to load some really quality, like, fanfic smut on your phone before you get put in jail, and then you can just start reading it aloud, while you're in prison. And then maybe they'll let you go sooner. I don't if it'll work, but, like, can't hurt to try!

**Leigh:** Finally, finally an outlet for my Rubeus Hagrid and a Genie fic.

**Gretchen:** Geez! [laughs]

**Leigh:** I don't actually have—I don't have that—but I'm sure it exists out there.

**Gretchen:** Oh, of course it does!

**Leigh:** Thanks, *Harry Potter* fandom!

**Gretchen:** Thanks. What's that rule?

**Leigh:** Rule 34: "if it exists, there's porn of it on the Internet"?

**Gretchen:** Oh, I'm sure there's some really smutty Hagrid fic somewhere...

**Leigh:** Oh, I mean, I know there's one of—and it might be satire—but I'm pretty sure that there's a Hagrid and the Giant Squid fic.

**Gretchen:** Alright. So that's cool.

**Leigh:** I think it's satire, but it still exists, so...

**Gretchen:** That might be one of those Poe's Law things where you're like, "I don't know if this is, like, actually like satire or sincere." 'Cause there are those. Like, "is this parody or not?" I can't tell.

**Leigh:** The eternal question of—what is it?—of *My Immortal*.

**Gretchen:** Oh, right, yeah, is this parody or not? [laughs]

**Leigh:** The saga continues...

**Gretchen:** Yes, so—Speaking of, Brenda Howard was actually— was very sex-positive, and as was mentioned, she worked for a phone sex service. She was hired by Lisa Veruso to work at her phone sex service in 1985. And according to Lisa:

*"Howard was able to voice what people wanted because of her love of phone fantasy and was always up for something creative."*

So, she liked creative phone sex. Good job.

**Leigh:** I love it.

**Gretchen:** Yeah and, related: she was also openly poly and involved in BDSM culture, so she was very sex-positive. We have to remember, at the time, in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, being openly poly and openly involved in BDSM culture were highly controversial things to be publicly out about. I mean, you could make the case that they still are. [agreeing noises] I mean, I know people who aren't comfortable— who are more comfortable being out as queer than they are being out as poly, or being out as someone who's into kink, or fetish, or BDSM culture, and that was even more true back then.

**Leigh:** Absolutely, yeah.

**Gretchen:** So, she was just kind of like a give-no-fucks, this-is-who-I-am, take-it-or-leave-it kind of person. She facilitated the Polyamorists, Perverts, and Switchables events at the Eulenspiegel Society, which is the longest-running BDSM education and support group in the U.S., which was founded in 1971. She was actively involved in the local chapter of the National Leather Association. Her friend Diana Vera recalled leaving a club with Howard, who said when they got into the cab:

*"We didn't find anyone decent to whip all night... which led to a very satisfying evening with the cab driver. "*

**Leigh:** [both laughing] Oh my god, this is so great...

**Gretchen:** [laughs] I know, right? I love Brenda Howard so much!

**Leigh:** [laughs] Ugh, God, I love her...

**Gretchen:** Oh, man. Can you imagine getting into an Uber and having that be like, what happens? It's like, "oh, goddamn, I didn't find anyone to whip tonight," and the cab driver's like, "Well... I'd be interested."

**Leigh:** [laughter] Be like, well, the night is young.

**Gretchen:** "Hey, guess what? I think I have a solution to that."

So, unfortunately, Brenda Howard died of colon cancer, weirdly enough, June 28th, 2005, on the thirty-sixth anniversary of the Stonewall riots. She died of colon cancer and is survived by her partner Larry Nelson, who is still very much involved in queer activism. I believe that he identifies as straight, but he's been very, very heavily involved, and that's how they met. They met through queer activism. So he was an ally for a long time.

This is one of my favorite quotes from Brenda Howard. I just want to end on some really awesome things. She said, of herself:

*"Bi, poly, switch—I'm not greedy, I know what I want."*

I was just like, "Oh, girl. Same, girl, same." I love you.

**Leigh:** I love her.

**Gretchen:** If I were more of an in-your-face person, I would want to be Brenda Howard. But I'm not confrontational, so...

**Leigh:** It's aspirational for you.

**Gretchen:** Right. Yeah!

**Leigh:** Whenever you feel like you're, you know, getting taken advantage of, or somebody's treating you like a doormat, you're just think, "What would Brenda Howard do?" Oh my god, we need to make wristbands!

**Gretchen:** Right! "What would Brenda Howard do?"

**Leigh:** What would Brenda Howard do?

**Gretchen:** I need to put that on my wall. [agreeing noises] What would Brenda Howard do?

There's also a statement from someone from Bi Net USA that called her "one of the original bisexual curmudgeons," and that is another thing that I need merch of, because I want to be a bisexual curmudgeon. I kind of am a bisexual curmudgeon, [laughter] thank you very much. Like, I am a grumpy, grumpy person about many things, and I've just found my new like descriptor.

**Leigh:** That's your new orientation, "bisexual curmudgeon."

**Gretchen:** Yes. There are three genders: bisexual curmudgeon... I'm sure I could come up with— I'm sure there are other ones, but I love that one, bisexual curmudgeon. That's my gender.

So, as one of the articles I read put it about Brenda Howard:

*"We march today because a bisexual woman marched then."*

So she's a very important person. She did so many things and was involved in helping so many different people. I mean, she was willing to go to jail for lesbian rights, for fighting for transgender healthcare. And one of the things that I loved most reading about her was seeing how much, to her, it wasn't about— there was a level at which it was about her identity, but mostly, it was just, she wanted to help anybody who was marginalized and would literally go to any march, protest, rally, anything.

Just when and where, "I want to help. I want to be involved. I want everybody to have equal rights, and I'll fight for anyone who's marginalized, whether they're the same as me or not." And that is an attitude that I feel like is really missing in a lot of current queer community, that idea of like, "You might not be the same as me, but who the fuck cares? If you're marginalized, if you're being oppressed right now, I'm going to fight for you.

[agreeing noises] I will fight for you, whether you share my identity or not." Other people in the community were people to be helped and supported, rather than, you know, enemies to tear down, and I just love that about her, that she was willing to do that for anybody.

**Leigh:** Yeah, yeah. I love that.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, and that's what Pride is supposed to be about! [agreeing noises] You can see why she would be someone connected with starting the events, because that's what Pride was about. All of us need to come together to be as visible as possible. Let's see what society does, and who cares? Fuck that. Fuck them for treating us this way. We're just going to be ourselves, and we're going to be out, and we're going to be one community fighting together to exist and celebrate ourselves.

### **Gilbert Baker: Creator of the LGBT+ Rainbow Flag**

**Leigh:** Absolutely. And speaking of coming together as one community united around something that we embrace, let's start a conversation about Gilbert Baker, [Gretchen cheers] who's the creator of the LGBT rainbow flag that we all know and love.

**Gretchen:** Nice!

**Leigh:** That has become an internationally recognized symbol for queerness.

So his early life— First off before we start, I just want to say—this is my favorite thing—he described himself as the "gay Betsy Ross" and performed drag under the persona "Busty Ross," which I love. [laughs]

**Gretchen:** Oh my God!

**Leigh:** "Busty Ross"... I love it.

**Gretchen:** "Busty Ross"... oh, God, that's delightful.

**Leigh:** So he was born June 2nd, 1951, in Chanute, Kansas, which was a tiny rural town, and he grew up in Parsons, Kansas, again, another small, rural Kansas town. His mother was a teacher, and his father was a lawyer



and a judge. And his grandmother owned a women's clothing store.  
[agreeing noises]

He was drawn to art and fashion design as a child—my inclination is to think no doubt influenced by being around his grandmother's store—

**Gretchen:** Makes sense.

**Leigh:** And from an early age struggled to fit in with his peers in this rural, conservative town, where he faced bullying and harassment, and even later, in his teen years, struggled with suicidal thoughts. That story that we all of know of a queer kid growing up in a conservative area and not getting that support.

He was drafted into the U.S. army at age nineteen, in 1970—you have to understand that Vietnam was still going on, so the draft was still enacted—and he actually hoped that getting drafted into the army would be kind of his escape from alienation and bullying, but he said he faced severe homophobia in basic training. [agreeing noises] After getting out of basic training, he opted to become a medic—he said if he was going to be in the army, he was going to be doing it helping people. He was reassigned and stationed in San Francisco, where he was sort of able to breathe a sigh of relief seeing this burgeoning gay community and the counterculture movement that was emerging post-Stonewall. He was honorably discharged from the military in 1972, and so he was spared from going to the war front actually in Vietnam.

After being discharged from the army, he decided to stay in San Francisco and began living as an openly gay man. As he said:

*"I had to find my own gay family."*

[agreeing noises] He entrenched himself in the gay community there, and having been profoundly changed by what he saw as a medic at the orthopedic hospital in San Francisco that he worked at—in terms of the horrors of war and amputations—he decided to join the anti-war efforts that were going on. A couple of quotes on coming out that I really loved from him:

*"I came out because I fell in love," he says. It wasn't a terrible, horrible damn thing. I was in love with somebody, and I wanted to scream it from the rooftops. "*

Which is—Fantastic. In an article from 2015, he remarked on the relationship with his parents regarding his sexual orientation:

*"When I was young, they thought I was from outer space. I was the only gay person they probably knew, and they struggled with that. Everyone knew I was gay, but they just didn't want to talk about it."*

Unfortunately, it would take another three decades, he said, before he and his parents would reach some kind of loving place [Gretchen sighs loudly] in their relationship, but that eventually came.

He continued his life in San Francisco. He worked on the first marijuana legalization initiative, California Proposition 19, in 1972. And his friend, who was an activist, Mary Dunn, taught him to sew, and he started to use his artistic talents to start creating banners that were used during anti-military and pro-gay marches and protests. He actually— he also joined the gay activist drag group Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which is still going on today. And he said I couldn't figure out exactly how long he stayed in them but he did eventually leave—he found it was really, really wonderful and liberating, but when the Sisters started to become more politically organized, right-wing conservative Christian groups like Jerry Falwell, started using like video and images of the Sisters and their performances for hate propaganda. And he's like:

*I do not want to be a tool for the right wing.*

[agreeing noises] And so ended up leaving. He did not want the propagation of his image to be used in that way.

**Gretchen:** Wow.

**Leigh:** Yeah. So Baker became friends with San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk—who, in case you don't know, was one of the first gay people elected to public office—and one day, Harvey came to Gilbert and suggested to him

that he work on creating a new symbol for the LGBT political movement. So ss Baker wrote in *Metro Weekly*:

*"We needed a logo, a symbol. We needed a positive image that could unite us. I sewed my own dresses, so why not a flag? At Harvey's behest, I went about creating our rainbow flag. I had never felt so empowered, so free."*

And so he specifically sought to create a more positive alternative to replace the pink triangle (that we talked about before with Magnus Hirschfeld) that was associated with Nazi concentration camps and the persecution of gays in the Holocaust. And he really wanted to build something new and independent from a history of oppression and genocide. So he said:

*"Up until the rainbow flag, the pink triangle was the dominant symbol for our movement, but it was negative. It had a depressing origin. You know, Holocaust and murder was put on us by Hitler. We needed something from us."*

So he settled really quickly on the need for it to specifically be a flag. He was inspired by the American flag and its power. So at that time, in 1976, America was celebrating its bicentennial, and he saw the American flag being put on everything. Porches, windshields, flags flying on cars, you know, everything, everywhere. Paper plates. And so he said:

*"It really put the seed in my head. I was like, "Wait a minute. We're a global tribe and a flag really fits our mission."*

In another interview, he said:

*"Flags are about power. Flags say something. You put a rainbow flag on your windshield and you're saying something."*

And that still happens today. You see this symbol and you immediately know what it's about.

Gretchen: Yep. Yep.

Leigh: Harvey Milk paid a thousand dollars for Baker's work, and then Baker and thirty friends—thirty volunteers— began designing the flag in 1978. They worked on it day and night, huddled in the attic of the San Francisco Gay Community Center. They dyed the fabric by hand in large trash cans and sewed the stripes by hand, stripe by stripe. You know, laundromats—You weren't allowed to wash things in a laundromat to rinse them of the dye, so they waited until nighttime and they broke into a laundromat and shoved all of them in there to rinse the dye. He's quoted as saying:

*"It was an organic, hand-dyed big mess, cotton. Oh my god, you don't even want to know, He said. Stitch, stitch, stitch on a little Singer. It's midnight, you know."*

**Gretchen:** I sew things by hand—or not by hand, I have a Singer, probably about as old as his Singer, [laughter] but I can't imagine hand-dyeing. I don't hand-dye anything. That just sounds awful.

**Leigh:** And this was a huge flag. This was thirty feet by sixty feet, the first flag.

**Gretchen:** Wow.

**Leigh: So** it debuted to the public on June 25th, 1978, and was raised in the United Nations plaza to commemorate the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day parade, a.k.a. Pride. They specifically chose that location to first fly it as a very deliberate statement to say, "Hey, this is a global position. This is a global movement. This is a global community." Harvey Milk also rode in the parade under the flag in the car float.

And so, again, what I love about researching Gilbert Baker is that he had so many interviews where we can use his own voice, which is really fantastic. We can hear his own words about his impact. So he said:

*"Hundreds of thousands of people passed the flag that day, and they knew it was our new symbol. That was the day that changed my life forever. I knew that was going to be the most important thing I ever did."*

The original flag had eight colors instead of the six it has now. And each color represented something that was empowering to the community. The original flag started, from top down: hot pink, which represented sex; red, for life; orange, for healing; yellow, for sunlight; green, for nature; turquoise, for magic and art; indigo, for serenity; and violet, for spirit, or the human spirit.

And then following Harvey Milk's unfortunate assassination later that year, the flag took on even more significance, and popularity of the symbol skyrocketed. It was used again in the 1979 Pride parade committee to demonstrate the gay community's strength and solidarity after this tragedy. He remarks in that same *Metro Weekly* piece—he writes this piece where he says—talking about Harvey Milk:

*My liberation came at a painful cost. In the ultimate act of anti-gay violence, Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone were assassinated. The bullets were meant for Harvey, to silence him, and by extension, every one of us. Uniting a community cost him his life.*

[agreeing noises] Just to juxtapose that with Harvey coming to him and asking him to create this symbol, and feeling more free than he'd ever had in his life, and then seeing that freedom come at a very tangible cost was really, really—just really profound.

**Gretchen:** I can imagine.

**Leigh:** Yeah. In that same year, 1979, pink and turquoise were dropped from the flag because it made it hard to mass-produce, and Gilbert wanted it to be freely available. He wanted it to be everywhere. The hot pink dye made it too expensive to mass-produce, and he decided to combine the turquoise and the indigo into one blue stripe, representing harmony, to make the flag an even amount of stripes, so it could be flown in two equal halves on light poles on either sides of the street for the 1979 Gay Freedom Day parade. The committee wanted to be like, "hey, can we put three colors on this side, and three colors on this side," and, you know, flags just look nicer with an even amount of stripes. So, there you go.

I just love this, that badass Gilbert wanted the flag to be easy to make and available everywhere and be able to be mass-produced, kind of all over the

place. He also refused to trademark it. He refused any attempt for anybody to convince him to trademark it because he believed that it belonged to the community. Fellow gay activist Cleve Jones said that:

*"It was his gift to the world."*

I really, really love this quote from Baker where he talks about—and this is just going to be quotes from him from now on, 'cause he says it the best:

*"A true flag is not something that you can really design. A true flag is torn from the soul of the people. A flag is something that everyone owns, and that's why they work. The rainbow flag is like other flags in that sense. It belongs to the people."*

And so talking about the significance of specifically the rainbow flag, I wanted to give a couple more quotes. He says:

*"We needed something beautiful, something from us. The rainbow is so perfect because it really fits our diversity in terms of race, gender, ages, all of those things. Plus, it's a natural flag—it's from the sky!"*

He's so precious! [Gretchen cheering] I love him!

**Gretchen:** He's such a delightful human being.

**Leigh:** He's so delightful. I know! He also says:

*"We needed something to express our joy, our beauty, our power, and the rainbow did that. We're an ancient, wonderful tribe of people. We picked something from nature. We picked something beautiful."*

I just love that, "an ancient, wonderful tribe of people." That's what we're talking about, all...the... time.

Later on in life after he saw—I think it was in 2015, when the Supreme Court ruling for same-sex marriage went through—and so after seeing a viral editorial cartoon of the Confederate flag being torn down and the rainbow flag rising, he said:

*"The rainbow flag is beautiful because it's about love. The Confederate flag is ugly because it's about hate. It's pretty simple, from the art level: beautiful versus ugly."*

**Gretchen:** Nice!

**Leigh:** I love him.

**Gretchen:** What a good!

**Leigh:** What a good!

**Gretchen:** What a good!

**Leigh:** So, yeah, Gilbert continued as a master vexillographer for over forty years. He continued having a career in flag-making. In 1979, he took a job at Paramount Flag Company in San Francisco and started creating more and more flags and like flamboyant window displays for the business, which actually caught the eye of then mayor of San Francisco, Dianne Feinstein, who commissioned him to design flags and banners for her inauguration ceremony.

And that kind of led to more high-profile commissions. He designed banners and flags for visits by foreign heads of states, dignitaries, and he even designed flags, banners, and buntings for the 1984 Democratic National Convention. Some of his other work—He designed flags for the Super Bowl. He designed flags for many, many nations state leaders. He designed a flag for the Premier of China, the president of Venezuela, the president of the Philippines, the King of Spain, and more. He was kind of internationally sought after as this master flag-maker.

Paramount closed in 1987, but that didn't stop his work. He continued making flags for many civic events and groups, including San Francisco's Symphony Black and White Ball, concerts in Golden Gate park, and of course, continued making flags for Pride. He even broke world records for creating two of the world's longest flags.

**Gretchen:** Of course there's a world record for that. [laughter] I mean, there's a world record for everything, my God.

**Leigh:** So, you know, alongside with Brenda Howard doing things at the 25th anniversary of Stonewall in 1994, in New York City, he created a mile-long rainbow flag carried by five thousand people.

**Gretchen:** [drawn out] Nice!

**Leigh:** Five thousand people had to carry this thing! It's amazing.

**Gretchen:** Good grief.

**Leigh:** And then he broke his own world record in 2003 for the 25th anniversary of the flag's design, in which he made a flag that spanned from sea to sea for Key West Pride. So it basically— It stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to Key West in the Atlantic Ocean.

**Gretchen:** What?!

**Leigh:** Yeah it was, like, a mile and a quarter long. So like the first bit of land in the Atlantic Ocean—in the Gulf of, like—What? He was like—He had it, like, "what the hell am I going to do with this thing," so he cut it into sections and distributed it to more than a hundred cities across the world—so like literally global Pride! Pieces of this flag are everywhere!

**Gretchen:** Aw that's awesome! That's so cool!

**Leigh:** It's like, you know, "Oh, you're in London, go take this to Spain. You're in Madrid, go take this to Berlin." It is amazing.

**Gretchen:** That's so cool.

**Leigh:** I love him! He's just, like, an optimist, lovely, artful man.

He moved to New York City in 1984, and he spent the rest of his life there, continuing his creative work and activism. He never stopped working on the rainbow flag, and he created other pieces of fine art celebrating the flag and the LGBT community. He made silk screens and gold bios pieces of art, and continued sewing dresses and making gowns and a whole bunch of other things. His friend Charley Beal said:



*"He would get up every day and make art."*

So like what a lovely existence.

Some accolades and recognition: he was chosen as the Grand Marshall in several Pride events in cities around the world throughout the decades. Cities that hosted him include Philadelphia, New York City, Toronto, San Francisco, London, Stockholm, Vancouver, and Winnipeg. In 2008, he returned to San Francisco to work on the Gus Van Sant film *Milk*, honoring the legacy of Harvey Milk and covering the events around his assassination. He created for that film period banners, and he even has a cameo in the film. He was honored by the National Gallery of Art in Dublin, Ireland in 2011, and he presented a flag to president Mary McAleese.

In 2015, San Francisco actually created the Gilbert Baker award, which is presented annually during Pride, and in the same year, the MOMA—New York City Museum of Modern Art asked Gilbert to contribute a flag. On the unveiling ceremony, which was on June 26th, it was the same day that the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage across the United States. Upon seeing the White House lit up rainbow, he said he was overwhelmed and thought, "I don't have to worry about making the rainbow flag a success anymore," which is lovely.

He considered one of the highest points in his career and his life was in as recent as 2016, when he was invited to the White House for a reception to commemorate Pride month by president Barack Obama. He presented Barack Obama with a hand-dyed cotton rainbow flag.

**Gretchen:** Wow.

**Leigh:** So. Okay. Not only is this guy an amazing optimist and artistic, he's also a really persistent badass. He suffered a severe stroke in 2012 that affected his physical movement, but even though he had a—there was a pessimistic prognosis from doctors, who told him like, "hey, you might never regain full movement of your hands," his optimism never left. He began his own personal rehab therapy by applying beads and sequins to gowns by hand, and he actually regained his ability to sew in only a few months. That summer, after he suffered the stroke, he was working on these different

projects on Fire Island, and then he was crowned Best Dressed at the annual Drag Invasion of the Pines.

I just... I love him. You're told you're never going to make art again—think again, fuckers! I will always be fabulous. I love it. [laughter]

And then, just wrapping up here— so when Trump was elected, Baker amped up his activism, and he actually worked on a piece of art. He created a powerful response. It was “a collection of Holocaust outfits emblazoned with pink triangles.” These were exhibited at the Art Saves Lives Gallery in San Francisco in January 2017. He still kept going, still had so many things to say.

Just a little like side thing I wanted to put in, a quote from him a couple of years ago on love and relationships. He had a best friend that he had known for over twenty-one years, and said they “love each other deeply,” but Baker actually said in that article:

*“I don't know if I'm the marrying kind. I think I'll drive somebody crazy. Maybe it's better to just stay friends.”*

Gilbert, I'll marry you! It's okay! Let's hang out together and make art!

Unfortunately, Gilbert passed away in his sleep on March 31st, 2017, just last year, at the age of sixty-five, from heart disease. Memorial services were held in San Francisco and New York, including, in New York, protest marches against Trump. Earlier this year, earlier in 2018, Gilbert's estate convened an advisory committee to support programs, events, and endorsements that would honor Gilbert's legacy of queer pride, liberty, and visibility.

**Gretchen:** Nice!

**Leigh:** Some other fun facts about his legacy—New York City Pride Committee actually partnered with a design team to create a new rainbow font called “Gilbert,” and you can actually search online for it and get it, I think, for free.

**Gretchen:** [gasps] Yay!

**Leigh:** On June 2nd, 2017, which would have been his sixty-sixth birthday, Google actually had a Google Doodle honoring him. They went into San Francisco and looked at Pride flags. It's a little animation that had the Pride flag stripe by stripe being stitched together, and it's really cute.

**Gretchen:** Aw, that's precious!

**Leigh:** To wrap this up, much like Gretchen did with Brenda, I wanted to end on some final quotes from Gilbert, and a couple that I think are really, really powerful.

On encouraging gay youth to come out of the closet without fear, he said:

*"You can live in this light of the truth. It's totally liberating. You don't have to live a lie. Living a lie will mess you up. It will send you into depression. It will warp your values. My message would be, don't give up hope. It does get better."*

And then at the end of that piece he wrote for *Metro Weekly*, talking about continuing to fight for liberty and visibility, he writes:

*"The strides we have made since I first flew the rainbow flag are unprecedented. The United States GLBT community is more visible than ever before. We face fewer hurdles and less violence than we once did. I can only hope the events of my life and lives of friends I've lost have made being gay just a bit easier. After all, personal freedom is what started me on the road to here, with the hope that others would never feel the isolation and desperation that plagued me.*

*But we cannot rest on our laurels. We cannot take our freedoms for granted. Indeed, there are still parts of the world where being gay is punishable, sometimes by death. The rainbow flag inspires hope and makes us think. Our work to unite our community has only just begun."*

**Gretchen:** Yeah, he's right.

**Leigh:** I wanted to end on that, because that's really powerful. He did so much and gave us so much. And Brenda Howard did so much and gave us so much. As we move into Pride seasons that are becoming increasingly more and more corporate, and capitalist, and, you know, kind of watered down, simultaneously, in this political environment in which things are— violence is only heightening, I think it's really important for us to remember where these events came from and what these symbols mean. And it's not just a gay dance party. It's not just a rainbow slapped on a pair of sneakers. These are things that have a very specific history and significance to us. Let's work on really empowering ourselves to use that and reclaim these things.

**Gretchen:** Right, right, because the problem is never in the symbol or the words themselves. The problem is in the ways that it can either be, in the case of things like the rainbow flag, the way it's been commodified and turned into something to make money, but the problem isn't the Pride flag or the rainbow symbol in of itself. The problem the ways in which it's been co-opted that doesn't represent what we actually stand for. And I think it's important to remember that.

The problem is never going to be in the symbols or words or events in and of themselves. It is the ways in which they have been warped from what they were meant to symbolize, and those are things we can take back. We can always make these things empowering again, rather than you know discarding them in favor of something else, because they still are empowering for many parts of the world and for many people.

**Leigh:** And even the very concept of being marketed to by corporations using the rainbow flag—having corporate support is not a bad thing in and of itself. It means that we're getting closer towards certain elements of you know not necessarily assimilation, but acceptance. The fact of the matter is that seeing ourselves on TV, seeing ourselves reflected in advertising and in brands, once they think they can get money out of us, that does go a certain way towards normalizing queer experiences.

But we always have to remember that it can't just go beyond, "cool, let's get their money." It has to go beyond, "and let's support this community." Do these organizations that are slapping rainbow flags on things and having Pride floats, do they have inclusive non-discrimination policies for employment? Are they giving money to queer organizations with the

proceeds from their rainbow products? These are things that we have to think about. And so—There are certainly more ethical ways we can exist simultaneously with this corporatization of Pride, but I think it's ways that we really need to very deliberately need to focus on.

### **Fun Segment: Pop Culture Tie-In**

**Gretchen:** Right. So, before we head out, gonna switch back to something a little more on the upbeat side, talk a little bit about pop culture and visual representations of the people we've been talking about.

Gilbert Baker is the subject of a PBS documentary by Marie Jo Ferron called *Rainbow Pride*. As Leigh said, he did recreate his original rainbow flag for the 2008 movie *Milk*, which is about activist Harvey Milk, and was interviewed in a featurette on the DVD. In the Dustin Lance Black's docuseries *When We Rise*, which was last year I believe—that that came out.

**Leigh:** And adapted from Cleve Jones' book, too.

**Gretchen:** Right. He is shown sewing the flag, and then there's a little bit where he explains why he chose the colors he did.

Oh! Okay! This is my favorite thing: there are children's books about Gilbert Baker. This makes me so happy that there are children's books about the creation of the rainbow flag and Pride, and that's just so delightful. The books are *Sewing the Rainbow* by Gayle Pitman and *Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag* by Rob Sanders. I kind of want to get them, because I just love that there are children's resources for things like this!

**Leigh:** The GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, too, also owns the sewing machine that Gilbert Baker used and a recreation of the original flag. As I mentioned earlier, the MOMA in New York has samples of the flag in its design collection as an example of an internationally recognized important symbol, on par with things like the recycling symbol and the Creative Commons symbol. It's that ubiquitous.

**Gretchen:** Right. Everyone like—You'd be hard-pressed to find someone who saw a rainbow flag and didn't know what it meant.

Not really pop culture, but Leigh mentioned that there was the Gilbert Baker award. There is also the Brenda Howard Memorial award, which was created by PFLAG, which is the Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays network. It was the first award by a major American LGBT society to honor an openly bisexual person. And the annual award recognizes an individual or organization whose work on behalf of the bisexual community, and the greater LGBT community best exemplifies the vision, principles and community service exemplified by Brenda Howard. And who serves as a positive and visible role model for the entire LGBT community. I thought that was cool. And there's also—in 2015, her partner Larry Nelson actually made a video about her, a tribute highlighting her accomplishments for the #StillBisexual campaign, and we'll put a link to that in our show notes and maybe in the video itself. It's really, really lovely. She, as I kind of mentioned at the outset, tends to be left out of the story quite a bit, so there aren't really a whole lot of references to her in pop culture or videos or even documentaries. We really don't have anything for her.

**Leigh:** But we can change that.

**Gretchen:** I know, we need to! She's awesome! She's a badass motherfucker and I love her! She's bisexual curmudgeon!

**Leigh:** Again, we implore you, queer filmmakers, make this story happen. That and Claude Cahun.

**Gretchen:** Yes, yes, they need to have him.

### **How Gay were They?**

So, that brings us to... how gay were they? Leigh?

**Leigh:** Oh? Oh, me first?

**Gretchen:** How gay were they? Yeah, how gay were they, Leigh?

**Leigh:** I think me and Gretchen both ended up giving ourselves a rubric of 20/10. I just... I love both of these people. Obviously, they were super gay or

bi, but with Gilbert—you know, I absolutely aim for Gilbert’s optimism, wonder, and joy for life, and to be able to create a symbol that has become so ubiquitously loved and supportive and empowering, and to be able to find the history behind it and the meaning behind it was so joyful. And hearing Brenda Howard and how much of a give-no-fucks attitude she had, I want to employ that in my life. I simultaneously want to give no fucks and love everything in the world, á la Brenda and Gilbert simultaneously.

**Gretchen:** That’s a really good life goal. I like both of those. ‘Cause yeah, I love his gentleness and his desire to see everybody represented. And okay—So, yes, 20/10, Pride flags, also a rainbow, also a Pride parade made entirely out of rainbows and glitter. [laughter] That’s my ranking this week for “How Gay Were They?”.

I’m going to change what I wrote in my notes because of what you were saying. What I love about both of them is that both of them represent a desire to care for everybody. [agreeing noises] They just showed it in different ways, and that’s what I would love to embody in my life. Is to have the desire to create something that everyone can find meaning in—that Gilbert Baker exemplifies, while also being the kind of person who fights for everybody and stands up for all of the marginalized people, even the ones that may not specially belong to my same intersections, or identity that Brenda Howard represents. Create something beautiful that everyone can enjoy, and also fight for everybody, if I could—life goals.

**Leigh:** I think those are really great goals for anybody and everybody to have. Go out and find your own inner gay Betsy Ross and bisexual curmudgeon.

**Gretchen:** [laughs] Yes, yes—oh, there’s another gender! We’ve got “bisexual curmudgeon,” we’ve got “gay Betsy Ross,” um...

**Leigh:** Or “Busty Ross?”

**Gretchen:** We’ve got “lesbian pirate.” “Lesbian pirate” is a good one.

**Closing and Where to Find Us Online**

**Leigh:** There we go. Alright. With that, that is it for today's episode. You can find us online individually. Gretchen, where can people find you upon the interwebs?

**Gretchen:** Well, when I'm not talking about badass bi heroes and the gay Betsy Ross, I am writing nerdy media analysis and fangirling over everything science fiction and *Wynona Earp*. Also talking lots about books for [thefandomentals.com](http://thefandomentals.com) and my personal website, [gnellis.com](http://gnellis.com). Or you can find me on Tumblr and Twitter as @gnelliswriter, all one word. What about you, Leigh?

**Leigh:** When I'm not imagining getting a beautiful gown sewn by Busty Ross or sitting in a jail cell hearing smut read by a bisexual curmudgeon, I'm usually talking about comics and queer TV over at [@aparadoxinflux](https://twitter.com/aparadoxinflux) on Twitter, and editing these episodes. [laughter]That's most of my life these days.

**Gretchen:** Wahoo! *History Is Gay* podcast can be found on Tumblr at [@historyisgaypodcast](https://www.tumblr.com/historyisgaypodcast), Twitter at [@historyisgaypod](https://twitter.com/historyisgaypod). You can always drop us a line with questions, suggestions, or just to say hi at [historyisgaypodcast@gmail.com](mailto:historyisgaypodcast@gmail.com)—we love getting emails! And if you're enjoying our show, remember to rate, review, and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. It helps people find the show, we can expand our awesome community around the world—we'll probably never be as widely recognized as the Pride flag, but, you know—

**Leigh:** Goals.

**Gretchen:** A couple of queer folks can dream.

That's it for *History Is Gay*! Until next time...

**Leigh:** Stay queer.

**Gretchen:** And stay curious.

♪ [Theme music plays]♪