

A Pioneer Campus Center: The Creation of the University of Michigan's Human Sexuality Office

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the creation of the Human Sexuality Office at the University of Michigan, the first official LGBTQ+ center at a university in the United States. The Human Sexuality Office opened in the Fall of 1971 spearheaded by graduate student Jim Toy, but also with support from local LGBTQ+ groups and university staff, students, and faculty. This historical essay traces the opening of the Human Sexuality Office, the role of its main founder Jim Toy, the resistance against it, and its first year in operation. In addition, the essay provides an overview of the environment surrounding the office's opening, including national attitudes and activism regarding the LGBTQ+ community during the 1960s and early 1970s. I rooted this historical analysis in primary and secondary documents from the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library and its collection of documents related to the Human Sexuality Office, now known as the Spectrum Center, and its founder Jim Toy.

Keywords: Human Sexuality Office, Spectrum Center, first LGBTQ+ college center, Jim Toy, historical narrative

On October 2, 2019, James (Jim) Toy, one of the founders of the University of Michigan's Human Sexuality Office, shared his recollections of the office's early days in an official interview. At 79 years of age, Toy's memories were in depth and his interview revealed a complete and engaging story, full of struggles as well as achievements. He shared trials and obstacles they had faced and overcome, stating that "we just kept on meeting and trying to pull the history together" despite resistance, even from campus administrators. Widely recognized as the first university center for LGBTQ+ in the United States, the

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University of Michigan’s Human Sexuality Office emerged in 1971 through the continuous efforts of Jim Toy. Toy’s 2019 interview is housed in the University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library, along with a plethora of primary and secondary documents that have been collected over the years in connection to the Human Sexuality Office. These documents are known collectively as the Jim Toy Papers and provide the foundation of this historical essay.

Gay rights became a prominent issue in the United States during the 1960s with increased political activism and visibility in news reporting. Several significant events, including the 1969 Stonewall Uprising, propelled the gay rights movement during this time, including the formation of the Gay Liberation Front. Although new gay rights groups emerged at this time and activism was at a high, there were no official university offices that supported homosexual students until the opening of the Human Sexuality Office in 1971. The Human Sexuality Office, founded by Toy and supporters, and backed by the University of Michigan itself, became the first gay and lesbian center at a university in the United States. This historical essay traces the creation of the Human Sexuality Office, the actions of its main founder, the resistance against its opening, and the success of its first year in operation.

Within the United States, the decade leading up to the creation of the Human Sexuality Office was slowly progressive in homosexual visibility and rights. Gay rights activists worked throughout the 1960s to gain more equality with their heteronormative peers and were successful, for example, in getting some states to do away with anti-sodomy laws that targeted gay males

Figure 1

*Oral History Interview with Jim Toy,
October 2, 2019*



Note: Photograph taken from Oral History Interviews, 2019-2020, Spectrum Center (University of Michigan) records, 1976-2012, 2019-2021 (Toy, 2019).

(Duberman, 2019; History.com Editors, 2023; Jourian, 2023; Library of Congress, 2023). Activists also worked to gain more recognition from the public, for instance getting the first documentary about homosexuality made in 1961, titled *The Rejected* (Christian, 1961; History.com Editors, 2023). However, even as gay life and rights was becoming more visible and somewhat accepted throughout the country in this decade, life for people who identified as non-heterosexual was fraught with harassment and discrimination (Duberman, 2019; History.com Editors, 2023; Jourian, 2023; Library of Congress, 2023). This decade of progress would lead to an environment of quasi-acceptance that would enable the Human Sexuality Office to open within the next few years.

A significant event in gay rights history happened in 1969, the Stonewall Uprising, which would heavily influence the gay rights liberation movement. On June 28, 1969, the police violently raided Stonewall Inn, a gay club in New York City. Although gay clubs, including the Stonewall Inn, were raided on a regular basis, this time the patrons and neighborhood residents decided to fight back, creating a rebellion that lasted over six days (Duberman, 2019; History.com Editors, 2023; Library of Congress, 2023). The Gay Liberation Front, a group devoted to gay rights and seen as the start of the gay rights liberation movement in modern America, emerged partially in response to the Stonewall Uprising (Duberman, 2019; History.com Editors, 2023; Library of Congress, 2023). The Gay Liberation Front was viewed as a radical group in general, but other similar groups appeared around the same time, including the Mattachine Society, Gay Activists Alliance, and Radicalesbians (Duberman, 2019; History.com Editors, 2023). To mark the one-year anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising in 1970, New York community members marched in the streets in support of gay rights (Duberman, 2019; History.com Editors, 2023). The day became known officially as the Christopher Street Liberation Day and has since been considered the first ever gay pride parade in the United States (Duberman, 2019; History.com Editors, 2023; Library of Congress, 2023). The formation of these groups, the public acts of gay rights activism, and the media reporting on these events, all brought more visibility of gay issues to the general public and contributed to the rising sensitivity in the national attitude towards homosexuals.

The Human Sexuality Office at the University of Michigan emerged as a result of the gay rights activism in the late 1960s. Its creation is closely linked to

one of its founders: Jim Toy. Toy had arrived in Ann Arbor around 1960 “to go to graduate school in the music school,” in his words, “and I dillied around with my studies,” which led to his continued presence by the time 1970 rolled around as a graduate student (Toy, 2019). He was still attending the University of Michigan, but in town he regularly met with people of the homosexual community, usually at a local bar, though at the time many of them did not specifically consider themselves to be gay or part of a group (Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019). In the year prior, Toy and some friends first established the Detroit Gay Liberation Front (Toy 2011; Toy 2019; Zheng, 2022). Soon thereafter, during a nationally covered anti-Vietnam War rally in Detroit, Toy publicly came out as gay, the first person known to have done that in the state of Michigan (Toy, 2011; Zheng, 2022). A month after the Detroit Gay Liberation Front was formed, Toy helped form the Ann Arbor Gay Liberation Front (Toy, 2011). In his interview, Toy stated of these events:

A group of several students who formed first the Detroit Gay Liberation movement, and then when it became clear that we needed to do something in Ann Arbor, we created the Ann Arbor Gay Liberation Front and we needed meeting space. So, I went to a secretary in student affairs and said, "How do we get a meeting space?" And she said, "Write me a memo." Which I did and we got meeting space. (Toy, 2019)

In Ann Arbor, the group continued gay rights activism on and off campus; they held official gay and lesbian meetings, organized dances, and worked to increase their group’s general visibility in town (Office of Special Services & Programs, 1971; Spectrum Center, n.d.; Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019). As a student on campus and a known leader within the local Gay Liberation Front, Toy would request meeting rooms on campus from a secretary for gay and lesbian students to meet (Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019). His requests soon attracted the notice of administration (Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019). When Toy requested to hold a large state-wide conference for homosexuals on campus during the 1970-71 school year, he received an official rejection from the University of Michigan’s President (Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019). In his interview, Toy recalled:

The letter said, "I forbid use of University of Michigan facilities for this," I

think he said, "gathering." The letter's somewhere in a file, I don't remember the exact wording. "Because it would not be educational and it would bring police presence to campus." Now whether or not educational and bringing police presence to campus were his ideas or the ideas of his superiors in the U of M bureaucracy, I do not know. (Toy, 2019)

However, a fellow member of the Gay Liberation Front who worked for the university had keys to the student union, and so the group held their conference on campus regardless of the President's rejection (Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019). The university sent a spy to the conference who Toy believed was secretly an ally, as that spy reported back to administration that the group was nothing to worry about and would disappear if ignored (Peterson, 1971; Toy, 2011; Toy 2019), but the group never did. Though some university administrators may have been displeased with the gay rights activism on campus such as the President, other administrators, faculty, staff, and students themselves lent support to Toy's cause (Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019).

This support for Toy and his allies would lead to the opening of the Human Sexuality Office. In his interview, Toy reminisced on this time. "I think," he shared, "my experience of receiving support and advocacy was gradual. I don't remember any particular one-time focused event that made it clear that we had a lot of support going for us" (Toy, 2019). However, perhaps one event did mark a turning point. During one of the many times Toy requested a meeting space on campus for his group, one of the secretaries he regularly communicated with said, according to Toy, "Jim, there's an office here advocating for women students and an office advocating for black students. Don't you guys want an office?" (Toy, 2011). Toy asked the Ann Arbor Gay Liberation Front whether they would, and they did (Toy, 2011). So it came to be, in 1971 Toy requested an official office space at the university, with two student representatives to advocate for gay and lesbian students on campus respectively (Office of Special Services & Programs, 1971; Spectrum Center, n.d.; Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019).

In response to Toy's official request, on May 19, 1971, Chi-Chi Lawson, the Assistant to Vice-President of the Office of Student Services, sent a memorandum to University of Michigan's Vice-President for Student Services Robert Knauss (Lawson, 1971). The memorandum detailed Toy's request for the hiring of two staff assistants for homosexual students and suggested potential

housing of these staff assistants within the Office of Student Services (Lawson, 1971). The memorandum further cited evidence from a national research team for the United States government, specifically the Final Report of the Task Force on Homosexuality from the National Institute of Mental Health originally published on October 10, 1969, to promote the creation of a supportive space for homosexual students; the report strongly asserted that supporting homosexuals was beneficial to society at large (Lawson, 1971). The memorandum argued for the need to have student advocates for the student homosexual population on campus and outlined the staff assistants' job description as follows:

1. Peer Counselor.
2. Information and referral person.
3. Coordinator of the special services within the divisions of the Office of Student Services for the needs of homosexual students.
4. Liaison between the homosexual community and the University.
5. Coordinator of educational programs and activities (i.e. academic courses, speaking engagements, gathering and dissemination of information).
6. Advocate for abolition of sexual oppression. (Lawson, 1971)

According to the job description, the two staff assistants for homosexual students would serve as peer counselors and advisors to the gay and lesbian communities on campus, but would also work as coordinators, liaisons, and advocates (Lawson, 1971). The memorandum ended with a list of 12 people who supported the opening of this office and the staff assistant positions; the 12 supporters included administrative staff at the University of Michigan and Jim Toy (Lawson, 1971).

The University of Michigan (1971) also released an extensive report titled "Background for the Appointment of the Two Student Assistants for Programming and Services in the Area of Homosexuality" on September 23, 1971. This report officially declared the hiring of two students to work for the Office of Special Services and Programs (OSSP), under which the Human Sexuality Office was housed, both financially and in terms of physical location (University of Michigan, 1971, p. 1). The report provided an overview of the growing American consciousness of minority groups, rising from the protests

of the 1960s and provided some specific examples including discriminatory acts against Black Americans, before going into discrimination against homosexual persons (University of Michigan, 1971, pp. 1-2). It also cited the US Task Force on Homosexuality funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, which studied mental health aspects of homosexuality and advocated for supporting this minority group for the overall betterment of society (University of Michigan, 1971, pp. 2-3).

The background report then discussed the history of laws against homosexual acts, and the repeal of such laws in several states and England during the 1950s and 1960s as a reflection of the growing awareness of gay rights (University of Michigan, 1971, p. 3). The report stated that “In 1966 the North American Conference on Homophile Organizations (NACHO) was formed” and connected with groups and newspapers across the nation, pushing the ideology that homosexuality was not a medical condition or defect, but just another aspect of sexuality (University of Michigan, 1971, p. 4). The report further explained how NACHO worked to change public perception of homosexuality throughout the United States (University of Michigan, 1971, p. 4). The report then explained how the University of Michigan had already officially recognized the Gay Liberation Front and Radical Lesbians as student organizations in previous years, and that 50 such student groups existed around the country (University of Michigan, 1971, p. 5). At the end of the report, the Office of Student Services (OSS) reasserted its decision to endorse this new student advocate program by stating, “These appointments represent a commitment by OSS to be aware and attentive to the concerns and problems of homosexual students on campus, and to treat these concerns with rationality and balance” (University of Michigan, 1971, p. 6). This comprehensive report used a lot of the information from the initial memorandum request to Vice-President Knauss and provided multiple quoted references to respected medical and scientific organizations that endorsed recognizing and providing aid to homosexual students, and by extension creating an office on campus to do just that. The report reads as an extensive justification and rationalization of the University’s decision to create the Human Sexuality Office.

The Human Sexuality Office was granted office space and opened in Fall of 1971 under the OSSP. It included two student employees, Jim Toy represented gay males and Cynthia Gair represented lesbian females (Spectrum Center, n.d.;

Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019; University of Michigan, 1971). Originally, Toy requested two full-time salaried advocates; however, they had to settle for part-time positions even though they actually worked full-time hours (OSSP, 1971; Toy, 2019). As Toy recollected, “We were given a space... With a file cabinet and I think a desk and two chairs... for two people, and I specifically said a woman and a man because we were aiming for gender parity” (Toy, 2019). Besides peer counseling, Toy and Gair helped provide educational information to the university and the local community, especially surrounding harmful stereotypes of homosexuals (Benedetti, 1971; Toy, 1972). They also helped coordinate students to resources and acted as general liaisons and advocates for the homosexual community on campus (Benedetti, 1971; Lawson, 1971; Spectrum Center, n.d.; Toy, 1972; Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019).

The office had the support of fellow students and the community. Toy stated that the office would also advocate for the community beyond the university, including the larger Ann Arbor community (Benedetti, 1971; Lawson, 1971). In his interview, Toy stated:

Day to day, we were, as I recall, largely supported because this was, in my jargon, the tag end of the radical years and so students at least were largely supportive of what we [were] trying to do. As for the faculty, we had faculty allies. (Toy, 2019)

Despite having this support and unofficially advising students and homosexuals in Ann Arbor for years, Toy felt that he and Gair did not know what they were doing when they first opened the office simply because there had never been an office like theirs before (Toy, 2011; Toy, 2019). They represented the first homosexual office ever opened on a university campus in the United States and were pioneers for their community.

Even though the Human Sexuality Office had opened with the support of the University of Michigan, the office still had to justify itself to the public throughout its first year of operation. On November 19, 1971, a few months after the office opened, the OSSP sent a document titled “For Immediate Release” that reiterated the hiring of Jim Toy and Cynthia Gair (OSSP, 1971). The document explained that since the Spring of 1971 the gay movement in Ann Arbor had been demanding representation at the University of Michigan

campus, and since Radical Lesbians and The Gay Liberation Front were officially recognized as student organizations by the university, this office was the logical next step in representing these students on campus (OSSP, 1971). The report was very pointed in its backing of the office and its two employees, stating, "With the limited University funds available to them, Gair and Toy hope to function as peer advisers to gay persons, build a library of gay literature, communicate with gay groups across the country, serve as a clearinghouse for gay activities and information of both local and national interest, and, in every other way possible, seek to implement programs necessary for the liberation of the gay community" (OSSP, 1971). The message of this report was clear, the Human Sexuality Office was on campus to stay, championed and housed by the OSSP.

Nearing the end of its first semester of existence, the Human Sexuality Office also got local support in local newspapers. The Michigan Daily published a very short article titled "Gay Advocates Named to New OSSP Offices" on December 10, 1971 (Benedetti, 1971). The article described the office's structure and details of employment and included quotes from the director of OSSP Elizabeth Davenport and Vice-President for Student Services Robert Knauss, as well as Toy and Gair (Benedetti, 1971). Davenport and Knauss stated the facts of employment and provided informational tidbits on the office, painting it as just one of many programs for the students at the University (Benedetti, 1971). These statements illustrate how the University of Michigan wanted to portray the office to the public as just another regular service provided to students.

Similarly, although much longer in length, the Detroit News released an article written by News Higher Education writer John E. Peterson (1971) on December 28, 1971, titled "The Gay Scene at Michigan." Peterson (1971) started by explaining the standard details of the office and employees, but then went into the rising national awareness of gay rights of the time, especially among universities, as explanation for the political environment in which the office was opened. He then quoted extensively from Davenport and Knauss, using the same information that the Michigan Daily article used, but went more in depth and detail (Peterson, 1971). Knauss elaborated on the medical community's views on homosexuality, including those that believe homosexuality was a mental illness to treat, but asserted that himself, Davenport, and other University officials viewed these students as just another group in need of

representation (Peterson, 1971). Davenport also explained that according to a Kinsey report of the time, around 8% of America's population identified as gay and that the University of Michigan was a miniature representation of the country, so if the numbers were reflective that around 2,600 of the 32,900 university students would identify as homosexual (Peterson, 1971).

Toy and Gair were interviewed for the article and agreed with those numbers, but stated that they wanted to "point out that only a small percentage of those are 'liberated enough to come out of the closet'" and explained how the small and fluctuating numbers of students attending gay meetings on campus showed the fear the community had in being identified as homosexual (Peterson, 1971). In the article, Toy and Gair acknowledged that attitudes on campus were more tolerant than before, but that many forms of subtle and overt discrimination still existed (Peterson, 1971). Gair asserted that the office was important to build a sense of community, provide aid, and educate the public about damaging false myths, for instance "homosexuals being child molesters" (Peterson, 1971). Toy even related an experience where he gave peer advice to a questioning student who discovered he was heterosexual through the advising process provided to him (Peterson, 1971). Through these detailed accounts, interspersed with quotes of support from university administration and referrals to the science and rationality of homosexuality and gay students on campus, as well as through descriptions of the operations of the office and its goals to help anyone regardless of sexual orientation, this lengthy Detroit News article presented the Human Sexuality Office as something needed on campus and not as something to be feared by the masses.

Not all reporting of the time on the Human Sexuality Office was supportive, however. A nationally syndicated columnist and churchman from across the country in California named Russell Kirk released an article through the Los Angeles Times titled "Sodom and Lesbos come to Ann Arbor." The article appeared on January 12, 1972, and denounced the office (Kirk, 1972; Toy, 2011). Kirk argued against the creation of such an office on campus, stating that it promoted the homosexual agenda and that, in his words, "Various U. of M. administrators murmur that 'homosexuals are merely another group emerging from repression'-- like Negroes, Mexican-Americans, Indians, women, and so on. They don't trouble themselves with the nice distinction that while there's nothing immoral about being black, brown, red, or female--well, being a pervert

is something else” (Kirk, 1972). Kirk also condemned the University of Michigan’s President Fleming for allowing this group on campus (Kirk, 1972).

In a direct rebuttal, the Vice-President for Student Services Knauss drafted a response five days later, on January 17, 1972, titled “Homosexual Programs” (University of Michigan, 1972). In this rebuttal Knauss responded directly to Kirk’s press release by name, advocated for the University’s Human Sexuality program by referencing the Task Force on Homosexuality report again, and brought in American Law Institute’s removal of homosexual acts as a crime for an example of how national attitudes were changing in regard to homosexuals (University of Michigan, 1972). Knauss ended by asserting that the Office of Student Services supported all student groups and their educational needs, including homosexuals (University of Michigan, 1972).

The Human Sexuality Office continued to receive university support and had a successful first year of operation through 1971-1972. Toy wrote an annual report for the office in which he gave a very brief overview of their first year of operation, before detailing the program’s objectives (Toy, 1972, p. 1). He stated that the ultimate goal of the office was to help create a society that had no discrimination based on sexual orientation (Toy, 1972, p. 1). Then Toy discussed their job duties for students and the local community, including peer advising, education, information and organizational services, liaison, advocacy for gay rights, publicity, and planning, all of which were in place from the office’s inception (Toy, 1972, pp. 1-2). Toy ended the report with the following statement: “We believe that our program, which is unique in the nation, has achieved an enviable success. We hope that we may continue to be attentive to the problems of homosexual students and that we will treat their concerns with rationality and balance” (Toy, 1972, p. 2). With this noteworthy statement, Toy acknowledged the Human Sexuality Office as the first in the nation, a pioneer center of assistance for his community. Toy echoed the same words that had been previously used by the university in their background for appointment document, words that urged people to view homosexual students and their needs with “rationality and balance”; his statements showed a continuation of the university’s unified defense of the office and Toy’s work. This report encapsulated the culmination of the office’s opening and its successful first year of operation as the first of its kind.

The Human Sexuality Office at the University of Michigan emerged during

a turbulent time of rising gay rights and visibility throughout the country. It was a pioneer office and program as a support center for homosexual students in higher education. Led by Jim Toy and supported by the University, the Human Sexuality Office, the first ever university-based LGBTQ+ center, was a success and opened the door for other support centers at universities around the country.

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