

Professor speaks on marriage equality progress

In light of upcoming LGBT History month, history professor Sandra Barney spoke Monday about the evolution of gay rights in America. The timeline started with an incident at the Stonewall Inn in 1969 and went to the defeat of the Defense of Marriage Act this past June.

Back in 1969, local ordinances in New York did not allow homosexuals to be openly gay. Police raids on bars were frequent because of reports such as same-sex people were dancing too closely together. When police stormed Stonewall, homosexuals fought back. The police pushed them back the first night, but many gays and allies came back the next day with numbers in the thousands. According to civilrights.org, this was the catalyst of the gay rights movement.

Barney discussed how gay rights focuses have shifted over the years.

At the start of the 1980s, a handful of young men in New York and in California reported having a rare cancer and/or pneumonia. The cancer, Kaposi's Sarcoma, is normally only found in elder Jewish men and young Africans while the pneumonia, Pneumocystis Pneumonia Carinii, was normally found in people with compromised immune systems.

However, these men were young and were previously very healthy. Besides that they were men, the only thing they had in common was that they were all homosexual, according to avert.org.

The web site continues on to say that, just over a month after the CDC's first official documentation in 1981, the New York Times reported around 41 homosexuals were diagnosed with the illness.

There were also many cases of violence against homosexuals. Barney discussed a young adult named Matthew Shepard, who was beaten and left tied to a fence to die in 1998. Shepard's death drew attention to hate crime legislation at the state and local level.

"Could you keep your job? Could you get married? Could you not get beaten up and killed?" Barney said. "That's what most of us were thinking about."

Homosexuals also face adversity at the federal level. In 1996, the U.S. government put DOMA into place, basically stating its "moral disapproval of homosexuality." Barney explained that they believed marriage was a legal reason to have sex and, eventually, children - which gays cannot do.

Because of DOMA, legal gay marriage was not recognized as official at the federal level and gay couples would therefore not receive the same federal benefits as heterosexual couples. These benefits include Social Security, health insurance and Medicaid.

This past June, the court case U.S. vs Windsor put an end to DOMA. After Edie Windsor's partner Thea Spyer passed away, Windsor sued for estate taxes. Though she won her case and was awarded the money at the state level, her case went to the US Supreme Court where DOMA was ruled unconstitutional.

"Edie is the Rosa Parks of this whole affair," Barney said.

At a press conference following the final court ruling, Windsor stated that the end of DOMA would hopefully be "the beginning of the end of stigma."