

***Celebrating PFLAG:
50 Years of Creating a Caring, Just, and Affirming World
for LGBTQ+ People and Those Who Love Them***

Village Preservation Society Panel Presentation & Discussion • June 22, 2023

Rev. Jeff Wells © 2023

As you have heard, Parents of Gays – later renamed “Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gay” – was founded in this building, when the congregation was called, [Metropolitan Duane United Methodist Church](#) (MDUMC, or “Met Duane”). Not only did it hold its *first* meeting here, as the story is often presented, but it continued to meet here every month for at least eleven years. I am going to share some of the highlights of that early history.

The story I have to explore with you is largely new information based on archival research. It is history that was lost and now is found. I am going to focus on the first four years of Parents of Gays, especially on the role of Rev. Ed Egan, who served as the pastor of the Met Duane church from 1971 to 1977. My first reveal is that Ed Egan was not merely the pastor of the church in which PFLAG was founded – he was a co-founder of Parents of Gays, along with Jeanne, Jules, and Morty Manford and a handful of other leaders.

Parents of Gays was founded when New York City and the country were much more virulently homophobic than today. Yet, in spite of the repression, hatred, violence at the time, Greenwich Village was a magnet and a relatively safer space for Gays and Lesbians than the rest of the city. Ed later wrote that when he arrived in 1971, one of the church leaders told him the congregation was about 50 percent Gay. Given the circumstances and the church’s location, Rev. Egan likely felt somewhat safe in inviting the Manfords and others to meet at Met Duane. He also had the support of the elected leadership of the congregation in doing so.

I first learned of Ed Egan in 2017 from a Church of the Village member, Lina Landström, who was taking a course in Queer history at the New School. She had learned that he was forced out of ordained ministry in the 1970s for being Gay. That June we held an event in the church to revive his memory and celebrate his ministry. Also, the Church of the Village and others succeeded in getting the NY regional conference of the UMC to pass a resolution recognizing and repenting for the injustice that had been done to Ed and another Gay minister named Paul Abels.



Ed Egan as a young pastor.

Ed Egan graduated from Yale Divinity School in 1954 and served five congregations – the last being MDUMC. It is important to recall that in 1972, the General Conference of the UMC voted to include in its *Book of Discipline* the homophobic sentence, “We do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice to be incompatible with Christian teaching.” This helps to explain why Ed was closetted within the New York regional conference of the United Methodist Church and semi-closetted in Met Duane itself. Yet, he was pretty open in other arenas. He already had a long history of actively advocating for Gay and Lesbian humanity and dignity. Since the late 1950s, Ed had been a member of the New York Mattachine Society. He gave lectures, offered counseling, published articles, and served on the Board of Directors. He also served as a spiritual counselor and lecturer for the Daughters of Bilitis – the first major Lesbian

organization in the U.S., which shared office space with Mattachine in lower Manhattan. At their 1964 national convention, Ed was honored for his contributions with the title “Son of Bilitis” – a recognition that was comically labeled, the S.O.B. Award. The Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis helped lay the groundwork for and evolved along with the more militant advocacy that blossomed after Stonewall in 1969.



Photo by Bettye Lane. Source: Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

Clergy Panel in support of Gays, 1973. Left to right: Rev. C. Edward Egan Jr., Rev. Roy Birchard, Rev. Robert E. Carter, Rev. Guard Lee, and Rev. John Carnwale.

I first learned in 2017 of Ed’s connection to Parents of Gays when I read his [clergy memorial](#) in the 1994 NY Conference Journal, composed by his partner, Russ, his daughter, Trudi Hendrichs, his son, Dana Egan. I am happy to share that Dana is with us tonight online. The memorial included a tantalizing reference that said Met Duane UMC had provided space for, “the Parents of Gays group, *of which he [Ed] was a founder*” (emphasis added). That made me even *more* intrigued. In 2019, I did more research and began to discover the extent of Ed’s role in envisioning, initiating, and promoting “Parents of Gays” (POG). Not only was Ed a founding member, but in 1976 and 1977, he composed the major written work for his Doctor of Ministry

degree based on this experience – a 105-page paper titled, “Parents of Gays: A Demonstration Project.” This included conducting, recording, and transcribing interviews with seventeen people over a six-month period – including parents, siblings, and several Gay men. The interviewees included Janet Lissauer, Sarah Montgomery, and Frank & Evelyn Bull, who were all active in POG/NY. He began this project less than three years after the founding of Parents of Gays and while he was still very active in the organization and attending every meeting of POG – held at the church on the fourth Sunday every month at 3pm. The “Site Team” – an advisory body for Ed’s project – included three members of Met Duane: Jerry Paige, Ray Johnson, and Beverley Berry – all important elected leaders in MDUMC. The team also included three leading members of Parents of Gays: Richard Ashworth, Rae Kameny, and Morty Manford, along with and a long-time friend and collaborator in social justice ministry – Robert Roy Wright.

P A R E N T S O F G A Y S

A Demonstration Project

reported by

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in partial fulfillment of requirements for

The Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

at

New York Theological Seminary

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The cover of Ed Egan's Doctor of Divinity paper,
"Parents of Gays: A Demonstration Project."

Of course, the seed for the idea of Parents of Gays came from Jeanne Manford and Morty, her adult Gay son. Many of you will already know this part of the story. Morty was a leader in the generation of Gay activists who came after Ed's generation. After Stonewall in 1969, he became an outspoken leader of the Gay Activists Alliance. Jeanne began her public defense of Morty and his activism *and his being Gay* in the now-famous April 1972 letter printed in the *New York Post*.

In June of that year, she and Morty marched together in the third annual Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade. She held a sign that read, "Parents of Gays Unite in Support for Our Children." There was an immediate and powerfully positive response from the crowd. People

came up and thanked her. Some asked her to speak to their parents. It was a spark that lit a flame. And Jeanne and Morty began to dream of creating a support organization for parents and their Gay children.



Jeanne Manford and son, Morty, marching in Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade, 1972.

In his 1977 paper, Ed wrote of the moment that the dream became a reality:

“Parents of Gays, New York, began as follows. On Monday, January 22, 1973, under the auspices of his Homosexual Community Counseling Center, Dr. Ralph Blair held a symposium in Manhattan featuring a panel of parents and their Gay children. Among these were Jeanne Manford and her son, Morty, later to become a member of my Site Team; Roy Byrd (pseudonym), the mental health counselor..., and his parents. In informal conversation after the symposium, we sensed the need for an ongoing work with, by and for parents of Gays. We agreed to meet at MDUMC on Sunday afternoon, March 31, 1973, open as to where we would go from there. That date marked the beginning of a series of monthly meetings which

has continued for four years. From the outset, POG seemed to meet a deep need among those attending, ranging in number from six on a cold Sunday in January to around 50 in the wake of wide press coverage in the *New York Post*.”

He was referring to a *New York Post* and wire service article in March 1974 that drew widespread attention to POG.

In addition to Jeanne, Jules, and Morty Manford, Parents of Gays continued to attract a core group of capable leaders, like Dick and Amy Ashworth, Sarah Montgomery, Rae Kameny, and others. From its first meeting in March 1973, Ed wrote, “Parents of Gays identified itself with MDUMC.”¹ Parents came from New Jersey, Long Island, Westchester and Rockland counties, as well as the boroughs of New York City. He added that his demonstration project “plugged in” to the work which had begun four years earlier “and which has been admirably carried out by a committed nucleus of parents and Gays in New York City, to their own benefit and to the comfort and enlightenment of untold others reached in person and by the media. Almost two years was required for the emergence of this committed core group. The Steering Committee of POG/NY came into being in August of 1975 after the group had been in operation 2½ years.” In 1974, a Parents of Gays group formed in Washington, DC. By the time Ed submitted his project in April 1977, there were at least 20 chapters in 16 states.

In February and March of 1975, Methodist Bishop Ralph Ward of the New York regional Conference and District Superintendent, Rev. H. Burnham Kirkland, received two letters from an anonymous “committee of nine concerned persons” in the Metropolitan-Duane congregation. The authors complained that, “our present pastor...is flagrantly homosexual...having occupied the parsonage apartment...with a male ‘spouse,’ Mr. Russell Morin. They have ‘gay’ parties, with all male guests – even some transvestites....” The letters demanded a change of pastor and threatened

¹ Ed Egan, “Parents of Gays: A Demonstration Project,” p. 6.

“to expose the homosexual situation” to the public if the Bishop did not act. Ed rightly labeled these “extortion letters.” Bishop Ward reappointed Ed to Met Duane in 1976 and 1977. Also, Ed continued to have the support of the majority of the MDUMC leadership. However, in the middle of 1977 – the same year Ed submitted his Parents of Gays Demonstration Project – he was compelled by the Bishop to take a leave of absence and forced to retire the next year. Surely Ed suffered this injustice, at least in part, because of his participation in Parents of Gay as well as the vote in March 1975 by the Met Duane Board to invite Metropolitan Community Church – a predominantly LGBT congregation – to hold worship in the church building.



Photo courtesy of Russ Morin

Russ Morin and Ed Egan at home in Haverstraw.

After being forced into retirement, Ed and Russ moved permanently to their home on the Hudson River, where Ed continued to be active in various causes, including editing the newsletter of Affirmation (an LGBTQI advocacy organization formed in the UMC in the early 1970s), and volunteering with SAGE – a support organization for older LGBT persons. He was also an accomplished sailor, photographer, genealogist, and amateur archeologist.

I am so grateful to the long and enduring connection between PFLAG and Metropolitan Duane Church and now the Church of the Village. I am grateful to the Greenwich Village Society

for Historical Preservation for creating and installing, in 2013, the commemorative plaque to the founding of PFLAG, which graces the front of our building. I am proud that PFLAG National held a memorial service for Jeanne Manford in this sanctuary. And I am so glad the Metropolitan Duane is included in the [NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project](#). It is so gratifying to know that ever since the 1970s, Metropolitan Duane UMC and later Church of the Village have been seen as a community of affirmation, support, solidarity, and love for the LGBT community in New York City and beyond.

Ed Egan was a quiet, private hero. He has become one of my heroes. When it was risky to do so, Ed stood out in front, a prophetic voice speaking truth to power. For both the Church of the Village and for PFLAG, it is so important that we preserve and learn from our history and celebrate the best parts of it – celebrate our heroes. I am inspired by the examples of the Manfords, the Ashworths, Sarah Montgomery, Rae Kameny, Janet Lissauer, Ed Egan, and so many hundreds of thousands of others who joined, led, and continue to spread the news about Parents of Gay and then Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gay, and now PFLAG. We still have plenty of work to do, but because of their efforts, we are surely in a much better situation today than what they faced in 1973 or before Stonewall or before the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis initiated their open struggle for liberation. Ed knew as we know, that God desires for us and is with us in the struggle for radically inclusive and all-encompassing love. As the Church of the Village and PFLAG, let us celebrate the privilege of leading in love.

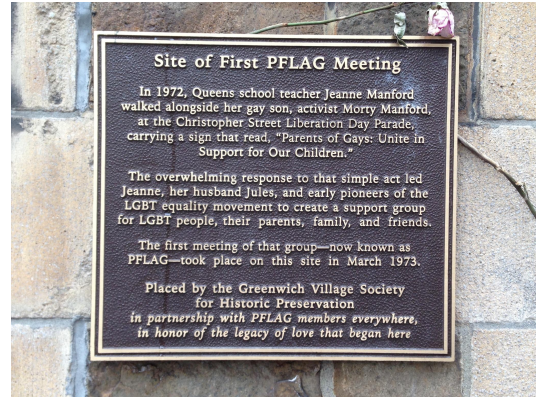


Photo Credit: PFLAG NYC

Unveiling of PFLAG plaque on the front of Church of the Village, June 23, 2013. From left: Bishop Alfred Johnson of Church of the Village (COTV), Suzanne Ramos of the PFLAG Board; Mark Peters, COTV; Rev. Vicki Flippin, COTV; Jody Huckaby, PFLAG Executive Director; and Drew Tagliabue, of PFLAG NYC.