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Title

Bayard Rustin Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

February 2, 1987

Extant

1 hour and 36 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Bayard Rustin was asked to discuss his personal experiences as a gay youth in a Black family, a gay organizer during the Civil Rights movement, a worker in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, as well as his observations on the Black church and its dealing with LGBTQ issues. He also gave his analysis of the politics surrounding lesbian and gay groups within Black movements, non-violence movements, and Christian organizations.

Biographical

Bayard Rustin was one of the outstanding human rights proponents and strategists of the modern era. Usually working out of the public spotlights, Rustin's socioeconomic analysis, commitment to nonviolent social change, and tactical organizing have been integral to the civil rights, pacifists and trade union movements of the mid-20th century.

Born March 12, 1912, in West Chester Pennsylvania, Rustin's early life was influenced by the Quaker Pacifism of his grandmother, Julia Davis Rustin, and his personal experiences of a segregated society. After studies at Wilberforce College, Cheyney State College and the City College of New York, Rustin became Race Relations Director for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. At this time Rustin also began his long-time association with A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, serving as youth organizer for Randolph's 1941 announced march on Washington.

Standing firm to his convictions on justice, nonviolence, and human equality, Rustin served more than two years in Lewisburg Penitentiary as a conscientious objector during World War II and, thereafter, served 30 days on a North Carolina chain gang for his participation in the first Freedom Ride in the South. But in 1953, he was convicted of misdemeanor vagrancy, a charge frequently used to target gay men, and was sentenced to 60 days in jail. In 1955, Rustin became a special assistant to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He helped organize the Montgomery bus boycott. The vagrancy charge was later used to sideline him in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which he was instrumental in organizing, but at the behest of King and Randolph, Rustin became the chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington. Rustin's influence expanded the agenda for this gathering of 250,000 people beyond the demands for integration to include fundamental economic and social reforms.

Rustin founded the A. Philip Randolph Institute in 1964 to build coalitions for social change between the labor movement, the Black community and other groups. While serving as executive director there, he has become increasingly well-known as a commentator on human rights and social change.

In April 1977, Rustin met Walter Naegle during a chance encounter on a New York City street. Their relationship quickly blossomed, and since same-sex marriage was not an option at that time, Rustin adopted Naegle as his son five years later. They were together until Rustin's death on April 24, 1987.

(This biographical statement—with minor updates—was written by Mark Bowman to accompany the publication of this 1987 interview with Rustin). In introducing this interview, Bowman also wrote:

As a gay man, Bayard Rustin has been subjected to private and public castigation throughout his career. While, in his own words, he "never came out of the closet with flags flying," Rustin has not compromised his position as a social pioneer who happened to be gay. In this interview with Open Hands, Rustin addresses this part of his life most often ignored in other public forums.

Biography Date: March 2024

Information on 1953 vagrancy charge added by Doris Malkmus, Archivist

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Bayard Rustin was asked to discuss his personal experiences as a gay youth in a Black family, a gay organizer during the Civil Rights movement, a worker in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, as well as his observations on the Black church and its dealing with LGBTQ issues. He also gave his analysis of the politics surrounding lesbian and gay groups within Black movements, non-violence movements, and Christian organizations.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/bayard-rustin>

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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Tags

Rustin, Bayard
Civil Rights Movement
Gay Liberation Movement
Race relations--Religious aspects--Christianity
Gays -- Religious life
Homosexuality -- Religious aspects -- Christianity
March on Washington (1963)
African American Religious Aspects