

UPSTAIRS LOUNGE FIRE EXHIBIT DISCUSSION

Provided by LGBTQ Religious Archives Network

Written By: October Kamara; Editing and Design By: Alysia Van Looy

OVERVIEW

On June 24, 1973, in New Orleans, Louisiana, a still unidentified arsonist set fire to the Upstairs Lounge, a known gay bar in the French Quarter. The fire spread quickly, and even though it was extinguished within minutes of the fire department arriving on the scene, it killed 32 people. Some survivors were able to get through the windows, but many didn't, as the windows were covered by burglar bars. Some also escaped through the burning stairway, by jumping the fire escape, or by getting to the roof of the neighboring building. The owner, Phil Esteve, opened the bar three years earlier in 1970, using the inheritance he received after his mother's passing. The Upstairs Lounge was also a meeting place for The MCC (Metropolitan Community Church) of New Orleans for a couple of months, which led to many of the congregation members becoming regular customers even after the church moved to a new location. The bar also became popular for the plays they hosted in their theater room. This tragedy overall was not nationally reported in the way it should have been, but the gay community was aware of it at the time, since it was covered in *The Advocate*, a popular biweekly magazine that has been published since 1969 and is recognized as a national LGBTQ news source. Because of strong anti-gay sentiments in New Orleans at this time, there were no community rallies, no community led vigils, and some victims remain unidentified because family members refused to claim the bodies of their kin. Due to the Upstairs Lounge connection to the local MCC, St. George's Episcopal Church held a memorial service for the victims and received negative backlash from the New Orleans community and some of its own members.

UNDERSTANDING GOAL

Students will critically analyze newspapers articles, photos, and other primary sources in order to gain a better understanding of the Upstairs Lounge Fire and have broader discussions about media bias, LGBTQ+ discrimination, LGBTQ+ history, and the gaps in how LGBTQ+ history is taught and learned.

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DISCUSSION #1: MEDIA BIAS

Have your students explore the exhibit and choose three news articles about the fire to read and analyze.

1. What bias can they find in the coverage?
 - a. Is the language loaded?
 - b. Is there a lack of context?
 - c. What are the unchallenged assumptions?
 - d. What point of view is the news coming from?
2. What homophobic language and stereotypes can they find in the coverage?
3. How does the media play a role in how this event was seen locally and nationally?

DISCUSSION #2: LGBTQ+ DISCRIMINATION

1. How does LGBTQ+ discrimination play a role in why this event is not widely talked about in history?
2. There was quite a lot of backlash from the New Orleans religious community when it came to holding religious services for the people who died in this fire. How does religion play a part in the discrimination of LGBTQ people and LGBTQ Christians during this time?
3. How does this history add to what you know about the importance of bars/nightclubs as meaningful gathering spaces for LGBTQ+ people?
 - a. Other examples are Stonewall Inn and Pulse.
4. Some regular customers of the Upstairs Lounge may have gone there in secret as a safe place to be themselves. What could it mean that some of these victims may have been outed through the newspapers or even through their deaths in the fire?

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DISCUSSION #3: GAPS IN LGBTQ+ HISTORY

1. Have you ever heard of the Upstairs Lounge Fire before this?
 - a. If so, where did you hear about it?
 - b. If not, why do you think you haven't?
2. What did you learn from this exhibit and these sources that you didn't know before?
3. How did this shift your perspective on LGBTQ+ and/or religious history?
4. Why are there gaps in LGBTQ+ History? How do these gaps form?
 - a. Think about how history is taught?
 - b. Think about who is in charge of determining what is history?
5. How as historians can we close the gaps in LGBTQ+ history?
 - a. Think about this in multiple settings such as education, media, public history, etc.

