

The Role of Violence on Gay Bodies in Establishing West Hollywood as a “Gay City”

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I. Introduction

As one walks along Sunset Boulevard through the heart of West Hollywood, they would be met with a world of vibrant energy, passing bars and stores blasting the finest fare in pop tracks through oversized speakers. They would witness friends, family, and lovers slurping down too strong cocktails while waving cash tips in the air, encouraging the local drag queen to drop into the splits during her lip sync performance to “God is a woman.” They would see, unabashedly, men dancing with men, women with women – love existing in its purest form. A love that exists without concerns over safety, identity, or violence. Modern West Hollywood is a unique neighborhood that welcomes everyone of every sexuality, gender, and interest, allowing there to exist a safe space within Los Angeles’ large city lines. The city serves as a place for celebration and gathering, emphasizing the importance of acceptance and love within both the queer and heterosexual communities.

Though the city currently serves as the premier LGBTQ space in Los Angeles in the 21st century, it did not always hold this status. A 1987 letter from Mayor Steve E. Shulte explained that “While West Hollywood is considered nationally to be a ‘gay city,’ and the Council and governmental agencies are developing a reputation for sensitivity to lesbian and gay concerns, there has been no organized or formal structure to assess the needs of this large segment of the West Hollywood community.”¹ In other words, there was no apparatus or institutions that officially helped the city to be a ‘gay city;’ only in reputation and assumption was it safe for queer individuals. Because of this, there existed an immense amount of violence within the

¹ Steve E. Shulte, “Letter Request to Start Gay/Lesbian Task Force,” April 13, 1987, Box 1, Folder 2, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

neighborhood and Los Angeles, as a whole, that greatly harmed LGBTQ community members and impacted their quality of life. Both physical and emotional violence gripped the city, causing many queer people to fear for their safety and well-being. However, the work of city council members and the West Hollywood community during the late 1980s initiated the neighborhood's transformation into the welcoming city it is today.

This paper will examine the response to various forms of violence upon queer bodies in West Hollywood in the late 1980s and how the actions of the West Hollywood City Council and the Gay and Lesbian Task Force in 1988 worked to establish the city as a safe space for LGBTQ individuals. Throughout the 20th century, countless forms of violence brutalized queer bodies, ranging from emotional attacks to physical brutality. Within West Hollywood, the most salient forms of violence came in the form of homophobia, police ignorance, and the AIDS crisis. First, violence against the LGBTQ community in the form of intolerance and homophobia dehumanized individuals and threatened their physical safety. Local and national discussions of the queer community saw homosexuals face immense cruelty that endangered them and devalued their existence in society. Witnessing this, the City Council and Gay and Lesbian Task Force worked to remedy the situation through numerous policies and legislative actions to ensure that West Hollywood establishes itself as a safe space for LGBTQ people to exist without scrutiny. Second, the West Hollywood Sheriff's Department's ignorance and refusal to support gay individuals throughout Los Angeles directly impacted the well-being of West Hollywood citizens. The disconnect between the queer community and the Sheriff's Office prevented an understanding between the two cohorts and enabled psychological and physical attacks to harm gay individuals. However, through the efforts of gay officials in 1988, a partnership between the police and the queer community began to emerge that allowed queer voices to be heard by law

enforcement. Finally, the HIV/AIDS epidemic perpetuated violence on queer bodies, as the disease was wrongfully deemed a “gay disease.” Claiming that the disease only thrived in gay communities continued queer ostracization and enabled gay-bashing to survive. The expansion and improvement of AIDS education and resources, however, allowed people to feel less afraid of the disease and receive access to increased opportunities within West Hollywood.

Using these three violences as a framework, this paper will argue that violence upon gay bodies in the 1980s catalyzed the establishment of West Hollywood as a gay city, specifically through the solutions prescribed by the City Council and Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Following some brief historical background, section one will analyze newspaper articles, transcribed phone correspondence, letters, and reports to conceptualize how homophobia alienated and threatened the LGBTQ community, but seeing this, city officials worked to build a safe community for people of all identities in West Hollywood. Section two will rely on letters, resolutions, and reports from the Gay and Lesbian Task Force to highlight that police bigotry threatened the safety of residents. However, steps toward a reconciliation between authorities and the gay community were being taken in 1988. The third and final section will examine newspaper articles, surveys, letters, and recommendation reports to understand how the fear of AIDS equates to a hatred of homosexuals and how West Hollywood officials worked to support those impacted by the disease and homophobic cruelty.

II. Historical Background

Due to its inherent clashing with what was societally considered “normal,” society struggled to understand what it meant to be queer and how it was similar or different to the lifestyles of heterosexuals. The uniqueness of the LGBTQ community’s love made navigating

heterosexual-dominant spaces challenging for gays and straights alike, as there was no consensus regarding the community's acceptance into society. The uncertainties surrounding the LGBTQ community enabled cruelty to be exercised against queer identities, leading to ostracization, mental turmoil, and violent attacks.

Beginning in the late 20th Century, gay activists began to resist marginalization through grassroots mobilization in an attempt to advocate for queer safety and civil rights. The movement, however, was relatively limited at its inception, with only the impassioned taking action. Despite its slow beginnings, it did not take long for national mobilization to occur. On June 28, 1969, a police raid of the Stonewall Inn in New York City resulted in a bloody confrontation that enraged and mobilized the gay community, leading to a cross-country unified fight for gay liberation.² The violent conflict, though tragic, was successful in initiating a wave of gay activism, which has brought significant and beneficial change to the lives of LGBTQ Americans. For example, in 1978, Harvey Milk and many West Coast gay coalitions were able to strike down Proposition 6 in California, which would have banned homosexuals from teaching in public schools.³ The proposition, drafted by conservative politicians such as Ronald Reagan and John Briggs, was a blatant attack on the access of gay individuals to public service and employment. The unified efforts to strike down legislation such as Proposition 6 were robust, as they allowed the gay community to come together and receive treatment equal to their straight counterparts. Activists' response to the physical and emotional violence on the LGBTQ community fueled the movement, allowing queer individuals to discern how they hope to establish a brighter future for those who come after them. Throughout the movement, it became

² Simon Hall. "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 3 (2010): 545.

³ Hall, "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest," 558.

evident that gay shared spaces were needed, as they allowed for the establishment of community, exchange of experiences, and access to essential resources.

It must be noted that queer history is not the same as general history, as the community has faced immense brutality and violence tied to the basis of gender and sexuality. Because of this, many cities do not account for the unique experiences of the gay community, as it is easier to only serve the majority population, which is heterosexual. The failure to account for LGBTQ history means that cities are built without consideration for the homosexual community, often preventing them from receiving necessary resources and support.⁴ Living in American cities in the 1970s and 1980s as a gay man or woman was extremely limiting, as exploration of identities and communities had to happen in the private sphere. With interest emerging in creating and maintaining gay neighborhoods, eyes turned to major cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and more.

Situated between Beverly Hills and Hollywood, West Hollywood has always been a queer area within the enormity of Los Angeles. Though not becoming an official city until late 1984, the neighborhood served as an unofficial safe haven for gay individuals, partly due to the explosion of LGBTQ-serving bars lining Santa Monica Boulevard starting in the 1970s and the frequent congregation of gay individuals in the neighborhood.⁵ The region was a popular meeting spot for gay individuals, as it allowed people to feel somewhat secure while they expressed themselves however they sought fit. Despite the region being beneficial to the community, some found it essential to incorporate the region and turn it into a proper city. By doing so, it was hoped that better services and resources could be provided to the residents and,

⁴ Ben Walters and Angus Stewart. "LGBTQ+ Spaces" in *Urban Claims and the Right to the City: Grassroots Perspectives from Salvador Da Bahia and London*, (UCL Press, 2020): 80–85.

⁵ "City of West Hollywood General Statistics," Box 1, Folder 2, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

in turn, establish a town dedicated to uplifting the gay community. So, on November 29, 1984, the City of West Hollywood was created. Over the next several years, city leadership began planning ways in which the city could best serve its residents, paying special attention to queer identities and representation. Doing so allowed the city to plan how they would combat attacks and violence on gay individuals and share essential resources and ideas intended to inspire the community as a whole.

Traditional historical scholarship tends to understand the Gay Rights Movement and LGBTQ history through the lens of significant leaders, ideologies, and events. In their work, scholars may discuss how activism was framed, the locations of significant events, or how the political and civil spheres clashed.⁶ Though important, using these discussions solely prevents one from understanding the impact of change on a microscopic level and how actions on a local scale can combat the struggles of citizens in that area. Analyzing actions executed reveals what was done at that moment in time to address situations impacting the neighborhood. Overlooking the specifics of the city and the identities of its population is a disservice to the work undertaken by officials to make West Hollywood, specifically, a safe space for LGBTQ individuals.⁷ From its inception, West Hollywood leadership has worked diligently to serve its gay population, leading to an impactful and progressive year of change in 1988.

III. Homophobia & Gay Bashing

Since LGBTQ identities inherently challenge the traditional understandings of love, gender, and family that emerged from institutions of religion and power, many expressed hatred

⁶ Julie Mertus. "The Rejection of Human Rights Framings: The Case of LGBT Advocacy in the US." *Human Rights Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2007): 1036–64.

⁷ Alison L. Bain and Julie A. Podmore. "Placing LGBTQ+ Urban Activisms." *Urban Studies* 58, no. 7 (2021): 1305–26.

toward the community. The status quo states that only men and women are to marry and find love, and those who pursue different routes deserve persecution. The hunting of LGBTQ individuals exists across time and place, forcing queer individuals to either suppress their identity or face assault. Because of its existence for millennia, the violence exerted on queer bodies has taken a plethora of forms. In modern times, attacks often manifest themselves in verbal assaults, including the usage of slurs or violent threats, which can lead to physical attacks that result in long-term recoveries or death. Individuals find themselves facing cruelty based on identity, preventing queer culture and community from being fully realized in most cities.

Despite Los Angeles having the reputation of being a progressive city, the LGBTQ community faced intense homophobia, both physically and verbally. The community as a whole was continually attacked in the media and from outside perspectives, offering their opinions on the identity group. For example, an article published by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1987 covers a custody battle of a teenager between a fundamentalist mother and the husband of the child's dead father. After the biological father's passing, his homosexual husband, Craig Corbett, wanted to take custody of the child, with the mother deeming it immoral. The most fascinating part of this piece is not the story itself but how the *LA Times* talks about Mr. Corbett as an individual. The author opted to title the article "Dead Homosexual's Friend Wins Custody of His Son, 16."⁸ Despite having marital status, the *Times* refused to recognize Corbett as a husband to another man and chose to call him his "friend." By refusing to call Corbett by his actual title, the *Times* exercised a psychological form of violence that challenged the acceptance of queer identities. When prominent publications such as this prevent gay identities from being recognized, gay

⁸ Jenifer Warren, "Dead Homosexual's Friend Wins Custody of His Son, 16," in *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1987, Box 2, Folder 1, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

bashing perpetuates throughout Los Angeles. It ostracizes the community as a whole, calling for the need for a gay “safe haven” to be created.

Beyond external opinions of the community, LGBTQ individuals faced incredulous violence that went largely unpunished by local officials. During the 1980s, the amount of gay-bashing cases increased exponentially, forcing queer people to face physical and verbal assaults that undermined their identities. In 1987, The Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center opened a hotline for people to share instances of homophobia, as the formal channels of support, such as the police, refused to recognize and prevent the violence the community endured. The Center recorded many of these instances to document the cruelties faced by the LGBTQ community and highlight the need for improved safety and acceptance. One caller’s testimonial explains:

“In mid September, a person with AIDS was attacked while waiting for a bus in Long Beach. The assailants, three young males, sneaked up behind the victim and beat him, breaking his hip. Although the attackers were identified by the victim and apprehended by the Long Beach Police, the police let them go after finding out that the victim had AIDS.”⁹

In this instance, one gay man was assaulted by three young attackers and was beaten until he was physically broken. The man did nothing to provoke the attack, but due to his queer identity, he was violently assaulted in a cruel and unnecessary confrontation. However, the violence did not end there, as the police refused to prosecute the three youths because of the victim’s positive AIDS status. The police, in a way, found the victim deserving of the attack, as his status as an LGBTQ individual with AIDS placed him at the bottom of the societal structures.

⁹ “GLCSC Anti-Violence Hotline Reports 24 Incidents in Last Six Weeks,” November 3, 1987, Box 1, Folder 3, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Again, queer identities were invalidated by Los Angeles society and structures, exacerbating the need for an established queer space in Los Angeles County.

Furthermore, The Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center itself faced immense violence from the Los Angeles community. In the middle of September, the Center was receiving more homophobic calls and letters than usual, with one series of calls “on the morning of September 17, 1987, [becoming] progressively more obscene until the last call, which threatened that “we’re gonna bomb you”¹⁰ The very institutions that sought to improve gay lives were under fire by homophobic and ignorant people. When support networks are threatened or attacked, it greatly harms the groups they hope to aid. In Los Angeles in the 1980s, violence attacked more than just individuals but also the widespread networks established to uplift the queer community. Because of this, it was paramount that a formal area dedicated to protecting and serving LGBTQ citizens be established somewhere within Los Angeles.

Witnessing these assaults on queer bodies, the West Hollywood City Council took it upon themselves to reaffirm their stance on homophobia and ensure that no harassment was taking place within city workplaces. In a letter sent to all city employees and the West Hollywood Sheriff’s Department on July 25, 1988, the City Council addressed harassment in the workplace, reminding workers that:

“The City of West Hollywood’s Malicious Harassment Ordinance Reads: It shall be unlawful for any person to engage in malicious harassment against any other person... Malicious Harassment is defined as persistent or a pattern of actions... intended to vex, annoy, disturb, frighten, intimidate, injure, threaten, victimize... Because of that person’s sex, sexual orientation, race, color, [etc.].”¹¹

¹⁰ “GLCSC Anti-Violence Hotline Reports 24 Incidents in Last Six Weeks.”

¹¹ “Harassment Complaint Procedure,” July 25, 1988, Box 2, Folder 1, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

The reminder sent to all city employees is a crucial example of how the City Council worked to foster inclusivity. By demanding that discriminatory practices are not tolerated in the workplace, they ensure that queer individuals can occupy important civic roles. Despite the anti-discrimination ordinances originating in 1985, the letter, three years later, serves as a potent reminder that West Hollywood will remain strong despite the uptick of gay violence in the 1980s. Taking a strong stance against gay bashing within city positions allows the sentiment to spread throughout the community and supports the construction of an established safe space.

Building community in West Hollywood was essential to providing solutions to homophobia rampant in the Los Angeles area in the 1980s, prompting branches of the City Council, such as the Human Services Commission, to undertake the goal of unification. In September 1988, the commission, staffed by many queer individuals, released its 90 Work Plan, which detailed various improvement projects and the actions required to be undertaken from the end of 1988 to the middle of 1989. Within this plan, the Human Services Commission wanted to “Continue the development, planning and analysis of major special events for the residents of West Hollywood,” which includes programs such as a community 5/10K Run and Walkathon, a West Hollywood Street Festival, and a Garlic Festival.¹² The community-based events allow individuals from every part of Los Angeles to gather in West Hollywood and celebrate queer identities through shared experiences. Utilizing neutral spaces like physical activity and food festivals enables LGBTQ people and allies to meet and formulate support networks essential to combating discriminatory experiences.

Furthermore, the Human Services Commission sought to uplift West Hollywood’s community by establishing leisure programs and spaces that allow individuals to gather and

¹² “Second Quarter 90 Day Workplan: 1988-1989,” September 27, 1988, Box 2, Folder 4, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

spend time with one another. For example, as of October of 1988, the Human Services Commission hoped to “Develop and implement a successful adult sports program,” which includes a men’s basketball league and a co-ed softball program.¹³ Allowing queer men and women to form teams and engage in friendly competition in West Hollywood further enables a community to be created for LGBTQ individuals, which indirectly combats the effects of gay-bashing and homophobia. Finding others with similar lived experiences allows people to stand firm in their identity and combat bigotry perpetuated by individuals who express discontent toward the LGBTQ community. Further, the Human Services Commission hoped to “continue [the] process of developing a Parks, Recreation and Facilities Needs Assessment Plan for the residents of West Hollywood.”¹⁴ Developing a plan for creating and maintaining space in West Hollywood allows LGBTQ individuals to have a right to the neighborhood, enabling them to gather and formulate a network of like-minded individuals. Doing so helps people find solidarity within their community, allowing resistance to gay-bashing to be fought from a united front rather than individual victims.

Considering these and other actions, the Gay and Lesbian Task Force published its Final Report in November 1988. In the report, the Task Force highlights some city successes but raises recommendations that West Hollywood needs to adopt to continue improving gay and lesbian lives. When discussing discrimination and homophobia, the report offers several solutions to continue equality and inclusion. Despite some queer individuals holding positions on the city payroll, the final report recognizes that there is a disparity in the number of elected officials who are gay and who are straight as the level of the position increases. In other words, the Gay and Lesbian Task Force found that many queer individuals found themselves stuck

¹³ “Second Quarter 90 Day Workplan: 1988-1989.”

¹⁴ “Second Quarter 90 Day Workplan: 1988-1989.”

within lower-level clerical levels, leaving more powerful roles, such as department head and professional staff, relatively unoccupied by the gay community. The Task Force recommended that the city hire an independent evaluator to review policies and hiring practices to understand “why the numbers of Gays and Lesbians decline as the hierarchical position in the organization increases.”¹⁵ Though tremendous steps were taken in 1988 to support the queer community in West Hollywood, it was evident that there was significantly more work to be completed to eliminate gay-bashing in the city. The recommendation to review the City Council and find out why LGBTQ individuals did not fill high offices is paramount to promoting progress in the city. When queer people find themselves in positions of power, they can fight unwaveringly for the improvement of the city on behalf of their gay support network. A city can only be a “gay city” if queer individuals are consulted during its establishment and its operation, something the Gay and Lesbian Task Force recognized and advocated for.

IV. Police Violence

Violence inflicted upon queer bodies did not just come from everyday citizens, but it also came from the institutions that are intended “to protect and to serve.”¹⁶ Historically, police in Los Angeles have disproportionately discriminated against individuals from marginalized communities, including groups based on race, religion, gender, and more. Sexual orientation is no exception, as police officers in the 1980s either refused to help or directly harmed queer individuals themselves. Because of the “otherness” inherent in sexuality, many close-minded

¹⁵ “City of West Hollywood Final Report,” November 21, 1988, Box 2, Folder 5, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹⁶ “Motto, Mission, & Values,” myPD, (LAPD 2019).

police officers treated the LGBTQ community with cruelty and injustice. Emotional and physical damage exerted on gay bodies in West Hollywood by Los Angeles police created a distrust and distance between the gay community and law enforcement, something that was important to repair for West Hollywood to thrive as a safe space.

Scholar Timothy Stewart-Winter suggests in his "Queer Law and Order: Sex, Criminality, and Policing in the Late Twentieth-Century United States" that the best way to analyze the relationship between police and the gay community is to look at more minute, local interactions rather than using a nationalistic lens. He believes that due to factors such as class, race, and gender, the gay experience with law enforcement is different across towns and regions, meaning a uniform interpretation cannot be used to explore the relationship.¹⁷ For example, he points to the Stonewall riots in 1969 in New York City. Until then, gay rights movements in New York did not directly address the cruelties inflicted upon them by law enforcement officers. The dramatic encounter catalyzed change in New York, as the LGBTQ community turned their actions toward policing, taking a more progressive stance than the national movement, which took its united criminal justice stance in the 1970s.¹⁸ Despite eventually matching up with national sentiments, queer activists in New York took an earlier stance on criminal justice than the rest of the United States. It is essential to view the gay rights movement through the lens of individual cities to comprehend the movement as a whole fully.

Stewart-Winter's concept can be applied to Los Angeles, as their experience with police differed in nuanced ways compared to the rest of the country. Understanding Los Angeles and West Hollywood in terms of the rest of the country would be a disservice to the activists and leaders who resisted police corruption and bigotry. In Los Angeles, violence exerted by police

¹⁷ Timothy Stewart-Winter, "Queer Law and Order: Sex, Criminality, and Policing in the Late Twentieth-Century United States," in *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (2015): 61–72.

¹⁸ Stewart-Winter, "Queer Law and Order," 63.

mainly came in the form of ignorance, as they refused to field the calls for help offered by the LGBTQ community. In early 1988, the Gay and Lesbian Task Force asked the West Hollywood Sheriff's Department for any information they had on record about discrimination cases that involved homosexuals. Despite having a large LGBTQ population in West Hollywood, the Task Force found out that "The West Hollywood's Sheriff Department does not keep statistics based on a person's sexual orientation."¹⁹ Even though identity-based archives existed in the Sheriff's Department, they failed to record attacks on gay bodies, one of the largest populations in West Hollywood. By not maintaining statistics, the police cannot notice patterns across violence, preventing improper or incomplete remedies from being pursued. Law enforcement did not protect the LGBTQ community in West Hollywood, allowing them to face cruel attacks without any semblance of safety.

Further, law enforcement was not a profession open to gay individuals in West Hollywood, as there were no openly LGBTQ deputies in the department. One of the most salient issues with West Hollywood at the end of the 1980s was the ignorance possessed by police officers toward the gay community. In a mock memorandum that was later sent to various law enforcement officials, the Task Force declares that the Sheriff's Department "[refuses] to recruit any openly gay or lesbian deputies. Nor will [it] implement any policies making it easier for any current gay or lesbian deputies to 'come out' on the job."²⁰ Restricting LGBTQ individuals from participating in the Sheriff's Office prevents deputies who hold a gay identity from responding to situations within their community. This creates a significant issue, as straight officers do not have the lived experiences of homosexuals, meaning that they possess an inherent misunderstanding

¹⁹ "Additional Requested Information," February 10, 1988, Box 1, Folder 3, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

²⁰ "Draft memorandum emphasizing the shortcomings of the West Hollywood Sheriff's Department," 1988, Box 2, Folder 3, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

and ignorance toward the gay community, leading them to respond with insensitivity and less urgency. When police cannot respond to situations due to their opinions of a specific identity group, they not only allow violence to go unpunished, but they enact psychological attacks against various identities. The LGBTQ community never felt secure in West Hollywood, as police refused "to protect and to serve" with sensitivity.

Witnessing the shortcomings of the West Hollywood Sheriff's Department, the Gay and Lesbian Task Force worked diligently to bridge the gap between law enforcement and the queer community, believing it to be essential for a collaborative relationship to form to improve safety in West Hollywood. To do this, the Task Force urged the City Council and law enforcement officials to adopt several remedial measures outlined in an August 1988 Resolution. Within the document, several solutions are prescribed, such as "a committee called the 'Sheriffs and Citizens Conference Committee' be established," "new and innovative ways be constantly sought to sensitize the Sheriff's Department to the needs of the gay and lesbian community," and "the Sheriff's Department be asked to make a policy statement encouraging gay and lesbian deputies to come out."²¹ The many suggestions all work toward a shared goal: police acceptance and protection of the gay community. Formulating a committee of LGBTQ individuals and West Hollywood officers streamlines communication. It allows complaints and suggestions to be made to the ears of law enforcement, which could lead to their adoption of the ideas. Further, basic education provided to police officers about the gay community enables officers, regardless of identity, to treat all West Hollywood residents with respect and dignity. Along with the education, encouraging closeted officers to come out could help to inspire other police and ensure they understand the queer experience to the best of their ability. The recommendations

²¹ "Resolution Regarding West Hollywood Sheriff's Department," August 1988, Box 2, Folder 1, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

made by the Gay and Lesbian Task Force provide the groundwork for steps that were completed over the following years to ensure that law enforcement could support West Hollywood in becoming a safe haven for LGBTQ individuals.

In their final report, the Gay and Lesbian Task Force discusses their optimism that the West Hollywood Sheriff's Department would adopt the recommendations in their proposed resolution. Before reissuing their recommendations in the report, the Task Force explained, "It is also the belief of the Task Force that there has been a concerted effort since Cityhood to address these issues, and the current leadership of the Sheriff's Department in West Hollywood has demonstrated a willingness to work with the community to ameliorate the situation."²² Expressing this sentiment in the report reflects immense optimism that police ignorance and violence can be remedied. The police department has "demonstrated a willingness" to learn and adopt new strategies, indicating that progress was likely to be made in restoring the relationship between the LGBTQ community and law enforcement, thereby leading to a safer and improved neighborhood for everyone. The optimistic situation in late 1988 eventually led to the betterment of relations three years later, allowing police violence and ignorance to drop significantly in the early 1990s.

V. The HIV/AIDS Crisis

Starting in the early 1980s, the AIDS epidemic took over 100,000 lives in nine short years, leading to one of the most significant health crises in the United States and international history.²³ Within the epidemic, gay men found themselves at the focal point as the disease

²² "City of West Hollywood Final Report," November 21, 1988.

²³ "Current Trends Mortality Attributable to HIV Infection/AIDS -- United States, 1981-1990," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1991.

disproportionately attacked the community. Not only was the disease incredibly harmful and deadly at that time, but the stigma surrounding it forced the LGBTQ community to face immense scrutiny and violence once again. AIDS in the United States was quickly associated with the gay community, as engaging in anal sex was a high-risk activity that allowed the spread of the disease. As a result, gay men were disproportionately affected by AIDS and were wrongfully labeled as the cause of the disease, leading to physical and emotional attacks against the community. For example, in a 1987 article from the *Los Angeles Times*, author Richard Isay highlights the impacts of the AIDS crisis. He explains that not only has verbal and physical attacks on gay men increased, but also that “I see some young adults who perceive themselves now not only as bad and immoral but also as potential carriers of death.”²⁴ This passage is especially heartbreaking, as the psychological attacks on gay individuals prevented them from feeling comfortable within themselves. Believing oneself to be a “carrier of death” fosters feelings of shame and disgust, hindering the ability to express one’s queer identity in society. The self-image of gay men in Los Angeles was shaped dramatically by anti-AIDS rhetoric, thus hurting the entire community, even those unafflicted by the disease, emotionally and psychologically.

Attacks on queer bodies also existed in how AIDS was discussed in the media. Often, because of the “lesser” status of LGBTQ individuals, newspapers and television refused to talk about the crisis, as it was believed only to be impacting the gay community. The silences about AIDS were detrimental to the community, as they not only found themselves to be the targets of discriminatory rhetoric, but they did not receive critical information about how to keep

²⁴ Richard A. Isay, “Scapegoating of Gay Men Leaves Its Mark,” in *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1987, Box 2, Folder 1, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

themselves safe. For example, a writer from the *Los Angeles Times* explained in an op-ed that his work was edited to minimize the crisis:

“Even after 12,000 people had become ill with AIDS, I remember an editor questioning my use of the term *epidemic* to describe what was happening. ‘Couldn’t we call it an outbreak?’ he asked. ‘I don’t know anyone who has this disease, do you?’ At the time, I didn’t. But now I do. And within the next five years, almost every American will know someone who has AIDS.”²⁵

Despite the crisis impacting several thousand individuals nationwide, the *Times* refused to acknowledge the epidemic’s severity and do its part to support public health and safety. Since many viewed AIDS as a “gay man’s disease,” they did not believe it to be paramount to inform the general public and address it with the seriousness it deserved. Even in the sphere of public health, the LGBTQ community was treated as an inferior population, stopping the media and public from sharing crucial information that could have slowed the spread of AIDS. Homophobia was only exacerbated during the health crisis, as the intolerance of the LGBTQ community allowed one of the worst public health epidemics to thrive nationwide. The lack of resources shared by the media made it crucial for gay individuals to know how and where to seek support, something that a designated gay city could provide.

Within West Hollywood specifically, residents and workers believed that many businesses were taking the crisis seriously, but some aspects needed improvement to result in meaningful change. In December 1988, the Human Services Commission surveyed City of West Hollywood employees to assess how AIDS was being handled in the workplace and what additional measures were necessary for workers to feel completely at ease. Despite a majority of respondents claiming to be satisfied with current city efforts, 29% said that they did not feel as if

²⁵ Marlene Cimon, “Giving AIDS The Silent Treatment,” in *Mother Jones*, October 1987, Box 2, Folder 1, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

they were receiving adequate information about AIDS in the workplace, with one respondent explaining, “I like to know of numbers to call direct... I wouldn’t feel comfortable in talking to a co-worker!”²⁶ With around one-third of respondents not receiving enough information and some feeling uncomfortable sharing their inquiries at the workplace, places of employment needed to offer comfortable and practical solutions. Instead of relying on internal resources, the City of West Hollywood needed to provide phone numbers and addresses to resource centers to reduce the fear and embarrassment around seeking support. The efforts of West Hollywood, though noble, reflect that even locations intended to serve the gay population could come short in addressing the violence inflicted by the AIDS crisis.

Knowing that current resolutions did not satisfy the needs of the LGBTQ community, the West Hollywood City Council and the Gay and Lesbian Task Force worked diligently to improve access to AIDS education and resources to help those impacted or at risk. For example, West Hollywood Mayor Stephen Shulte requested monetary support from the United States Conference of Mayors to further combat AIDS in West Hollywood and hopefully curb the crisis. On August 12, 1988, the conference, composed of mayors nationwide, awarded \$41,969 to West Hollywood organizations, explaining that “We hope that the project is actively supported by your office so the materials and techniques developed in West Hollywood can serve as a model for other cities”²⁷ The grant was significant to the battle against AIDS in two ways. First, it was one of the first substantial efforts by West Hollywood officials that extended beyond the legal boundaries of the city, showing the willingness of those in power to outsource to stop the spread

²⁶ “AIDS in the Workplace Survey Results,” November 30, 1988, Box 2, Folder 6, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

²⁷ “Letter from the US Conference of Mayors to West Hollywood Mayor Steve Shulte,” August 12, 1988, Box 2, Folder 2, Kim Kralj papers (Collection 2157). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

of AIDS. Mayor Shulte recognized that the resources of West Hollywood alone were not enough to protect public health and the illness of gay bodies. Hence, his efforts beyond the city's boundaries show his commitment to keeping LGBTQ residents healthy and knowledgeable. Second, the United States Conference of Mayors' support of West Hollywood in hopes of it becoming a "model city" is significant to the meaning of gay cities nationwide. Making West Hollywood a model implies that other cities across the country could also become safe spaces for LGBTQ individuals, thus uplifting gay communities throughout the United States. West Hollywood played a crucial role in paving the way for gay acceptance and safety, something that was crucial to the improvement of gay lives in cities from coast to coast.

In their Final Report, the Gay and Lesbian Task Force also provided recommendations intended to improve the city's response to AIDS and stop the disease's attacks on gay bodies. Similar to the AIDS in the Workplace Survey, the Task Force found that many city programs were somewhat satisfactory, but noted several limitations within them and provided solutions to enhance these current efforts. For example, they suggested that "It is recommended that the City work with AIDS agencies to develop programs to assist staff and volunteers in coping with ongoing bereavement issues."²⁸ This recommendation hopes to address the mental assaults on the LGBTQ community, as grieving close friends or family who have passed away from the disease is unbelievably difficult. Losing someone to AIDS creates not only sadness within an individual but can worsen the fears and stigma associated with the disease. Establishing support networks specifically to address these sentiments can uplift the gay community and help them maintain an optimistic and healthy population.

The Task Force also provided recommendations centered around homophobia perpetuated by the epidemic. Their last recommendation about HIV/AIDS read, "It is

²⁸ "City of West Hollywood Final Report," November 21, 1988.

recommended that the city pursue AIDS discrimination cases quickly and positively.”²⁹ In other words, it is paramount that City officials address instances of homophobia that AIDS inspired with swiftness and effectiveness, as doing so can reduce negative stigma about the disease and help queer individuals feel more comfortable seeking out help. Because the disease was frowned upon heavily in the late 1980s, many gay men felt ashamed to seek support or resources, in turn allowing AIDS to spread and take more lives within West Hollywood. If it were treated as a general illness and not something reserved solely for LGBTQ individuals, the discrimination and hatred toward gay individuals would be reduced, allowing more people to seek healthy remedies. Through the attention of law enforcement and city officials, negative sentiments toward AIDS could be reduced and lead to the betterment of gay lives within West Hollywood and Los Angeles as a whole.

VI. Conclusion

The efforts of the West Hollywood City Council and Gay and Lesbian Task Force to address violence in the LGBTQ community from gay-bashing, police ignorance, and the AIDS crisis initiated the transformation of West Hollywood from a neighborhood to a city that works to uplift and support gay individuals. At the end of the 1980s, violence on gay bodies had worsened significantly in the Los Angeles area. Homophobia brutalized gay individuals solely due to their identity, forcing them to endure both physical and emotional attacks. This, in tandem with police ignorance toward the gay experience and the AIDS crisis ravaging LGBTQ health, made life dangerous and frightening in Los Angeles for those who only wanted to be able to love who they loved. Aware of these injustices, the progressive City Council of West Hollywood took it upon

²⁹ “City of West Hollywood Final Report,” November 21, 1988.

themselves to establish a neighborhood that paid special attention to creating and maintaining safety for gay residents.

1988 specifically was a crucial year for the City of West Hollywood, as critical research and actions were undertaken to improve the city and its people. In regards to homophobia, West Hollywood sought to construct a community and remind everyone in West Hollywood, regardless of identity, that the queer experience is valid and protected by city officials. Creating a shared safe space where individuals could gather and form relationships was essential to uplifting West Hollywood, as it allowed the gay population to protect one another through the community. Police ignorance also needed to be addressed because of its adverse impacts on protecting and recognizing gay identities. In 1988, the West Hollywood City Council and Gay and Lesbian Task Force attempted to bridge the gap between the two groups and streamline communication between gay residents and their local police. Additionally, they urged the Sheriff's Department to hire more openly gay and lesbian deputies, as they would be able to educate fellow officers about the gay experience and encourage a newfound sensitivity to be adopted toward the LGBTQ community. Finally, the expansion of AIDS resources and attempts to reduce negative stigmas allowed health education about the disease and embarrassment to improve, allowing residents to receive crucial information about their health and safety.

Thanks to the influential work of past leaders and activists, West Hollywood today is a place filled with celebration, beauty, and joy. LGBTQ individuals from around the world come to the city to dance and talk openly without fear of being attacked simply for their sexuality. The efforts of those before us have allowed us to adopt this privilege, experiencing their idealized version of the city with loved ones, new and old. Attacks on LGBTQ individuals will never cease, but by creating safe spaces and communities dedicated to supporting gay people, society

can move toward a future where individuals are celebrated for their identities and actions,
leading to a more equitable and enjoyable life for all.