# Stonewall, ACT UP, Pride Marches and a Mile-Long Rainbow Flag!

Blanche, you'd better believe there's drama—and joy—in the memoir of Gilbert Baker, creator of the modern symbol for LGBT liberation.

June 27, 2019 By Trent Straube

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The rainbow flag was born June 25, 1978. Gilbert Baker, then 27 years old, created the flag—actually a pair of them, each 30 by 60 feet!—to fly at San Francisco's United Nations Plaza as part of the Gay Freedom Day Parade. After finishing the sewing the night before, Baker and a friend stripped naked and frolicked in the fabric to imbue it with raw gay energy. The next morning, they celebrated with a snort of coke.

What can you say? It was the 1970s, in hippie San Francisco.

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The fact that such details come across as celebratory and historic instead of sordid and hedonistic says a lot about Baker and his memoir, Rainbow Warrior: My Life in Color. And to be fair, overall, the book is rather chaste regarding sex and drugs, but it really delivers the money shots when it comes to behind-the-scenes political infighting, personality clashes and the eternal battle between grassroots activists and corporate sponsors—and how all that negativity can be overcome for the greater good.

But back to June 1978. Only three years later, in June 1981, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report published the first official account of what would become known as AIDS. So it's no surprise that the epidemic plays a big role in the history of the rainbow flag and its creator, who died in his sleep at home, in 2017, at age 65.

Born in Kansas and transplanted to San Francisco via the Army, Baker was friends with fellow activist Cleve Jones, a protégée of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official in California (he was assassinated in 1978), who urged Baker to create a symbol for LGBT liberation to replace the pink triangle and its associations with Nazi concentration camps. Baker knew just the thing: a rainbow flag.

Watch the In the Life interview with Baker above to learn about the flag's original eight colors and what they stood for, and why he created the six-colored "commercial version" we know and love today.

Hard to imagine in 2019, as we approach Stonewall 50 and WorldPride weekend, but the rainbow flag didn't catch on immediately. Much of Baker's memoir focuses on his effort to create a mile-long rainbow flag for Stonewall 25, the New York Pride March in 1994. The mammoth flag project was sponsored by Stadtlanders pharmacy, as a way to promote AIDS nutrition and meal programs. Knowing that a flag of record-breaking length would receive worldwide media attention, Gilbert understood this was his chance to solidify the rainbow flag as a symbol for the LGBT community—one that could represent many diverse identities, sexualities, genders and causes, including AIDS awareness.

But New Yorkers weren't so keen to have a flag from a San Francisco queen upstage their parade, and when Baker tried to win allies through the AIDS activist group ACT UP, he received a frosty welcome. Making matters worse, he was told by corporate sponsors not to wear a dress (Baker was gender fluid in that sense) while working in his own workshop because media outlets might stop by and get the wrong impression. Then came his friendship-ending brawl with Cleve Jones. A bigger villain, perhaps, was newly elected Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who refused to give the marchers permission to use Fifth Avenue, instead shoving them out of the spotlight to the deserted edges of Manhattan on First Avenue.

What happened? To give it away would be to ruin a truly enjoyable read that will leave you with a new appreciation for the both Pride and the rainbow flag.

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