Stonewall and LGBTQ Equity

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events

Topic Summary

In June 2019, we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, which took place on June 28, 1969 and is viewed by many as sparking the movement for LGBTQ rights in the U.S.

The Stonewall uprising, also sometimes referred to as the Stonewall riots, began in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City. As was typical during that time, police officers entered the bar and arrested employees for selling alcohol without a liquor license, roughed up many
customers, cleared the bar and arrested several customers for not wearing at least three articles of “gender-appropriate” clothing (which was a New York criminal law at that time).

When raids like these happened in the past, customers would typically leave the premises. However, the LGBTQ community's anger this time was strong and resolute as they watched customers being taken away in a police van. They began to taunt the police, throwing bottles and debris and as a result, the police officers called in reinforcements. What happened next was a spontaneous, violent demonstration that spawned additional demonstrations over several days by the LGBTQ community—both customers and neighbors.

Prior to and during the 1960’s, our country was a hostile place for LGBTQ people. For that reason, they congregated at gay bars and clubs where they could socialize and express themselves openly. These bars were continually shut down by the police, because the mere gathering of gay people constituted “disorderly” behavior. In the 1960's, many of these regulations were overturned, but certain behaviors like holding hands, kissing, or dancing with someone of the same sex were still illegal, so police harassment in gay bars continued. In addition to raids and beatings, police sometimes used entrapment by pretending to be a gay man searching for a partner in order to make arrests.

Many people view Stonewall as the beginning of the LGBTQ rights movement, and it was also seen as a symbol of resistance to social and political discrimination against the LGBTQ community. Though activism around LGBTQ rights existed in various ways prior to 1969, the Stonewall uprising mobilized the LGBTQ community towards increased organizing and as a result, several LGBTQ rights organizations were established. Also, LGBTQ rights groups were inspired by other activist movements of the 1960’s, including the Civil Rights and anti-war movements.

Here are some quotes from people and activists who were there:
"Growing up in the 1950s, you conformed to society and what it was... obviously 'no one is supposed to be gay.' I think that was a message that kept people like me in the closet. But, our youth, our generation was a different generation. We weren't going to be conformists to the 1950s. It was a glorious place (Stonewall) to be because we could be open, we could be ourselves, we could dance, we could hug, we could kiss. We could be openly who we were."

"There was supposed to have been a shoe thrown, or there was a brick thrown. Or someone threw off a Molotov cocktail. We were fighting and it was for our lives. We said we want to be treated equally under the law. And if the law doesn't, you have to change it."

"It's all of us together, women and men, and trans and bi. I felt that our goal was to transform the world."

Since Stonewall, there has been significant progress for LGBTQ equity including the recognition of same-sex marriage as a constitutional right nationwide, the establishment of many community LGBTQ rights national organizations and the passage of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act protecting LGBTQ people from hate-based violence (in some states). However, there still remains much work to be done to ensure equity for the LGBTQ community in the areas of hate crimes, employment and housing discrimination, healthcare, bullying and harassment, representation, public accommodations, etc.

**Age**

12 and up

**Questions to Start the Conversation**

- What did you learn about Stonewall and LGBTQ rights that you didn’t know before?

- What do you think it was like for LGBTQ people in the 1960's or before?
- Why do you think members of the LGBTQ community engaged in this uprising in 1969?

- If you could ask a question of the people who were there, what would you ask?

- In your opinion, how are things different for LGBTQ people now as compared to the time period of the Stonewall uprising?

- In what ways do members of the LGBTQ community face bias, discrimination and injustice?

Questions to Dig Deeper
(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- What progress has our country made around LGBTQ rights? What are some examples?

- What are some areas of LGBTQ rights and equity do you think our country still has to work on?

- To what extent do you think your school is a safe, welcoming and equitable environment equitable for LGBTQ students? What have your school leaders, teachers and/or peers done to create that environment?

Take Action
Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- Help to organize an educational forum in school to talk about the Stonewall uprising and LGBTQ rights in general. Learn about LGBTQ history in your community or state at your local library, museum or community center.

- Initiate a committee/group to understand more about how LGBTQ people are treated in your school and/or community. Consider doing a climate study,
focus group and/or survey to learn more; then analyze the results and take actions to foster a more safe, respectful, welcoming and equitable community and ensure that bullying prevention policies address LGBTQ students.

- Get involved in a local LGBTQ rights organization in your community or a national organization that has local affiliates such as GLSEN, PFLAG the Human Rights Campaign.

**Additional Resources**

- **The Stonewall Uprising** (ADL Lesson Plan)
- **Understanding Homophobia/Heterosexism and How to be an Ally** (ADL Lesson Plan)
- **10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism**
- **Safe and Inclusive Schools for All**
- **LGBTQ Pride Month** (Education Resources)