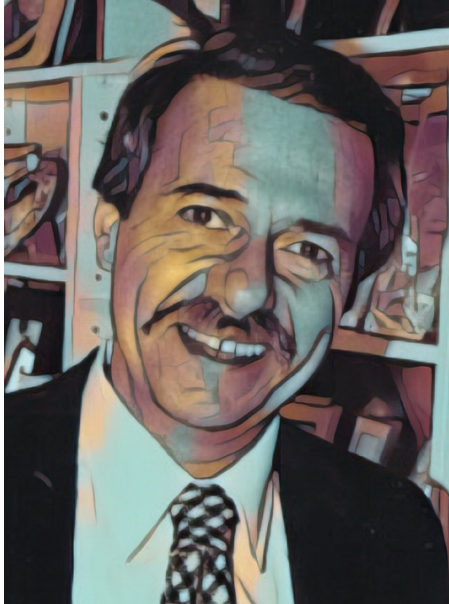


Gerald Gerash



Gerald “Jerry” Gerash was an attorney, gay rights activist, and community organizer who spearheaded a movement to repeal anti-gay criminal laws in Colorado.

Gerash was born in the Bronx in 1934. He was the son of Russian Jews who had fled Europe due to increasing violence directed at Jews. Growing up he witnessed and identified with the marginalized and oppressed communities living in the Bronx. This ingrained within him a strong sense of right and wrong, and a need to fight injustice. When Gerash was 10 years old, his family moved to Los Angeles. In the early 1950s, he attended college at both UCLA and UC Berkeley. Then he went on to obtain his law degree from University of Denver Law School in 1969.

Gerash described the Denver gay community of the early 1970s as extremely isolated:

“Gays and lesbians lived hidden lives and in fear of exposure that could, and did, result in loss of a job and professional career—even eviction from one’s home. We ventured out to meet other gays only in designated spaces, mostly the gay bars. Once there, we were afraid to use our real names. And arrests were a real possibility. We lived underground—in a gay world, entirely separate from the straight world. And the straight world didn’t know our gay world even existed. We preferred that—for our own survival; we knew they saw us as pariahs, perverts, criminals or, at best, as mentally sick.”

In 1972, only two gay organizations existed in Denver. Gerash knew that the vacuum of representation needed to be filled. Thus, in the fall of that year, Gerash and a group of friends and colleagues organized the Gay Coalition of Denver (GCD).

“GCD grew fast because people knew about Stonewall, the women’s and black civil rights movements, and the anti-Vietnam War movement, and some of us sharpened our organizing teeth in these liberation struggles. We were already pent-up and ready to live an open, freer gay life by creating a liberation movement of our own. GCD’s members, imbued with

a yearning for gay freedom, immediately began to fill gay Denver's void with a new gay culture and joyful assertion of our inherent worth."

The coalition offered services, such as: a political and legal committee; a library; a coffeehouse; a hotline; counseling services; coming out classes; and other support groups.

Then came a turning point, in the first few months of 1973, when over 250 gay men were arrested for "lewdness" (using the notorious "Johnny Cash Special" bus). Gerash and the coalition immediately protested, held press conferences, and met with Denver City Council members. Gerash had a two pronged plan: file a lawsuit against the city and organize the lesbian and gay community in mass to protest at city council meeting.

On October 23, 1973, the coalition's supporters arrived at city council ready to voice their concerns. At the start of the hearing, the president threatened to arrest all 350 protesters, but after four hours of speakers the city council was persuaded. They repealed four anti-gay laws – a first in the nation. Gerash's lawsuit against Denver a year later resulted in halting the police's discriminatory arrests, as well as ending their general harassment of the gay and lesbian community.

During this same period, the coalition continued to push for legislation to protect gay and lesbian individuals from discrimination. However, this did little to solve ingrained problems within the gay and lesbian community caused by generations of homophobia. Gerash recognized that the community was in need of an institution to combat the problems of alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide. Thus, he lead the formation of Unity, an "organization for organizations" to create a community center. In 1976, the Gay Community Center of Colorado was officially formed. Today, the Center remains in operation and is the largest LGBT community center in the Rocky Mountain region.

Gerash continued to fight for gay equality in Denver until 1985 when he moved to California to practice law there. He is now retired and living in the Palm Springs area.

References

Mueksch, Nicole. "Colorado Law Professor Honored with LGBTQ Advocacy Award." *CU Boulder Today*, University of Colorado Boulder, 28 Sept. 2021 - [Link](#)

"United We Stand: The Story of Unity and the Creation of The Center." *The Center on Colfax*, Denver, Colorado, June 3 2016 - [Link](#)

"Gerald 'Jerry' Gerash (1934 -)." *Denver Public Library History*, Denver Public Library, 25 Feb. 2019 - [Link](#)

News Stories – [Link](#)