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Capital man in vanguard on gay rights

With a '77 White House delegation, he helped initiate policy changes

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By Matt Weiser - Bee Staff Writer



George Raya, a longtime gay rights activist in Sacramento, applauds Monday while serving as a monitor at a state Capitol rally by high school students. Sacramento Bee/Brian Baer

Thirty years ago, George Raya of Sacramento and a small team of cohorts achieved the unthinkable: a meeting with White House staff to discuss gay rights.

The meeting in 1977 was the first time in history that any president allowed a formal discussion of gay rights in the White House. Though the delegation did not see President Carter himself, their meeting with his staff in the Roosevelt Room was a milestone that led to many policy changes.

"It did start the ball rolling," said Raya, now 57 and a resident of Sacramento's midtown neighborhood. "Back then we had no rights. We've made some progress in some areas, and in others we've still got so far to go."

Monday's anniversary of that visit coincided with the second annual Queer Youth Advocacy Day in Sacramento. About 400 high school and college students from around the state met with politicians to urge support for SB 777, a bill that would add teeth to existing laws that prohibit discrimination against gays and lesbians at school. Raya participated as a monitor during the group's rally at Capitol Park.

"I think George's work is amazing," said Wendy Hill, a lobbyist with the National Association of Social Workers and volunteer organizer for the youth event. "He's a true leader. We've been fighting this for such a long time that it's sort of a multigenerational thing now. He represents that first-string generation."

Raya was born and reared in Sacramento, graduated from Sacramento High School in 1967 and CSU Sacramento in 1972.

He first realized he was gay when he was 18 and a freshman in college. The activism started right away: He won a court battle to establish a club for gay students at Sacramento State.

After dropping out of law school at UC Berkeley, he joined with gay activists in the Bay Area and began pushing for rights. Because he knew so many people in Sacramento and was willing to "work cheap," they sent him home to work as a lobbyist.

He says the work came easy.

In 1975, he helped pass AB 489, which decriminalized private sexual acts between consenting adults in California. Many other states followed suit in succeeding years.

"It made me a national celebrity," Raya said. "I took a trip to New York, and everybody wanted to meet me. I started giving talks around the country."

Raya's 1977 trip was organized by what is now known as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, based in New York. The group chose activists representing all areas of the nation, and Raya was among those tapped.

The White House visit featured an appointment with Midge Costanza, the first woman ever hired as a full-fledged presidential adviser. She said the meeting led to many important federal policy changes. For instance, the department of Housing and Urban Development stopped preventing gays from renting federal housing. The Immigration and Naturalization Service stopped its practice of keeping gays out of the country. The Internal Revenue Service gave gay-oriented nonprofits tax-exempt status like any other nonprofit.

"I agreed to have this meeting because our administration was so well known for international human rights," said Costanza, now 74 and public affairs officer for the San Diego County District Attorney's Office. "That day, history was made on the issue of human rights, and it took place where it actually started: at home, here in our country."

Costanza recalls Raya as the youngest member of the delegation but said he had a powerful presence and a command of the issues. Raya was only 27 then.

"You cannot imagine how exciting it feels to get in a taxi and be admitted at the west gate of the White House," Raya recalled. "I'm really into big government, and that is the center of it all. The power is right there."

Each delegation member was assigned a specific area of federal government to research on the subject of gay rights. Raya's was the Department of Health and Human Services.

He doesn't remember getting much time to deliver his pitch, because the group was so preoccupied with "thank yous." But he did press for research funding on hepatitis, which preceded HIV/AIDS as the primary communicable disease among gays. One result was a federally funded study of hepatitis.

Unlike many homosexuals, Raya came from a supportive family that already had welcomed two lesbians. So, he said, he had the leeway to fight for issues beyond his own status as son, brother and citizen.

Today, Raya is a CalWORKs case manager for the Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance. He's a shop steward with United Public Employees Local 1, and represents gay county employees as chairman of the union's Sacramento County Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Caucus. He also is a board member of the Capital Crossroads Gay Rodeo Association and a member of the Sacramento Parks and Recreation Commission.

"Most people think we're hairdressers and florists. I like people to know we're into everything," he said. "If they know someone, a family member or a friend who is gay, they get to find out that person doesn't have horns. They mow the lawn. They send their kids to school. They pay taxes. They have the same values. They're not all that different from me."

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George Raya, left, of Sacramento, pauses outside the White House with the Rev. Troy Perry, center, and Ray Hartman, both of Los Angeles, on March 26, 1977, after they discussed gay rights with members of President Carter's staff at the White House. Photo courtesy of George Raya



Summer Larson, 16, of San Diego and Shelbie Macias, 15, of Castro Valley listen during a state Capitol rally Monday by high school and college students backing a bill to toughen laws prohibiting discrimination against gays and lesbians at school. Sacramento Bee/Brian Baer

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