The Rainbow Flag

Before the Rainbow

LGBTQ2S+ folk are resilient. We have had to be. We have been illegal, placed in concentration camps, imprisoned, given electric shock treatment, fired, bashed, threatened, and denied service — all because of who we love. We have lived with disgrace and suffering, keeping our lives and our loves safe by keeping ourselves and our relationships hidden.

Before 1978, **the pink and black triangles** were the most common symbols used by LGBTQ2S+ communities. The triangle badges were used in the Holocaust Camps of Nazi Germany to identify **"homosexual" men (pink)** and **lesbians/antisocial (black)**. Those who wore them post-war felt strongly that they were reclaiming and rebranding what had been a symbol of shame, trauma, and death.

Six nights of resistance between June 28-July 3, 1969, trans patrons of the Stonewall Bar in New York City lit the spark for "gay liberation" by fighting back against the police who were there to arrest them for the crime of being themselves in public. Stonewall was the catalyst for the next fifty years of fighting for equality rights.

The Rainbow

In 1978, the Height Ashbury and Castro Districts of San Francisco, were still a haven for hippies, artists, musicians, and young gay people looking for and finding the counterculture. Harvey Milk was the first openly gay elected official in the history of California. A city Councillor, he would find a modest amount to fund a proposal to fly rainbows for Pride in June of that year. Five months after Pride, in November 1978, Milk was assassinated – for being who he was and for what he symbolized.

The group of artists who had made the rainbow proposal wanted something to acknowledge both the adversity and the hope of the LGBTQ2S+ communities. The decision was to produce two massive 40' by 60' (that is, so large each was just slightly shy of a full-sized basketball court) rainbow flags with 18 smaller flags to line the reflecting pool.

One of the two large flags was an eight-colour rainbow (the current six colours plus turquoise and indigo); the other an American flag with rainbow stripes. The artists and the volunteers dyed, shrank, sewed, washed, dried and ironed fabric over seven weeks. The flag was immensely popular and would grow to be a universal symbol of LGBTQ2S+ presence and visibility.

A remnant of the original flag. All of the original colours are here; however, the pink and turquoise are barely discernable. This remnant is on display at the Smithsonian and is credited to Gilbert Baker, although he was not solely responsible for the rainbow flag. Pink and turquoise were dropped as colours because of their cost.

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The Colours

There was no meaning given to the original colours, other than a desire for vibrant colour and the concept that rainbows worked as a symbol for LGBTQ2S+ people who belong to communities of different colours, backgrounds, and orientations. Who had shared traumatic circumstance and were still standing. Universal. The colours were later given the following meanings:

Red = life

Orange = healing

Yellow = sunlight

Green = nature

Blue = harmony

Purple = spirit

What Does it Mean?

The rainbow flag is NOT a flag of exclusion; it is recognized throughout the world as representing inclusion for 2SLGBTQ+ folk and those who love their gay fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbours. It is a sign of pride, of hope, of welcoming and safety of home.

When the flag is raised, when it is displayed on doors and windows, it means that the institution had some soil warming to help create a safe place for LGBTQ2S+ folk. That safe space is what the LGBTQ2S+ people look for and need when they see the flag and walk through the doors.

Note: There are at least 21 different variations on the rainbow flag. This version is the best known.

Written by: Diane Kilby, Co-creator and presenter of Code Rainbow at the Village of Winston Park. (May 2022)