

## art

# Revealing 300 years of gay history at Yale

New exhibit chronicles Ivy League school's rich gay past in Connecticut

By ADRIAN BRUNE

THROUGH THE LARGE, paneled oak doors and the buttressed corridors, past the medieval tapestries and regal paintings of Yale's forefathers, Jonathan D. Katz escorts visitors to a cloistered exhibit room in the corner of Sterling Memorial Library.

The first hint of a significant difference between other freestanding library exhibits at Yale and this one is the array of Pride T-shirts lined up beneath the portrait of Benjamin Franklin bearing down on eight enclosed, lighted cabinets. The second is a collection of late 19th century photographs of Yale men dressed in drag, peering out at onlookers from one of the cabinets.

Visitors might wonder whether John William Sterling, a lawyer for the Rockefeller family, would have approved of housing a gay culture exhibit — "The Pink and the Blue: Lesbian and Gay Life at Yale: 1642-2004" — in the library he endowed upon his death in 1918. Then Katz points to another case, which contains an early photograph of Sterling, next to a placard describing his 50-year relationship with his longtime partner, James Orville Bloss.

"We discovered in researching this project that Sterling was gay," says Katz, the executive coordinator of the Yale's Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies. "When he died, he left a provision

in his will that said Bloss could only be buried in his mausoleum if he remained single for the remainder of his life. That signaled a devotion beyond friendship."

The post-mortem outing of one of its most well known benefactors is proof of just how far Yale, known among the Ivies — Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cornell, Columbia, Brown, University of Pennsylvania and Dartmouth — as the gay-friendliest, has come on gay issues in its 303-year history.

It didn't always prove easy to overcome the social juggernaut of Ivy tradition, as "The Pink and the Blue" illustrates with secret diaries and scrapbooks, forbidden love letters and furtive photographs.

Katz says he designed the exhibit, which runs until May 14, to reveal Yale's struggles with gay culture as well as its early embrace of it during the '70s. It represents the first time an American university has not only unearthed its gay past, but also endowed a substantial exhibition to reveal it.

IN THE PORTENTIOUS AISLES OF THE Yale archives, students of a gay history class taught by famed historian and Kramer Initiative visiting professor, Jonathan Ned Katz (he is unrelated to the exhibit's coordinator), began pulling out dusty relics of Connecticut's gay history last spring for research projects. The overwhelming number of Yale-specific artifacts ultimately resulted in "The Pink and the Blue" — pink as the universal gay insignia, and blue as Yale's school color — and the final exhibit points out that it is nearly impossible to acknowledge Connecticut's gay past without mentioning Yale.

As one of America's first colonies, the Puritan forefathers of Connecticut enacted one of the country's original anti-sodomy laws in 1642, mandating execution for "any man caught lying with another man." Four years later, the citizens of New Haven, where Yale was founded as a divinity school, executed their first offender, a man by the name of William Plaine, the exhibit states.

Yale remained in its infancy during the 18th century, and a large portion of its gay history went unrecorded. But a journal obtained from transfer student Albert Dodd revealed the intense love some men felt for other men at Yale as early as 1837.

From that point, Katz says a



A current exhibit of queer culture at Yale University, 'The Pink and The Blue: Lesbian and Gay Life at Yale and in Connecticut, 1642-2004,' reveals that as far back as the '30s gay students there were participating in musical and theater groups such as the famous Whiffenpoofs, an a cappella group, and the Calliope Club (above).

groundswell of surreptitious homosexual activity took place, often hidden by the theatrical garb of performance groups still active today, such as the renowned a cappella group, the Whiffenpoofs.

When Cole Porter arrived at Yale in 1909, wearing a checked suit and salmon tie, he became one of the few people for whom Yale provided what Katz called, "a taste of unfettered possibility." The young composer immediately became friends with other students whom Porter's biographers described as homosexual, wealthy and devoted to theater and wit.

BUT FOR LARRY KRAMER, THE WRITER and AIDS activist responsible for the \$1 million grant that led to the Larry Kramer Initiative and this exhibit, the oppressive nature of Yale in the '50s led to some very dark days. "When I went to Yale, I thought I was the only gay person in the world. I tried to kill myself because I was so lonely," Kramer later wrote of a suicide attempt in which he swallowed 200 aspirin.

Despite his painful memories, when Yale approached Kramer, who founded ACT-UP, he said he would donate money to the school only if it was used to establish something gay-related.

At first, Yale officials said no to Kramer's vision, but media publicity and some artful compromise resulted in a five-year program that involves bringing in visiting faculty members, hosting conferences and coordinating academic endeavors related to gay studies.

"We started this as a litmus test of Yale's commitment to its own statements," says Katz, who came to Yale via his former organization, Queer Nation, and as a tenured art history professor at the State University of New York-Stony Brook. "But we keep getting the consistent message from the administration that it wants this to happen, not tepidly, but as the advent of a leading program."

Kramer has expressed more interest in a curriculum light on theory and heavy on history, believing that will better serve gays' social acceptance.

With 60 exhibits, including historian Carl Van Vechten's queer scrapbooks and photographs that indicate prominent Connecticut physician Alan Hart was transgendered, "The Pink and the Blue" has enough history for a book. Katz hopes to publish one on this subject within the next few years.

"I see this as an extension of my street activism," he says. "A successful program at Yale could help promote lesbian and gay studies nationally."

## MORE INFO

**The Pink and the Blue: Lesbian and Gay Life at Yale and in Connecticut 1642-2004'**

Through May 14  
Sterling Memorial Library Memorabilia Room  
Yale University  
New Haven, CT  
Mon. - Fri. 8 a.m. - 5 p.m.; Sun. 1 - 5 p.m.  
Closed Sat.  
[www.yale.edu/lesbiangay](http://www.yale.edu/lesbiangay)

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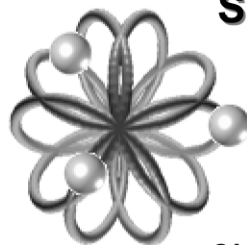
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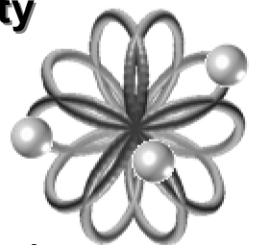
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