

Driving Change

Andrew Shaffer offers us a glimpse at one of the many stories that make up the history of Madison's LGBTQ community, as preserved by the LGBT Archives Project.

In the mid-1970s, Madison's buses became the site for a battle over gay visibility. David Smith, a local activist, had learned that many of the advertisements on the buses were posted on behalf of nonprofit causes at no charge. Wanting to draw attention and attendance to the Madison Gay Center, he investigated the posting process with the city and meticulously followed the steps to ensure his petition would be approved. The Center, one of Madison's earliest LGBTQ organizations, offered peer counseling services, dances, and a social place primarily for gay men to gather. These ads, which Smith designed and printed, were created to help the Center achieve greater visibility and reach more people who needed the services they offered but didn't know where to look.

With the paperwork and about 100 ads in tow, Smith made his way to Metro Transit to hand them over for installation throughout the city's bus fleet. The director of Metro Transit quickly refused the request, fearing the ads were too controversial and riders would object. Smith was upset at being excluded despite having done everything the city required, and reached out to Mayor Paul Soglin's office for support. Soglin was sympathetic, and ordered the cards to be posted. The ads were seen on city buses, but there were reports of the cards being destroyed by disapproving bus drivers.

This battle may have been small and short-lived—barely a blip on the local radar—but it helped to set a precedent for acknowledging and supporting Madison's gay community at City Hall. Our history is full of these moments when we rise to demand visibility, access, and a place to belong. The Madison LGBTQ Archive works to document this history, from mundane stories of everyday life to epic moments of triumph and loss, and everything in between. This archive is for all of us—to create a permanent statement that we are here, that our stories are important, and that our lives belong in the pages of history. Find out more about the archive and how you can get involved online at go.wisc.edu/LGBTQ60s or on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at @MadisonLGBTQ. ■

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