

BARBARA GITTINGS

Pioneer Lesbian Activist (1932-2007)



In 1948, a high school teacher told Barbara Gittings that she was probably kept out of the National Honor Society because of “homosexual inclinations.” At Northwestern University, she was confronted with rumors that she was a lesbian. Gittings could accept the label but questioned the prevailing view that homosexuality was “sick,” “sinful,” and “perverted.” Finding no positive reinforcement in Chicago’s libraries, it was years before she discovered a bit of fiction and nonfiction to sustain her. In 1956 she joined the Daughters of Bilitis, the first female homophile group in the U.S. dedicated to improving the lives of lesbians. When Gittings organized their first East Coast chapter, in 1958, a gay activist was born. In 1963 she was tapped to edit their legendary magazine *The Ladder*. She marched in the first gay picket lines in 1965 outside the White House, the Pentagon, and Independence Hall, carrying a sign reading “Sexual Preference is Irrelevant to Federal Employment” which, today, is in the Smithsonian Institution along with copies of *The Ladder*. From 1970 to 1973 Gittings helped successfully lobby the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. In 1973 she helped start what is now the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF). Gittings was co-Grand Marshall of the 1997 New York City Gay Pride Parade where she was declared a “Mother of Lesbian and Gay Liberation.” In 2001, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) bestowed to her the first Barbara Gittings Award for Activism. The American Library Association presented her with its highest award – lifetime honorary membership – in 2003. She earned the APA’s first John E. Fryer Award in 2006. After a lifetime committed to the GLBT Civil Rights Movement, Gittings retired to an assisted living facility in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania with her partner of 46 years, Kay Tobin Lahusen. She passed away on February 18, 2007 after a long battle with breast cancer. She was 74.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: Have you ever heard about Barbara Gittings being a pioneering lesbian activist in your literature text?
2. Read the biographical information.
3. Group Discussion: Why was Gittings important in starting lesbian and gay groups?
4. Extend knowledge: How do you think Gittings changed the prevailing view of homosexuality during the 1970’s?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. The Legacy Project Website Investigation: How did Gittings establish a knowledge base about gay and lesbian issues in the literature and libraries?
2. Compare or contrast another inductee with Gittings in the literature areas. Connect your findings to the website of The Legacy Project Literature at <http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Literature.html>
3. Prepare a chart reflecting the timelines, accomplishments, comparisons and contrast between Gittings and another inductee that you have chosen in your investigation.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Describe the major changes that Gittings experienced in her rise to activist.
2. How has society changed from the time when homosexuality was viewed as “sick or perverted?”
3. View Gittings in <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moUL32lwNpE>
4. Based upon your own understanding, how did Gittings improve the equality of all in your society?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Based upon Gittings’s life, who would you consider a leader in the LGBTQ movement today?
2. Review your investigation of The Legacy Project Website and Gittings’s accomplishments in http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/gittings_b.html, document the actions of this current leader’s accomplishment and discuss his/her beliefs and values to change the LGBTQ lives today.
3. Nominate this activist to The Legacy Project website at http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Nominate_Someone.html