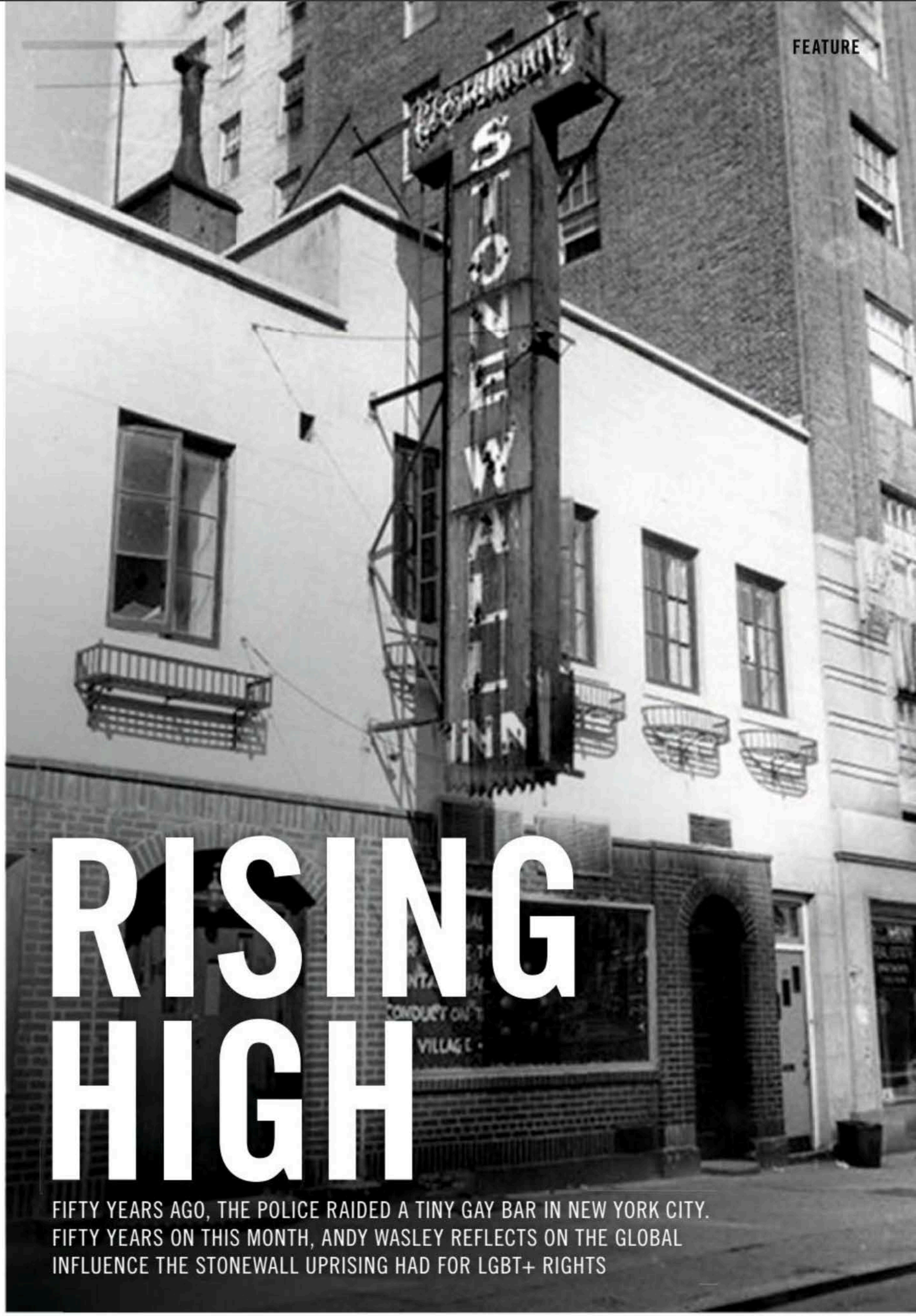

RISING HIGH

FIFTY YEARS AGO, THE POLICE RAIDED A TINY GAY BAR IN NEW YORK CITY. FIFTY YEARS ON THIS MONTH, ANDY WASLEY REFLECTS ON THE GLOBAL INFLUENCE THE STONEWALL UPRISING HAD FOR LGBT+ RIGHTS

On 28 June 1969 the New York Police Department launched a raid on a small gay bar in the city's West Village.

The Stonewall Inn was crowded with more than 200 customers, including members of the LGBT+ community's most marginalised minorities: trans people, street kids, butch lesbians, people of colour, drag queens and sex workers. This was their sanctuary – a refuge from society's unrelenting demand that they hide their identity. Speaking in 2016, one patron told the Washington Post, "It was the only place we could dance slow together. The Stonewall was sacred to me."

At 1.20am, eight police officers marched into the bar and called out: "Police! We're taking the place." Panic erupted; customers tried to escape, but the police had blocked the doors and windows. Amid the chaos a young man wailed: "I'll lose my job! What will happen to me? My family! Oh, no, no, no!"

Police raids on gay bars were common. But this evening, something was different. Many of the Stonewall Inn's customers had already been arrested or otherwise harassed by the police just because of who they were and whom they loved. They had had enough of society's stifling crusade against sexual and gender minorities, and strongly resisted arrest.

At some point four police officers attempted to manhandle one lesbian from the Inn into a patrol car. She fought them every step of the way, until an officer beat her over the head with his baton. She rounded on the crowd, by now 500-strong: "Why don't you guys do something!?"

They did. Over two nights, members of New York's LGBT+ community fought back; it took police riot teams to disperse them from Christopher Street.

David Carter's 2004 book Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution covers the story in meticulous and harrowing detail. Carter is in no doubt about Stonewall's importance. "It is to the gay movement what the fall of the Bastille is to the unleashing of the French Revolution," he writes.

The Stonewall Uprising (also known as the Stonewall Riots) shocked the authorities, galvanised LGBT+ campaigners and inspired the Pride movement. In the wake of the Uprising, Gay Liberation Front (GLF) groups were set up in New York, Boston and other US cities. One year after the Uprising, the first gay Pride march took place in New York. Gay rights campaigners became more visible, radical and uncompromising.

By 1971, a GLF group had been set up in London. It counted a young campaigner, newly arrived from Australia, among its founding members: Peter Tatchell. The veteran campaigner recalls the effect the Stonewall Uprising had on the early days of radical LGBT+ rights campaigns: "The sight of LGBT+ people fighting back against our persecutors dispelled forever the idea that straight society could walk all over us with impunity," he says.

"This was emotionally uplifting for millions of previously downtrodden and downcast queers. It helped banish our internalised shame, repairing much of the mental damage done to us by previously unchallenged homophobia, biphobia and transphobia."

Fifty years on, for many LGBT+ people in western countries, equality seems to be a given. Here in the UK we can marry and raise children, and we are protected from discrimination in all areas of life – from employment to medical care. But things are far from perfect.

In many countries LGBT+ people remain marginalised and face serious threats to their personal safety. Health outcomes and suicide rates are relatively poor for LGBT+ people even in countries that have embraced equality. Homophobia remains commonplace in public life and schools. And trans people still face an appalling struggle for acceptance. Despite huge advances, the campaign for equality is obviously far from over.

Ayla Holdom is the chair of the Trans Advisory Committee at Stonewall, the UK's largest LGBT+ rights charity (named in honour of the Uprising). She says the events of 1969 should remind us of the continuing need to strive for equality.

"The world is a better place: Section 28 has been abolished, we're teaching LGB relationships in schools and telling children it's not just 'accepted' - it's normal," she says. "You have to see that as progress. But we still see the underlying strain of people complaining that 'you're not like me, and therefore you might be a danger to me and others'. I think that's something we're always going to be fighting."

That fight dates back to Stonewall and beyond, but many LGBT+ people have little understanding of the Uprising and how it ignited a global campaign for equality.

"I fear that some of the older generation and many of the younger generation have little knowledge of Stonewall and the long and sometimes painful battles we've had to fight to overturn anti-LGBT+ prejudice and discrimination," says Tatchell.

Holdom agrees: one of the "younger generation", she acknowledges that history can yield lessons and inspiration – particularly for trans people. "None of us reads the history as much as we should," she says. "When I read about Stonewall, it was the first time I've been aware that a lot of the [police] targeting was against trans women. It was all about uncovering a 'fraud', and 'protecting' the rest of society from these 'forces of evil', these 'deviants'. It's horrific, and eventually the reaction to that is that people say, 'I've had enough - this is wrong'."

As the Uprising shows, trans people have been staunch allies of lesbian, gay and bisexual people throughout the last 50 years – but this fact seemed to have escaped many members of the UK's equality movement, which has often focussed almost wholly on lesbian and gay equality. Even Stonewall, the charity, steadfastly refused to campaign on trans equality in England and Wales, until Ruth Hunt took over as Chief Executive in 2014 and swiftly embraced trans issues.

"We haven't really used the phrase 'LGBT' until relatively recently," Holdom notes. "The trans community is relatively small, and up until very recently has struggled to coalesce." She believes the story of the Uprising should inspire solidarity among LGBT+ people – particularly on trans equality – while fights continue for equality.

"The history is there to be read, in terms of trans people's involvement in the Uprising," she adds. "I think, fundamentally, despite coming from different classes, races, genders and sexualities, LGBT+ people coalesced around a solidarity that came from being persecuted and misunderstood in the same way. That's absolutely relevant to today."

Pride in London agrees on Stonewall's continuing relevance and will be marking the 50th anniversary at this year's march and the events that surround it. Christopher Joell-Deshields, the organisation's Director of Community Engagement, says today's Pride movement owes "absolutely ▶

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PICTURE, RIGHT: CREATIVE COMMONS RHODODENDRITES

everything" to the Stonewall Uprising, and he wants to make sure people understand the role played by minorities within the LGBT+ community. "Trans and non-binary people of colour were at the forefront," he says. "Without them the Pride movement wouldn't be where it is today."

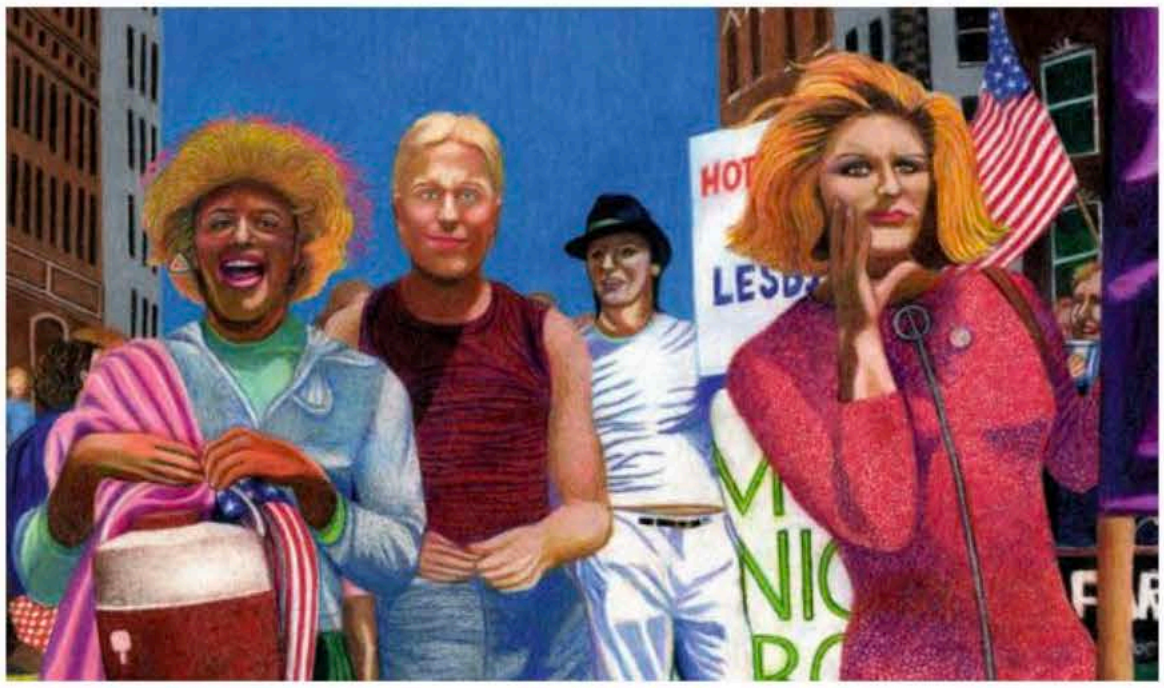
He adds: "The whole LGBT+ community needs to come together in this anniversary year to drive out hate both within the community and externally. This means actively challenging transphobia and other forms of discrimination wherever we see them, as well as doing all we can to lift these minorities up and celebrate them. Not everyone in our community experiences the great strides in equality that some of us enjoy today – we must keep speaking out, sparking conversations and making sure their voices are heard."

Tatchell agrees: he wants to see the LGBT+ rights movement return to its radical roots – those early, exuberant GLF campaigns for sexual freedom in the Uprising's immediate aftermath. "Fifty years on from Stonewall, the LGBT+ agenda has downsized considerably," he argues. "The biggest LGBT+ campaigns in recent years have been for marriage equality and parenting rights.

"The focus on the 'safe cuddly' issues – worthy though they are – suggests that LGBT+ people are increasingly reluctant to rock the boat. Many of us would, it appears, prefer to embrace traditional heterosexual aspirations rather than critique them and strive for a liberating alternative. In my view, this signals that the LGBT+ community has succumbed – like much of mainstream society – to the depressing politics of conformism, respectability and moderation. GLF showed that it doesn't have to be this way."

As for Holdom, inspired by Stonewall's story she reflects on what she would like to say to the men and women who fought back on those moonlit summer nights in 1969. "I'd thank them for what they did," she says. "I'd want to say: 'I'm sorry that you had to do that. We're not going to let what you went through, and the life you had to hide, be in vain. We're not going to put up with second-best.

"You struggled to get us to where we are today; we're not going to let your fight be forgotten or wasted." ●



ORIGINAL STONEWALLERS MARSHA P. JOHNSON, JOSEPH RATANSKI, AND SYLVIA RIVERA AT THE 1973 GAY PRIDE MARCH 1973. PICTURE CREDIT COPMMONS GARY GAULT

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