Senator Allan Spear and the Minnesota Human Rights Act

Joshua Preston

When Allan H. Spear retired in 2001 from the Minnesota Senate after 28 years in office, he began to write the story of his life—from his Indiana boyhood to a career in academics and politics that saw him emerge as a nationally celebrated gay rights icon. As much a statement of principles as a memoir, the manuscript was a testament to Spear’s belief in the incrementalist nature of public policy and how, for social movements in particular, progress can be frustrating, slow, and full of compromise—but forward-moving nonetheless. Spear was in the midst of writing when, following heart surgery, he died on October 11, 2008, at age 71.

Two years later, the University of Minnesota Press published Spear’s 410-page, incomplete manuscript, titled Crossing the Barriers: The Autobiography of Allan H. Spear. Unfortunately, Spear’s book ends in 1983, well before what he saw as his proudest legislative achievement, amending Minnesota’s Human Rights Act in 1993 to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, and public services based on actual or perceived sexual orientation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Minnesota became the eighth state to provide such protections for gays and lesbians and the first to extend the same rights to transgender individuals.

Passing a nondiscrimination bill did not come easily. First introduced in 1973, the bill failed eight times in 20 years before being signed into law. As Spear and his colleagues discovered over the course of their multi-decade campaign, it takes more than a passion for a cause to create change: it takes electoral politics and no small amount of grassroots organizing. What follows takes up where Crossing the Barriers ends, focusing on the lead-up to what was, until the 2013 legalization of same-sex marriage, the largest stride LGBT Minnesotans made to be accepted as full, equal members of society.

Allan Spear joined the University of Minnesota history faculty in 1964. Coming of age in the social turmoil of the 1960s, Spear believed in taking the best lessons from the classroom and applying them to the real world. He made no secret of his support for the civil rights and antiwar movements, writing extensively on both and actively supporting the presidential campaigns of senators Eugene McCarthy in 1968 and George McGovern in 1972. He ran for office himself: for state house in 1968, a race he lost, and for state senate in 1972, when for the first time, ...

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not only could 18-year-olds vote, but redistricting placed the east and west banks of the university campus into one senate district instead of two. Counting on student turnout to boost his final vote tally, Spear ran an unapologetically progressive campaign, and though he was still closeted at the time, promised his supporters that one of his top priorities would be to ban discrimination against gays and lesbians. In November, he won 53 percent of the vote, pulling an upset victory over a popular city council member, John Cairns.

Spear’s promise to amend the Human Rights Act to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and other areas for LGBT people was no small gesture, and for him and his supporters it must have seemed a political impossibility. In the early 1970s the gay rights movement was still in its infancy, and many people viewed homosexuality as a choice and perversion rather than a natural sexual orientation and identity. Because of this widespread attitude, laws banning discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and other characteristics did not extend to the LGBT community. If an employer or landlord opposed someone’s sexual orientation, that person could be harassed, fired, or denied service without legal recourse. Consequently, many gays and lesbians were inhibited from publicly coming out. When Spear entered the legislature in the 1973 session, he and Minneapolis gay rights activist Steve Endean (whom Spear first met while courting the support of the DFL Gay Caucus) knew they faced an uphill battle, one they thought would require at least a few years of lobbying.2

Yet of his own volition, Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Senate Majority Leader Nick Coleman sought to add nondiscrimination protections for those of a “homosexual orientation” to a bill that updated various aspects of the state human rights law, an act that “stunned” Spear and Endean. They watched as the senate passed with little fanfare a gay rights measure, making it the first legislative body in the country ever to do so. In the house, the state’s own Human Rights Department quietly lobbied against Coleman’s language, and consequently it was removed in the final version of the bill passed by both chambers. Spear later reflected that he was “ashamed” for watching the debate from the sidelines and not participating, but he “did not see how [he] could do so without coming out.”3

Spear did come out as a gay man a year later in an interview with the Minneapolis Star, encouraged by Endean and inspired by the example of the openly gay Massachusetts state
representative Elaine Noble. Just as important, though, he wanted to be in control of his coming out, worried that as more and more people knew he was gay, opponents might try to take advantage of this information. Spear’s announcement made national headlines, and though some of his senate colleagues were uneasy, others were supportive. Yet as cathartic as it was, Spear feared being labeled a single-issue “gay senator,” and so asked Coleman to serve as chief author when the nondiscrimination bill was reintroduced during the 1975 session. In spite of Spear and Endean’s behind-the-scenes support, the bill failed. Spear and Endean’s political pragmatism clashed with activists on the left, some of whom accused Spear of being a “sellout” and hypocrite for promoting a bill that excluded transgender individuals. Legislative support dissipated as activists disrupted committee hearings, held press conferences in the men’s bathroom, and threatened hunger strikes while chained to capitol railings. Curiously, in the house, Minneapolis Independent-Republican (IR) Rep. Arne Carlson took note of the “sell-out” charge and introduced an all-inclusive alternative. When Carlson’s bill failed on the house floor, Coleman retracted his own.4

Although he was a product of the 1960s counterculture, pragmatism guided Spear on gay rights. Progress came in increments, he reasoned, and success came only “by winning a place at the table, electing gay people to office, changing the laws, and gaining acceptance for gay rights as a legitimate civil rights movement.” This approach meant taking baby steps, winning rights for some groups first, then building upon those victories. Distancing himself from the left’s obsession with direct action, which he deemed to be “street theater,” Spear advocated for a more tempered approach, focused on long-term movement building. He had seen the success of this approach firsthand in 1974 when he and Endean cofounded the Minnesota Committee for Gay Rights (MCGR), which successfully lobbied the Minneapolis and St. Paul city councils to pass their own nondiscrimination ordinances.5

The nondiscrimination bill was reintroduced in 1977 with the support of the MCGR’s team of professional lobbyists, this time with Spear serving as its chief author. Framed as a “moderate measure” unrelated to broader issues like marriage equality and adoption rights, the bill had behind it the support of Governor Rudy Perpich and the League of Women Voters, even the Minnesota Council of Churches. Spear reassured colleagues that, contrary to what his opponents suggested, his bill was not an endorsement of homosexuality but “an affirmation of the premise
that all people have the right to education, housing, and employment that is based on their qualifications and not their private lives.”

Spear and Endean tried to work out of the media spotlight in order to, as Endean said, “keep the kooks [on both sides] away.” Still, they were met by an antigay movement that sought not only to obstruct gay rights but to turn back the few advances that had been made. The singer Anita Bryant was making national headlines with her “Save Our Children” campaign, which promoted a Christian fundamentalist agenda in Florida’s Miami-Dade County, centered on repealing that county’s nondiscrimination ordinance. This antigay fervor spread to Minnesota. Voters began receiving phone calls from pastors telling them to protest Spear’s bill, which became one of the most lobbied-against of that session, pushing away supporters and leading others to question whether discrimination was even a problem. Retracting his bill, Spear gave his “bitterest” speech, lambasting the “bigots” and Christians who, by not showing love for their neighbors, “distorted and cheapened the message of Christianity.” As for his colleagues who supported the bill in spirit but were silent, he reminded them that “[t]he bottom line in this job is having the courage to and having the guts to stand up for what you believe in.” Leaving the senate floor, Spear broke down into tears, feeling betrayed by both the state and his own colleagues.

The opposition Spear faced that year foreshadowed the rise of the religious right and its impact on the fledgling gay rights movement. Bryant’s campaign succeeded in Florida, and thereafter spread to Wichita, Kansas; Eugene, Oregon; and St. Paul. In each city public referendums in 1978 repealed nondiscrimination ordinances. In light of these defeats, Spear turned his attention to consumer protection and prison reform as chair of the Commerce Committee’s Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Economic Development and as a member of the Judiciary Committee. Heartbroken, Endean left Minnesota to join the Gay Rights National Lobby in Washington, DC, and later founded the Human Rights Campaign.

As the religious right became a dominant force in national politics, there were signs of hope for LGBT Minnesotans. In 1980, Minneapolis voters elected Karen Clark to the state house of representatives, the first open lesbian elected to office in Minnesota. Besides being an important progressive voice in the house, Clark brought to the movement a whole new energy. She possessed a talent for coalition-building that Spear did not, and had her own set of personal connections. For example, she convinced the MCGR to change its name to the more-inclusive Minnesota Committee for Gay and Lesbian Rights (MCGLR), fostering a political alliance between the two communities that saw themselves as separate and distinct.

In 1983, Spear and Clark were inspired by an unexpected victory in Wisconsin, which the year before had become the first state to protect the rights of gays and lesbians through legislative means. The Minnesota legislators reintroduced the gay rights bill under the banner of the Lobby ’83 campaign. Garnering the support of 25 organizations (including the Minnesota Public Interest Research Group and Minnesota Nurses Association), Lobby ’83 stressed that times were changing, and the state ought to follow the lead of Minnesota-based corporations Honeywell, General Mills, and the Pillsbury Company, each of which had enacted nondiscrimination policies. Opponents countered with warnings of hiring quotas, and groups like the Greater Minneapolis Association of Evangelicals framed the issue as one of “Homosexual Privilege.” Some heterosexual business owners wrote to Spear saying the bill actually helped them. One wrote that it would “make sure that I keep my eyes open, and that I disregard any unfounded prejudices that I may have when I hire a new employee.” Still, facing the highly organized opposition,
Spear and Clark knew the votes were not there and pulled back, lest a failed floor-vote “set a dangerous precedent which would be used to defeat the bill in the future.”

Activists encouraged Spear and Clark to try again in the next two legislative sessions, if only to “keep the issue of our rights in the public eye.” But during the 1980s it was not discrimination but the HIV/AIDS crisis that gripped the community, killing tens of thousands of gay men and invigorating opponents who saw the disease as a form of divine punishment. In Minnesota, organizations such as the MCGLR reduced their focus on gay civil rights. Newer groups, such as Gay and Lesbian Community Action Council (GLCAC) and Minnesota AIDS Project (MAP), focused more on health care and state support for AIDS victims than gay rights. As Spear noted later, for all of its tragedy, the AIDS crisis was “a unifying cultural focus” that “established homosexuality as a legitimate topic.”

As national public opinion shifted in favor of gay and lesbian nondiscrimination laws, state lawmakers remained uncertain that such discrimination even occurred. With critics writing off personal stories as anecdotal, Spear and Clark lobbied for a governor’s task force to document the problem. In theory, faced with a report outlining the daily struggles of thousands of Minnesotans, opponents—or even lukewarm supporters—could no longer hide behind the charge that gay rights was about special privileges or the endorsement of a lifestyle. In 1990, Governor Perpich appointed the Governor’s Task Force on Gay and Lesbian Minnesotans to travel the state and hold hearings with local officials, community leaders, and others. Working with no staff or budget and paying its costs out of pocket, the task force found cases of discrimination everywhere. Collecting testimonies of harassment and violence for its report, chairwoman Geraldine Sell years later acknowledged the abuse she and committee members faced through the process, “much of it based on deep religious principles, by persons who firmly believe that they are doing God’s will.” As the hate mail came in, she wished opponents could know the pain and terror that young men and women communicated to us, having been taught that homosexuality is evil and dooms one for all eternity, but that suicide does also. There was not a single person . . . who said to us, ‘I have chosen to be gay,’ but there were many who wrote to say they dared not come forward.

After more than 40 meetings and 10 months of work, in March 1991 the task force released its official report, recommending that gays and lesbians be included in the state’s Human Rights Act. Additionally, it recommended the state repeal its sodomy laws and fund training for those working in law enforcement, education, health care, and human services. At the press conference announcing their findings, Spear said the report “very clearly documents that this is a serious problem, that there is widespread discrimination, and that people outside of Minneapolis and St. Paul . . . are desperately in need of [legal protection against discrimination].” It was “urgent” the legislature act. What happened next divided the LGBT community, not unlike what occurred in 1975, when there was disagreement over which groups to include in the bill and how best to pass it.

A little more than two weeks after the report’s release, Clark, with Spear’s encouragement, reintroduced their bill in the house. Onlookers worried the pair was acting hastily, with the former chair of GLCAC, Julia Classen, arguing there was no groundwork done to rally statewide support for passage. Even with an endorsement from newly elected Governor Arne Carlson, the house Judiciary Committee shut the bill down, 13 to 11. Afterward, Clark echoed activists’ concerns, saying that her colleagues who voted against it did so because they felt their “districts need to be more enlightened on the issue before they can vote with us.”

When the dust settled, the vice chair of the governor’s task force, Leo Treadway, wrote a four-page letter to Spear expressing his disappointment—not just that the bill failed, but how quickly everything transpired. The fact that it was introduced that session, he said, hit him and others “like a bolt from the blue” when they knew successful passage would take at least two years of organizing. Though Treadway helped where he could, he and others felt “taken for granted” and then “used, patronized, and scolded” when voicing their concerns—such
as the bill’s exclusion of transgender individuals. In all, the experience made him reconsider whether to keep “viewing you and Karen as our wise leaders who always know best.”

But 1991 was not without victories. The previous summer, the St. Paul city council reinstated the nondiscrimination ordinance it had repealed in 1978. This action mobilized opposition some of the same groups that led the repeal campaign 12 years earlier. One was Citizens Alert for Morality, which quickly gathered the needed signatures for another public referendum. In light of reports from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force that found violence against the LGBT community increasing, Spear and others feared repeal would send “a message of approval to bashers and bigots that open season can continue on lesbians and gay men.” But a new generation of activists working together under the name Campaign 90s stepped forward to save the ordinance. Drawing on the momentum in St. Paul, GLCAC founded the grassroots campaign that proved instrumental in passing a statewide gay rights bill: It’s Time, Minnesota.

Focused on the upcoming elections, It’s Time sought to elect pro-gay legislators and build a coalition of support around Spear and Clark’s bill. At its peak, It’s Time listed more than 60 supporting groups and gained the endorsements of many religious organizations, even gaining support of the Minnesota Catholic Conference. In the 1992 elections, the DFL Party retained control of both houses. This event, combined with a supportive governor, meant the 1993 legislative session looked to be the best chance yet to pass a statewide nondiscrimination bill. Scott Dibble, an It’s Time organizer, said, “We knew it was our time; we were galvanized; we could just taste it.” Though the bill had already been introduced seven times, by 1993 the political landscape had changed. U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone (D) made his phone bank lists available to the campaign, and, as Dibble recalled, hundreds of volunteers called blindly with no idea whether the person on the other end was conservative or liberal. Volunteer callers openly used the words “gay” and “lesbian.” Dibble recalled many “had never heard those words spoken out loud, much less [from] someone on the phone calling them up and saying, ‘We would really like you to call your state legislators.’”

With It’s Time focused on lobbying, it was time for the gay community to come together and decide how the 1993 bill would be different from its predecessors. Beyond banning discrimination in housing, employment, and education, the list expanded to include public accommodations, public service, and access to credit. (Exemptions were later written into the bill, for religious organizations and others.) Most importantly, the 1993 bill expanded protections not only to gays and lesbians, but also to transgender individuals. Clark fully supported this inclusion, but Spear was initially cautious. Spear still believed, as he did in the 1970s, that if protections were extended first to gays and lesbians it would be easier to later reopen the issue and add protections for others. It was revolution by piecemeal, yes, but to reach for too much at once, he thought, doomed the bill’s chance for passage. What Spear did not yet understand was that while such calculations made sense decades earlier, the window had widened—and, as Treadway hinted, in order to have the full support of the community, the bill needed to support the entire LGBT community.

To find the right language for the bill, Clark and members of the LGBT community held meetings where attendees worked side by side to draft “what was a totally inclusive law, which we all embraced, and [which] didn’t have the words ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.’” Instead, “It talked about ‘sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation.’ Both.” This vagueness was purposeful, Clark noted. “The words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ were still hard for a lot of legislators to say in those days.” By covering everyone, the bill’s language steered the debate from any
one group. Indeed, the subject of transgender individuals came up only “minimally” during the public debate. Spear went through a learning process, but when he finally understood, Clark said, “he became one of the strongest supporters of the inclusionary language.”

In the 20 years since his election, Spear had proven himself to be more than just a “gay senator.” Praised by colleagues of both parties for his fairness and sharp mind—he was the first non-lawyer to chair the senate’s Judiciary Committee—Spear achieved a milestone when, in January 1993, he was elected president of the senate. Coinciding with growing momentum for a gay rights bill, Spear’s election to the leadership post was a fitting reminder how far both he and the LGBT movement had come. That session, for the eighth (and, as it turned out, final) time, Spear introduced a bill amending the state Human Rights Act (SF 444), while Clark did the same in the house (HF 585). As both bills moved forward, It’s Time increased its efforts, mailing legislators newspaper clippings, talking points, and scripts to use when answering constituent mail. The group also hosted lobby days where supporters from around the state traveled to the capitol to share their personal stories. Public opinion was shifting, organizers knew, and by taking these many actions, It’s Time demonstrated that rather than being an outside movement they represented people from all around the state.

On the right, It’s Time was matched by Traditional Values of Minnesota and the Minnesota Family Council, who, some speculated, hoped to use the issue as a way to rally the IR Party’s religious base for 1994. Opponents’ arguments against the bill had not changed, and with the push and pull from both sides, many legislators worried about their reelection. It was so intense, Clark recalled, that sympathetic but politically vulnerable colleagues came to her office in tears begging for forgiveness and her permission to vote no. “Those were hard conversations,” she said later, but she refused to give her permission.

On March 1, 1993, the bill overcame its easiest hurdle when the senate Judiciary Committee passed it on a bipartisan 9-to-1 vote. The house was expected to be tougher than the senate, so when Clark’s bill came before the house Judiciary Committee on March 5, 300 activists from both sides filled the room and halls. In one moving testimony, Nancy Biele, violence prevention planner of the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, reaffirmed the need for the protections. Not only was discrimination occurring, but because victims feared the consequences of
reporting it this created an environment where “no one is held accountable” for their violence and abuse. Biele then shared the stories of several victims, including a lesbian who was stalked and raped by a male colleague but chose not to report it since it could lead to her sexual orientation being revealed, and then possibly being fired from her job. Watching the testimonies from within the crowd, It’s Time co-chair Alexa Bradley was proud that finally gays and lesbians were “not alone in calling for our basic civil rights and the recognition of our human dignity.” When the vote came, the bill passed once again on party lines, 16 to 6.

Two weeks later, on March 18, SF 444 was taken up by the full senate. As the debate went back and forth, it was eventually time for President of the Senate Spear to make his remarks. Stating as he had many times before that the bill said nothing of “special privileges,” he reminded his peers that “human rights laws merely recognize that in an imperfect society some groups have faced discrimination and some categories have been the basis for unfair discrimination.” Spear repeated the findings of the task force—that this discrimination was real and ruining lives—then began to speak personally:

Finally, I’d like to say something on the personal side about this bill and this is not something that comes easily for me—I think those of you who have known me for a while know that I don’t talk a lot about my personal life, but I refuse to let other people question the validity of my own life experiences. I’ve been told by many people that oppose this bill that sexual orientation should not be included in the human rights law because it is a choice, and if they make a choice, they can change that choice. Well, let me tell you, I’m a fifty-five-year-old gay man and I’m not just going through a phase!

In response, IR Sen. Linda Runbeck chastised Spear and her colleagues for “being obedient to the school of political correctness” and “too lacking in boldness to say something is wrong here.” If the bill passed, she insisted, the state would head toward “revolutionary and irreversible social change” and the “trashing of religious beliefs about matters of sexuality, relationships and families.” DFL Sen. Florian Chmielewski was only slightly less dramatic in his remarks, saying it was wrong to extend rights to those whose behavior was “an insult to any decency.”

The biggest surprise in the debate was a last-minute speech by IR Senate Minority Leader Dean Johnson, a Lutheran pastor from western Minnesota, who announced he would vote yes. Though claiming not to understand the “gay lifestyle,” as he listened to arguments against the bill, he said he realized that they were the same ones used against Lincoln and Humphrey when they stood up for civil rights. It would be easy for him to vote no, he said, but “we were elected to lead, to do what is right and to do what is just, and to seek justice.” Just as important to his conversion, he added, was a colleague in the National Guard whose career as a mental health counselor was at risk because of her sexual orientation, which he saw as irrelevant to her abilities. When the vote came shortly after Johnson’s speech, SF 444 passed 37 to 30, with five IRs voting in favor and thirteen DFLers opposed.

Johnson later told the media he had no regrets, saying he had “chosen to avoid this fight for a long time” but “couldn’t avoid it anymore.” Witnessing firsthand the animosity directed toward gays and lesbians, he said he was “disgusted” with his party’s evolving agenda, adding “The IR Party of today is not the IR Party I joined. . . . I’ve been a quiet dissident for years.” The Kandiyohi County IR Party censured Johnson because of his stand, even as he claimed receiving 10 times as many letters of support than opposition. Using a popular talking point, he emphasized to his critics that his “was a vote to end discrimination” and “not an endorsement of a lifestyle.”

The same day SF 444 was debated in the senate, HF 585 was debated in the house. With the diligent lobbying
of It’s Time, Clark rallied support of undecided IR representatives, including future governor Tim Pawlenty. The bill passed 78 to 55. When the chamber emptied, Spear was there to greet Clark, joking, “Would anyone question our sexual orientation if we hugged?” Joining them was Spear’s old friend and colleague Steve Endean, returning home to witness the end of a campaign he helped start 20 years earlier. Though there were small differences between the house and senate bills to be sorted out in conference committee, the heavy lifting was done. Two weeks later, on April 2, 1993, with no fanfare or ceremony, Governor Carlson signed the bill, saying it was merely “the right thing to do.”

It had taken 20 years, but finally, it was done. On April 2, 1993, Minnesota became the eighth state to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation, and the first to extend those same protections to transgender individuals.

When reporters asked Spear in the days following passage what made 1993 different from the decades leading up to it, he cited several key factors. Foremost was “changes in public opinion that registered with legislators,” such as the failure of the 1991 St. Paul referendum and the passage of similar laws in other states. But as he and Clark learned firsthand, change required more than just the right timing. Momentum had to be harnessed and channeled to affect policy. Therefore, much was owed to the work of It’s Time, Minnesota, which he called “the best organized effort that we’ve ever had” since it rallied “a far broader base of support than had ever existed before, including a lot of mainstream labor, religious and business organizations.”

Even as national groups like Endean’s Human Rights Campaign looked to Minnesota as a case study for other states, unbeknownst to many activists, the window for gay rights legislation was closing. With the right organizing around Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” for the 1994 elections, the IR Party (and Republican Party nationally) became more conservative, alienating its moderate members. In Minnesota, Governor Carlson was booed off the stage in several cities including Forest Lake, his hometown. “I was disappointed when nobody came to my rescue,” Carlson recalled. “When Hubert Humphrey went to the national convention in 1948 and made his famous civil rights speech, the Democrats hailed that. He came home a hero. My party strung me up, threw me out, and nobody came to my rescue.” At the IR Party state convention, activists stood and turned their backs to the governor, endorsing instead the conservative former state representative Allen Quist. Although Carlson defeated Quist in his party’s primary, the conservative faction’s influence was evident when Carlson replaced on his ticket his pro-gay rights lieutenant governor, Joanell Dyrstad, with IR Rep. Joanne Benson, who voted against the 1993 Human Rights Act.

In November, Carlson won handily as part of a conservative national wave, later called the Republican Revolution. With Republicans winning across the country and taking control of the U.S. House of Representatives, there was little doubt what this meant for gay rights. “Disturbed” as he watched the swearing-in ceremonies taking place in Washington, DC, Spear faced the “sad reality” that the gay community now had “daunting challenges in the years ahead.” In Minnesota, even though the DFL retained control of the legislature and the state had a governor sympathetic to gay rights, there was no hope for anything
They know whereof they legislate

A gay-rights bill was passed Thursday by the Minnesota Senate and now only needs Gov. Arne Carlson's signature to become law. Carlson has said he will sign it.

The bill would add "sexual orientation" to the state Human Rights Act, protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination in housing, employment, education, public accommodations and other areas.

It contains exceptions for religious organizations and for the rental of owner-occupied duplexes.

The two chief sponsors of the bill are Sen. Karen Clark, DFL-St. Paul, and Sen. Allan Spear, DFL-Minneapolis, who are being backed by gay and lesbian members of the Legislature.

In interviews this week with Star Tribune reporter Donna Habersetzer, they talked about the strengths of the legislation.

Sen. Allan Spear, DFL-Minneapolis

A 34-year-old, Harvard-educated lawyer with a master's degree in public administration, Spear is the Senate's lone openly gay member.

Q. Where did you come out, and what prompted you to do it?

A. I came out in December of 1984. I gave an interview to Outspoken Horizons in which I talked about my homosexuality and was asked what prompted me to come out. I said it was my desire to be more real about who I was.

Q. What was the reaction of your family and friends?

A. Some of them were surprised, but generally supportive.

Q. What's the impact of your new power in what some people have labeled the gay movement?

A. I presume that those who are interested in what I do will have been asked to be the movement's spokesman or to be more active in it.

Rep. Karen Clark, DFL-Minneapolis

A 31-year-old, lawyer and former law school classmate of Spear, Clark has headed the gay rights effort in the House.

Q. When did you come out, and why?

A. I came out in 1984 and was a full-time student at the University of Minnesota Law School. I didn't want to be locked into a life of secrets.

Q. What was the reaction of your family and friends?

A. They were all supportive.

Q. How do you see your position in the gay movement?

A. I don't see myself as the movement's leader, but rather as a member of the movement who is working to promote the rights of gay and lesbian people.

Carlson signs gay-rights bill into law

Gov. Arne Carlson signed into law Friday a bill that makes it illegal to discriminate against gays and lesbians in employment, housing and other areas.

The law, which will take effect Aug. 1, adds to the state Human Rights Act a provision against discrimination based on sexual orientation. The act already prohibits discrimination based on race, sex, age, disability and other factors.

Minnesota follows seven other states and the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in extending civil rights to gays and lesbians.

The Independent-Republican governor signed the bill without fanfare yesterday after delivering a one-sentence statement to the news media afterward.

He said he intended to sign the bill "because I want to make it illegal to discriminate against people who are gay or lesbian.

"I believe in equal rights for everyone."

His supporters for gay rights have rallied conservative members of the party and would have him if he seeks re-election in 1990.

The state is 8th to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation

Since the passage of the Civil Rights acts of 1964, the state of Minnesota has enacted laws prohibiting discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations. The law was signed into law by Gov. Arne Carlson.

Sen. Allan Spear, DFL-Minneapolis

Q. What was the reaction of your family and friends to the new law?

A. They were all supportive.

Q. How do you see your position in the gay movement?

A. I don't see myself as the movement's leader, but rather as a member of the movement who is working to promote the rights of gay and lesbian people.

Although proponents said the bill would simply extend basic civil rights to gays and lesbians, opponents argued that it would allow the teaching of homosexuality in schools and the recognition of same-sex marriages or alternative sexual identities.

Opponents also criticized the bill because it would allow gay and lesbian couples to be discriminated against in employment, housing, and other areas. They argue that such practices are unfair and violate civil rights.

The bill became law after it was passed by both houses of the state legislature and signed by the governor.

The bill provides that discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations is prohibited on the basis of sexual orientation. It also provides for a commission to study the issue and make recommendations.

The bill was supported by a wide range of individuals and organizations, including civil rights groups, churches, labor unions, and businesses.

Sen. Beryl West, DFL-Minneapolis

Q. What is your position on the new law?

A. I strongly support the new law. It is long overdue and will help to ensure that all Minnesotans are treated equally under the law.

Q. How do you think the new law will affect the state?

A. I believe the new law will have a positive impact on the state. It will help to ensure that all Minnesotans are treated equally and will help to promote understanding and acceptance of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Q. Do you think the new law will be effective?

A. I believe the new law will be effective. It will help to ensure that discrimination is not tolerated in the state and will help to promote a more inclusive and accepting society.
on the scale of the 1993 Human Rights Act. In fact, when President Bill Clinton later signed the Defense of Marriage Act (1996), Minnesota passed its own version, legally defining marriage as between one man and one woman. But for a new generation of activists coming out of It’s Time, Minnesota and the GLCAC (later OutFront Minnesota)—including Scott Dibble, who succeeded Spear in the senate—there was a lesson in the 20-year campaign for gay rights: it may take awhile, but electoral politics coupled with grassroots organizing works.28

When Spear retired in 2001, the movement for gay rights was on the defensive. In the years between his retirement and death in 2008, the movement had few landmark victories to point to. The movement was, however, on the verge of a tipping point. In 2012, voters rejected a ballot measure to constitutionally ban same-sex marriage, the next year legalized it, and thereafter strengthened anti-bullying laws. Though Spear did not live to see these achievements, they were a direct extension of his historic role in the 20-year road to the 1993 Human Rights Act. Because of this achievement, in 2007 the Minnesota Historical Society recognized Spear as one of the 150 people who shaped the state, the only state legislator so honored.29

Notes

1. Because Spear’s autobiography is unfinished, a short afterword was included by the historian and former state senator John Milton, who was given the unenviable task of condensing the last 20 years of Spear’s life into 25 pages, with only nine dedicated to the 1993 Human Rights Act. “Proudest legislative achievement” from Karen L. Boothe, “Minnesota’s Spear Calls It A Day,” The Advocate, July 4, 2000, 16.


5. Spear, Crossing the Barriers, 281–98.

6. Spear, Crossing the Barriers, 337.


Several religious organizations and leaders wrote to Spear endorsing the bill, including the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ and the Urban Affairs Commission of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis.


27. Arne Carlson in discussion with the author, June 5, 2014.

28. Allan Spear to supporters from the LGBT community, Jan. 6, 1995, Box 9, Spear Legislative Records; Scott Dibble, “Speech at Allan Spear’s Retirement Reception,” June 6, 2000, Box 1, Allan Spear Papers; Scott Dibble in discussion with the author, May 31, 2014.


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