

The Black Nite Brawl of 1961

### **A Request to Recognize Wisconsin's First LGBTQ Uprising**

The Stonewall uprising in New York City in June 1969 was undeniably the start of a national LGBTQ awareness. But even before that event, gay people in cities around the country were beginning to push back against homophobic attitudes. Perhaps one of the most notable, but most underrated, is the Black Nite bar brawl in Milwaukee, Wisconsin-- the first "gay rights" state.

**We seek to celebrate the revolutionary spirit of our brave elders -- who on August 5, 1961, ignited the first LGBTQ uprising in Wisconsin history, and one of the first LGBTQ resistance events in U.S. history. Over time, this event was hidden by history and remembered only by a small and ever-shrinking group of elderly survivors. We refuse to let this important local history be forgotten.**

### **The Story**

On a hot and foggy August night, four sailors went to a Milwaukee gay bar on a dare. After starting a fight with the bouncer, they were chased off by a bar patron in a bath robe wielding beer bottles in each hand. Embarrassed to be beaten up by a homosexual, they vowed to come back and "clean up" the bar and "teach those sick faggots a lesson." And, later that night, they did come back.

But these sailors didn't know who they were dealing with.

Josie Carter, a gender non-conforming black "queen," had already given their friend a concussion. They had threatened her, her boyfriend, and her bar, before she'd even had time to finish putting on her make-up for the night. As Saturday night customers rolled in, she wound up the Black Nite crowd with the story, encouraging them to stay and defend the bar if the sailors came back. Owner Wally Whetham wanted to lock up the bar and send everyone home, but people were sick and tired of running.

Only a year before, a police raid in Juneau Park resulted in Elroy Schulz, a gay brewery worker, being beaten to death. Gay men were hassled with sting operations everywhere they went. They were disowned, demoralized and disrespected at every turn. And now, violence was on the doorstep.

"We do not run from a fight," Josie told the crowd. "We do not run from anything."

On August 5, 1961, Milwaukee learned how true this was. When the sailors returned, they weren't just fighting Josie and the bouncer anymore. They were fighting an army of angry queens, lesbians and gay men who had reached their breaking point, with nothing left to lose.

**The Black Nite Brawl at 400 N. Plankinton was the first LGBTQ uprising in Wisconsin history.** Six years before Stonewall, five years before Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco, and four years before the Dewey's protests in Philadelphia, our elders took an early stand against homophobia and fought back.

Local news coverage sought to scandalize the event. Instead, the news stories changed the course of history. For the first time, Milwaukee knew that gay people existed here, in large enough numbers to have their own spaces, and that they would fight back if provoked. For the first time, isolated LGBTQ people learned that they were not alone in the world, but that they had a local community. For the first

time, Milwaukee's LGBTQ people felt pride after a lifetime of shame, guilt, rejection and scorn.

The sailors were cleared of all charges. The bar was ordered to close. Within a few years, the entire block – containing the city's earliest known gay bars -- was deliberately demolished. But a seed had been planted within the community's earliest gay rights activists, and by 1962, the Milwaukee Journal was reporting that "the homosexual has gotten bolder." By 1969, over three dozen gay bars had opened in Milwaukee, which allowed men to dance together – something forbidden throughout the Midwest.

To her death in 2014, Josie humbly downplayed the event as just another wild night out. She refused to accept the title of "Mother of Gay Milwaukee," even as a whole new generation of transgender youth "adopted" her as a trancestor. Until our researchers connected the dots between oral interviews, newspaper clippings, testimonials and timelines, the historical significance of the event was unknown.

We seek to unhide this history and make this historical event well-known to all Milwaukeeans. We seek to connect Milwaukeeans with their long, rich and proud LGBTQ heritage, as well as our amazingly progressive history. In a second year without a PrideFest, we cannot allow the 60th anniversary of LGBTQ pride to "go dark." We owe it to these warriors -- and, especially, to the "Mother of Gay Milwaukee" -- to keep their stories and spirit alive, and to give them the proper respect they were denied while they were alive. The Black Nite Brawl is another reminder that LGBTQ history did not start at Stonewall – the fuse was lit long before June 1969 in cities all over America, in bars like the Black Nite, by pioneers like Josie Carter.

**Today, nothing stands at 400 N. Plankinton Avenue at all.** There is absolutely nothing here to tell people that Milwaukee pride was born here. We seek a historical marker at the corner of Plankinton and St. Paul to commemorate Josie's heroic confidence, bravery, and leadership – at a time before equality, at a time before liberation, at a time before hope. It would be the city's first historical marker honoring a LGBTQ person. It would also provide inspiration and hope for LGBTQ people facing adversity and abuse today, especially trans and gender non-conforming women of color, who face critical, extinction-level challenges in their everyday lives in our city.

The whole wide world celebrated Stonewall 50 in 2019. Let's make sure the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Black Nite Brawl is not lost to history.

### **About the organization**

The [Wisconsin LGBTQ History Project](#) is an independent, self-funded, all-volunteer organization founded in 1995. Over the past 25 years, the project has become the state's largest digital collection of LGBTQ historical content. We are currently fundraising to cover costs of these commemorative events.

**For more about the Black Nite Brawl, visit [OnMilwaukee](#) and [NPR](#).**