

How Did the Rainbow Flag Become an LGBT Symbol?

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Gilbert Baker, who designed the first rainbow flag in 1978, marches in the Stockholm Pride Parade in 2003. Photo from AP

It's not uncommon to see rainbow flags flying outside of homes and bars, pinned to shirts and on the back of bumpers. They represent pride within the LGBT community, celebrating the love of all people of all sexualities.

The term LGBT refers to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Often, members of the LGBT community have been met with discrimination and violence. In response, the 1960s saw the rise of social movements for LGBT rights. Part of their work was to come up with symbols that could rally the community to a common cause. This was also a way for the community to take control of its image, instead of being described through prejudice. The rainbow flag is one of the most well-known and currently used symbols.

Gilbert Baker's vision

Who created the flag, and why did it become a symbol of the LGBT community?

The now-famous flag was created in 1978 by artist, Vietnam War veteran and then-drag performer Gilbert Baker. He was commissioned to create a flag by another gay icon, politician Harvey Milk. Milk was the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in California. He asked Baker to create a flag that would adorn San Francisco's annual pride parade.

The idea of a flag had already occurred to Baker two years earlier. He found it important to celebrate the gay and lesbian community using a common symbol. As Baker told the Museum of Modern Art during a 2015 interview, he had been inspired by the celebrations marking America's 200-year anniversary of its independence in 1976. The constant display of stars and stripes made him realize the cultural need for a similar rallying sign for the gay community.

At the time, Baker was a struggling drag performer. Drag is a performance style in which men traditionally dress as women. He was used to making his own costumes and clothes, so he was well-equipped to sew the new flag.

Differences are celebrated

The most commonly used image for the growing gay rights movement was the pink triangle. This triangle was a symbol the Nazis forced gay people to wear in Germany in the 1930s and '40s to identify them and punish them, but gay activists in the U.S. later redefined it as a symbol of gay pride. For Baker, however, the pink triangle had too dark and painful a history, so he chose a rainbow as his inspiration.

The different colors of the flag were meant to represent togetherness. A rainbow is made up of many different colors that together make something natural and beautiful. The LGBT community, likewise, is made up of people of all races, ages and genders. Thus, the flag celebrates people's differences and their togetherness at the same time.

The original flag featured eight colors, each with a different meaning. At the top was hot pink, which represented sexuality (the choice to love who you want), followed by red for life and orange for healing. Next came yellow for sunlight, green for nature, turquoise to represent art, indigo for harmony and violet for spirit.

The big reveal

With the help of close to 30 volunteers working in the attic of the Gay Community Center in San Francisco, Baker made the first version of the rainbow flag. The flag was showcased at San Francisco's Gay Freedom Day Parade on June 25, 1978.

After the design was unveiled, participants of the parade proudly waved the new symbol in support. Later, because fabrics with pink and turquoise colors were expensive and not easy to come by, a six-color flag was made, which is the one often seen today, with blue replacing turquoise.



After the assassination of Harvey Milk on November 27, 1978, demand for the rainbow banner increased. Popularity spiked again a decade later when a man in Los Angeles sued his landlord over the right to hang his flag outside his home.

Recognized around the world

In the years since, the rainbow flag has only grown in popularity and is now seen around the globe as a positive representation of the LGBT community. In 1994, a mile-long version of the flag was created to celebrate the 25th anniversaries of two landmark events: the Stonewall Riots, an important moment in the gay rights movement, and Baker's creation of the flag. The Stonewall Riots were demonstrations in New York in 1969 against police who were arresting gay people for being gay.

Baker died in 2017, at the age of 65. It had been two years since the legalization of same-sex marriage throughout the U.S. His legacy lives on in the six-colored flag that flies proudly every Gay Pride Month, recognizing the lives, and loves, of LGBT people worldwide.