

Alexandria Times

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The legacy of French Quarter Café

On Oct. 23, 1991, Murray Greenberg, owner of the French Quarter Café, a gay bar located at 808 King St., and two other plaintiffs won a suit against the Commonwealth of Virginia. U.S. District Judge Albert V. Bryan Jr. ruled that three sections of a 1934 Virginia law regarding the sale of alcohol and homosexuals were null and void.

The Virginia Attorney General's Office did not advocate for the liquor law's constitutionality during the suit. The court's ruling ended a longer fight by gay rights groups to end legal discrimination in Virginia's alcoholic beverage control laws. Greenberg also won a libel suit filed against him by retired Army Col. William M. Glasgow, who agreed to donate \$2,500 to the Whitman-Walker Clinic as compensation for Greenberg's legal fees. Bryan's ruling not only allowed openly LGBTQ+ bars to operate, it empowered gay rights advocates to push for other rights.

According to the Oct. 25, 1991 edition of the Washington Blade, the 1934 law decreed: "Bars or restaurants could not serve drinks to Gays, that Gays could not enter bars or other establishments licensed to serve drinks, and that Gays could not be hired as employees at such establishments."

Although ABC officers



PHOTO/42 NORTH VIA PEXELS

The legacy of French Quarter Cafe is significant in the fight for equal rights for LGBTQ+ people in Virginia.

rarely enforced this particular law in the 10 years before Greenberg and his co-plaintiffs filed suit, it put establishments like the French Quarter Café at the mercy of individual officers of Virginia's ABC Board.

Glasgow's complaints to the ABC Board about the French Quarter Café prompted officers of the liquor control board to visit the establishment. While the officials did not threaten to remove the French Quarter Café's liquor license, Greenberg decided that his problem was the 1934 law, not the liquor board officials or anti-gay

rights residents like Glasgow.

Virginians for Justice, a gay rights advocacy group now known as Equality Virginia, tried to get the state legislature to repeal the law for more than a year before the lawsuit.

According to the October 1991 edition of the Our Own Community Press newsletter, Virginians for Justice spokesperson Pat Heck claimed, "Many legislators agree that the laws are anachronistic but are hesitant to support gay positive legislation."

When Virginians for Justice found frustration in the legis-

lature, it organized the lawsuit with Greenberg, the College of William & Mary Gay and Lesbian Alumni group and Dale Barnhard, a lesbian activist, who had been asked to stop dancing with a woman at G.W. Restaurant and Bar, as the plaintiffs.

After Bryan's ruling, Greenberg declared Oct. 26, 1991, to be "Victory in Virginia Day," inviting the local LGBTQ+ community to the French Quarter Café to celebrate.

In an interview published in the November 1991 edition of Our Own Community Press, Virginians for Justice Chair Shirley Lesser argued the plaintiff's victory meant: "The Commonwealth of Virginia can no longer assume that gays and lesbians are unable to organize to protect themselves from bad laws whether they are on the books or under consideration."

The French Quarter Café closed in 1994, but its legacy in the fight for equality endures today.

Historic Alexandria celebrates Pride Month in June. For more information on Pride events and LGBTQ+ history in Alexandria, please visit alexandriava.gov/LGBTQ.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.