

CHARLES SILVERSTEIN

b. April 23, 1935

d. January 30, 2023

PSYCHOLOGIST & LGBT ACTIVIST

His testimony helped prompt the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness.

“We wanted to eliminate homosexuality as a mental disorder, period.”

Charles Silverstein was an American psychologist, writer, and gay rights activist. His testimony played a consequential role in persuading the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to declassify homosexuality as a mental illness.

Silverstein was born to a Jewish family in Brooklyn, New York. As a teenager, he recognized he was gay. Wishing he could be “cured,” he struggled with low self-esteem and feelings of shame.

Silverstein attended State University of New York at New Paltz. He taught elementary school for six years before deciding to become a psychologist. He earned his doctorate in social psychology from Rutgers University.

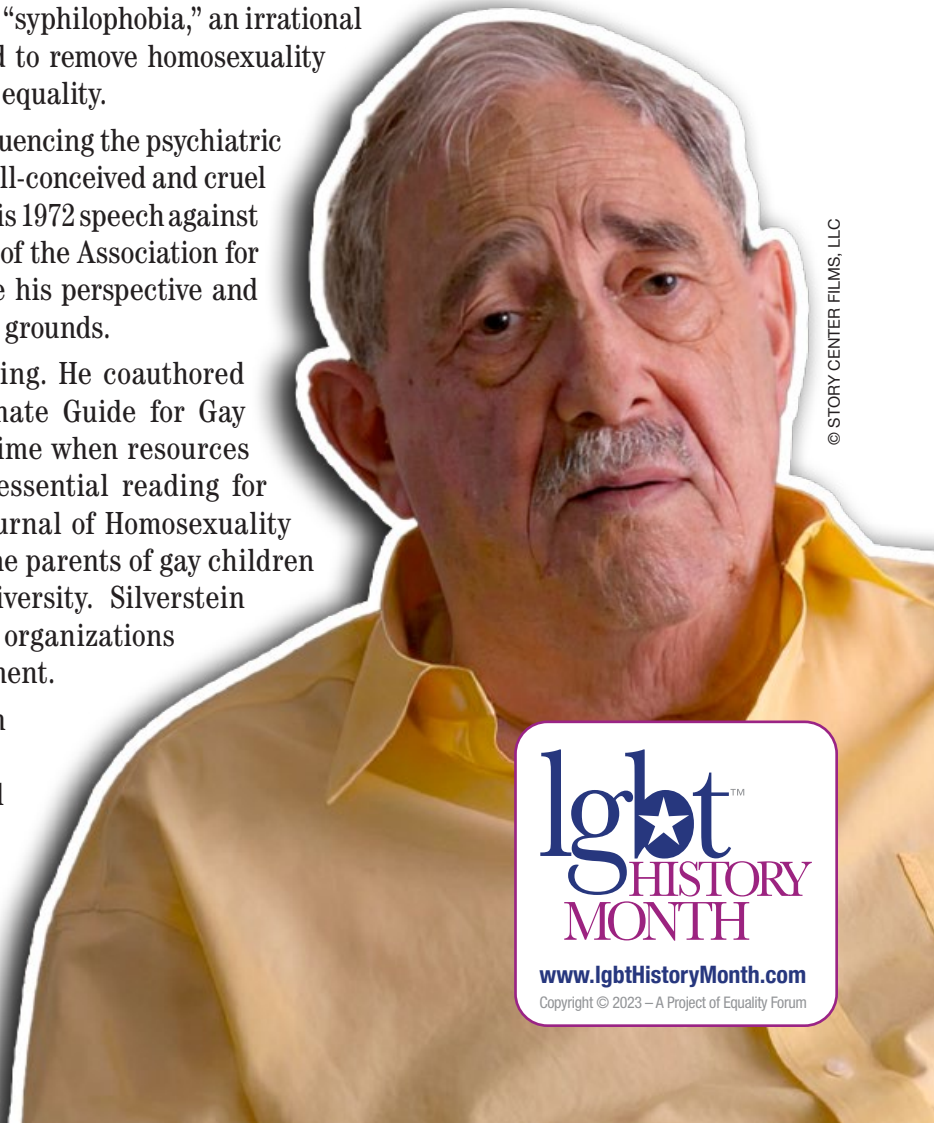
In his early 30s, after his first gay sexual experience, Silverstein emerged from the closet to become a passionate gay rights activist. He joined the pioneering Gay Activists Alliance in 1972 and began challenging the psychiatric profession over the classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). In February 1973, while still a doctoral student, Silverstein spoke as one of several presenters to an APA panel who was reviewing the matter. Using humor to sway his audience, Silverstein satirized the organization’s previous absurd diagnoses, such as “syphilophobia,” an irrational fear of syphilis. Ten months later, the APA voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM. It marked a watershed for LGBTQ equality.

Silverstein’s activism also played a key role in influencing the psychiatric establishment’s views on conversion therapy, the ill-conceived and cruel attempt to change someone’s sexual orientation. His 1972 speech against the practice persuaded Gerry Davison, president of the Association for Advancement of Behavioral Therapies, to change his perspective and begin speaking out against the practice on moral grounds.

Silverstein’s activism also extended to publishing. He coauthored the 1977 book “The Joy of Gay Sex: An Intimate Guide for Gay Men to the Pleasures of a Gay Lifestyle.” At a time when resources on the topic were limited, the book became essential reading for countless men. Silverstein also founded the Journal of Homosexuality and authored guides for psychotherapists and the parents of gay children to help facilitate understanding of sexual diversity. Silverstein also founded two LGBTQ-affirming health care organizations dedicated to providing unbiased medical treatment.

Silverstein received an achievement award from GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBT Equality. He became an American Psychological Association Fellow in 1987 and received The Gold Medal for Lifetime Achievement from the Association in 2011.

Silverstein died at age 87. He is survived by his adopted son.



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