

JOHN D'EMILIO

b. September 21, 1948

LGBTQ HISTORIAN

He is a preeminent author, professor, and pioneering LGBTQ+ historian.

“Movements aren’t magical, they evolve, and they grow under different circumstances.”

John D’Emilio is an author, a professor, and a pioneering LGBTQ+ historian.

Born in the Bronx, New York, D’Emilio was raised in a working-class Italian family. He attended an elite Catholic boys’ school in Manhattan on a scholarship and struggled with his sexuality, he said, “when it was impossible to be gay.”

D’Emilio developed an interest in history during the 1960s antiwar movement and pursued the subject at Columbia University. He focused on the history of gay activism and graduated cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa. He earned his Ph.D. in 1982.

Based on his groundbreaking doctoral dissertation, D’Emilio’s first book, “Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970,” was published the year after he graduated. He met his life partner, Jim Oleson, around the same time and began teaching LGBTQ+ history at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, where he remained for over a decade. In the 1980s, during the early years of the AIDS epidemic and in a period of widespread homophobia, D’Emilio was among the first educators to study and teach the subject.

In 1995, D’Emilio became the founding director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s Policy Institute. He returned to academia in 1997 as a professor of history and women’s and gender studies at the University of Illinois Chicago.

D’Emilio has authored numerous books, including a memoir, “Memories of a Gay Catholic Boyhood.” In 1988, he collaborated with Stanford history professor Estelle Freedman on the best seller, “Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America.” Notably, in 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court cited the book in its decision on *Lawrence v. Texas*, the landmark case striking down state sodomy laws nationwide. That same year, D’Emilio published the biography “Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin,” which earned a National Book Award nomination and won the Stonewall Book Award and Randy Shilts Award.

Among additional honors, D’Emilio has received fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He won the David R. Kessler Award for LGBTQ Studies from CLAGS at City University of New York in 1999; he was inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame in 2005; and he received the Bill Whitehead Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2013.

Oleson, D’Emilio’s partner of more than 30 years, died in 2015 in their Chicago home where D’Emilio still lives. He is a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois Chicago.



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