



From Bigot to Activist: The Leonard Matlovich Story

Introduction

With an impeccable record and a Commendation Medal, Technical Sergeant and Vietnam War veteran Leonard Matlovich deliberately outed himself as gay in order to challenge the United States military's ban on homosexual service members. He was, as expected, thrown out of the Air Force for being gay. He sued for reinstatement. It was 1975 and it was the first case of its kind. The Making Gay History podcast episode conversation between Matlovich and oral historian Studs Terkel includes a startlingly frank discussion of Matlovich's transition from former racist to LGBTQ+ rights pioneer.

Matlovich's story demonstrates that everyone has the capacity for personal change and highlights that a diverse range of people and actions have played important roles in the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement.

This lesson was created as part of the Making Gay History / National Education Association Teaching Fellowship. Each lesson specifically uses a podcast episode and related resources from the Making Gay History podcast. These lessons have been created so that teachers across the country have the context and tools to bring archival audio from the Making Gay History podcast into middle and high school classrooms.

The Making Gay History podcast brings LGBTQ+ history to life through the voices of the people who lived it. We strive to create a world where everyone understands, respects, and honors the experiences and histories of LGBTQ+ people by providing engaging and accessible entry points to its largely hidden history. The podcast is hosted by historian and journalist Eric Marcus, who has been documenting LGBTQ+ history for more than 35 years.

Grade Level

11th - 12th grade

Disciplines / Unit Recommendations

Created as part of the Civil Rights unit for 11th-grade U.S. History. The lesson may also be useful for Vietnam War studies and civics classes on the U.S. military.

Estimated Time

Initially created for two 80-minute block periods.

Preparation

It is recommended that teachers double-check all links as some may shift since they are not hosted by Making Gay History directly.

- ☐ Listen to **Making Gay History Season 8 Episode 7: Leonard Matlovich.**

<https://bit.ly/mgh-matlovich>

As the teacher, you know your students and teaching situation best. It is always advised to listen to the full podcast individually before playing for or assigning to your students, just as you would review any text for classroom use.

Optional: Make the podcast [episode transcript](#) available for students to read/reference when listening to the podcast.

- ☐ Depending on students' comfort level and the school's setting you may need to have a conversation with students and/or administrators or parents about language prior to teaching this lesson.
- ☐ Permission slips for listening to the podcast for students younger than 18.
- ☐ Preview [Queer History Episode 7](#) (or identify alternative context-setting film for LGBTQ+ activism in the time period under study).
- ☐ Preview tribute video: [Leonard Matlovich 1987](#) (Yestergay TV).
- ☐ If [S-I-T: Surprising, Interesting, Troubling](#), [See-Think-Wonder](#), or another thinking protocol that will be used, and make any copies necessary for student graphic organizers.

Background

Many activists in the early LGBTQ+ civil rights movement considered service in the United States military to be a key part of full citizenship. Among the proponents of this idea was [Frank Kameny](#), a pioneer activist who in the 1970s sought out a gay service member with an impeccable record to come forward to provide a test court case challenging the military's ban on homosexuals, which dated back to World War II. Technical Sergeant (TSgt) Leonard Matlovich stepped up to make his story known.

“Technical Sergeant (TSgt) is the second Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) rank in the US Air Force. It is the rank just above Staff Sergeant and below Master Sergeant. Within the enlisted Air Force, TSgt is known as the second hardest promotion to acquire, next to the promotion to Senior Master Sergeant, which is capped by federal law. “ ([See “Air Force Technical Sergeant.”](#))

Leonard Matlovich was the only son of a career Air Force non-commissioned officer: Leonard Matlovich, Sr. Matlovich, Jr. was born at Hunter Air Force Base in Georgia on July 6, 1943 and grew up on Air Force bases all over the U.S. He was raised Catholic and later became a Mormon. Although he knew he was gay, he fought those feelings. Typical for the time, he only knew negative stereotypes of LGBTQ+ people and consequently experienced internalized homophobia.

Due to these negative feelings, he had low self-esteem and manifested this by bigotry toward Blacks and Jews, which made him feel superior.

After 12 years of exemplary service, Matlovich shared the truth about his sexuality with his commanding officer in a letter that he hand-delivered on March 6, 1975. For more on LGBTQ+ people in the military, start here: [LGBTQ America: LGBTQ Military Service](#).

Procedure

Day 1:

1. Teacher shares history on the LGBTQ Rights movement through a short lecture and/or by screening a video presentation, such as [“Queer History” Episode 7](#), available on YouTube.
2. Provide a reading on Stonewall for additional context. Stonewall Fact Sheet: makinggayhistory.org/stonewallfactsheet.pdf.

3. Play the beginning or entirety of Season 8, Episode 7 of Making Gay History: Leonard Matlovich <https://bit.ly/mgh-matlovich>.
 - a. If time is short, play the first part of the episode as a teaser to encourage students to finish listening at home.
 - b. If time allows between Day 1 and Day 2, the podcast can be played in class in its entirety.
4. To engage students, consider using a strategy such as [S-I-T: Surprising, Interesting, Troubling](#) or [See-Think-Wonder](#). For SIT, have students listen for what they find Surprising - Interesting - Troubling. For See-Think-Wonder, invite students' curiosity about the history of LGBTQ+ people in the military by identifying what they notice about it and what thoughts it sparks. Initial thoughts can be collected as an "exit card" on Day 1 and/or this can form the basis for review and conversation on Day 2.

Day 2:

1. Review the content of the podcast.
 - a. This could be done with class discussion or in small groups.
 - b. If S-I-T or See-Think-Wonder strategy was used on Day 1, that construct could be the basis for collecting students' thoughts and questions.
2. Slideshow on TSgt Matlovich. This is an opportunity to slow down and lean in to student curiosity and observations from the podcast in order to reinforce understanding, clarify misconceptions, and identify additional areas of exploration.
 - a. Invite student questions and thoughts throughout.
 - b. Recommendation: have the podcast available to play excerpts of parts you want to highlight.
3. Additional discussion questions (during or after the slides) could include:
 - a. How did Matlovich's beliefs about others change over time? What contributed to that change?
 - b. What qualities did Matlovich express at the various parts of his life that he shared on the podcast?
 - c. What is the significance of how Matlovich chose to commemorate his own life?
4. Show tribute vide, [Leonard Matlovich 1987](#) (Yestergay TV).

Additional Resources

- Stonewall First Anniversary Pride March Fact Sheet
makinggayhistory.org/pridemarchfactsheet.pdf
- [Stonewall Inn Historic Overview, NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project](#)
- Making Gay History Podcast Stonewall Season
<https://makinggayhistory.com/season-five/>
- ["Stonewall: The Making of a Monument" \(New York Times Op-Doc\)](#)
- [Stonewall National Monument 3-D Tour](#)
- ["Stonewall Uprising," PBS American Experience documentary](#)
- *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* by David Carter (the definitive book on the Stonewall uprising)

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I am a transgender retired veteran of the U.S. Army. As a 16-year-old questioning person who wanted to serve, I was inspired when I first read about Leonard Matlovich's story when it broke in the 1970s. Today, I teach U.S. History at a small high school in Rhode Island in a town with a major navy base, which results in a large military presence in our school. I am also an advisor to our Gay Straight Alliance.