SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTION

dsm PRIDE

SHARON MALHEIRO

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The first thing Sharon Malheiro did when she received the 60-page Iowa Supreme Court ruling was turn to the last page.

It was April 2009, and inside the document was the final decision on the Varnum v. Brien appeal, which argued limitations on marriage violated the equal protection clause of the Iowa Constitution. An affirmative decision would legalize same-sex marriage in Iowa.

Malheiro, a lawyer by trade, knew the final decision was on the final page. As she flipped to the spot, her eye caught the answer: affirmed. It was a unanimous decision. Malheiro left the room, called her partner of 20 years and asked her to marry her.

"It's hard to put into words," Malheiro said. "It was a very affirming time."

That moment was the culmination of many years of work for Malheiro, who grew up in the Chicago area and received her undergraduate degree from Drake University. After working as a journalist for 15 years, Malheiro went back to Drake University and earned her law degree.

In the 1990s, Malheiro, currently a senior shareholder with the Davis Law Firm in Des Moines, was a rising star in the legal profession. While there wasn't anything on the books that prevented employers from discriminating based on sexual orientation, Malheiro was open and accepted in her workplace. She knew she wasn't putting her job at risk, like many other people would be, by advocating for LGBTQ rights.

"[My employer] accepted me, and they were OK with it," she said. "I would actually tell other people's stories through me."

When Malheiro first became an advocate, the LGBTQ landscape was "nonexistent," she said. There was a fledgling LGBTQ center in Des Moines, but there wasn't a wide-ranging effort. Malheiro and other LGBTQ leaders focused on pushing for an expansion of the Iowa Civil Rights Act to include sexual orientation. It was a long battle — almost two decades — but in 2007, sexual orientation was indeed added as a protected status in the Iowa Civil Rights Act.

The next big battle for Malheiro was marriage equality. She partnered with the national LGBTQ law firm Lambda Legal, which wanted to focus on equality in the Midwest. After same-sex marriage was legalized, Malheiro partnered with Lamda Legal again to give same-sex couples the right to have both of their names on a child's birth certificate, which wasn't allowed in Iowa until 2013.

Along with these advocacy victories, Malheiro has many other proud moments. She was one of the founding members of OneIowa, a statewide organization focused on advancing LGBTQ rights, and has won numerous community and leadership awards for her efforts.

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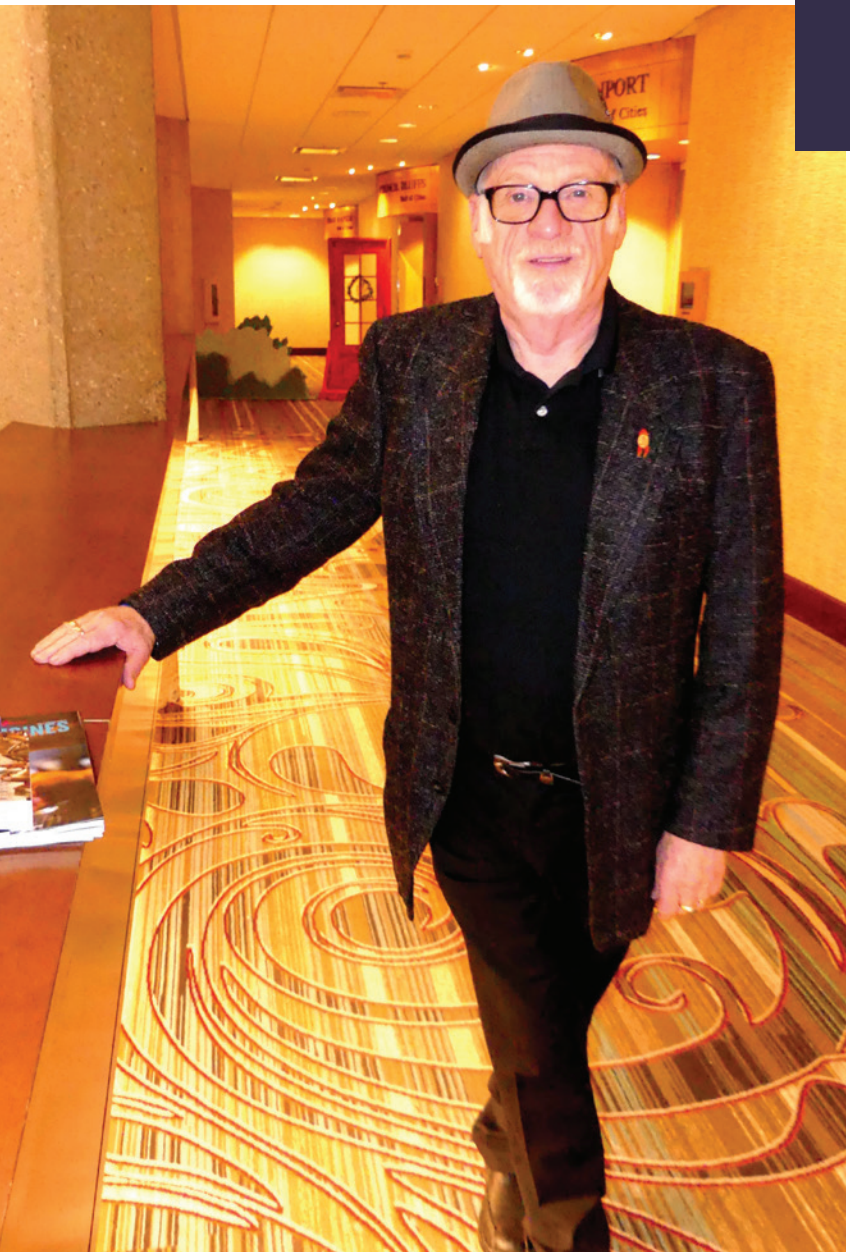
LEADING THE WAY

GARY MOORE



Gary Moore can remember having feelings as early as the age of 5 that he didn't quite understand. But he knew they were different from the rest of his peers, and by the time he was an adolescent, he knew he was attracted to males.

He tried to educate himself, but that was tough in the 1960s when gay men weren't always accepted in society. His parents not-so-subtly left an edition of the Sexual Encyclopedia in his room, and he read an excerpt about homosexuality. The book said he had a psychiatric diagnosis, and he was likely to commit suicide.

Moore, who was born in Des Moines but grew up in Dubuque, carried the thought that his feelings were deviant and wrong throughout his teen and college years – until his senior year at the University of Dubuque. That's when he stumbled across a book called "Society and the Healthy Homosexual." The text said Moore's feelings weren't wrong — society was.

"It provided the first positive concepts about gay people to me," Moore said.

After college, Moore was drafted into the U.S. Army and served in the Vietnam War in the early 1970s. He knew he couldn't come out as gay — he had only come out to gay peers and a close friend of his — so he kept it to himself. When he confided in a pastor on his base, the pastor essentially told him he was destined for hell unless he agreed to change.

"That infuriated me," Moore said.

When Moore returned from the war, he started working as a social worker at Iowa Lutheran Hospital in Des Moines. It was the late 1970s, and whenever a homosexual patient came into the mental health clinic, the first treatment was electroconvulsive therapy — applying electric shocks to the brain. By the time Moore left the hospital six years later, he had persuaded the psychiatrists to send homosexual clients to him to talk.

"Those patients thought they had something to be disturbed about," Moore said. "I told them there was nothing wrong with them."

During the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, Moore was diagnosed with HIV. At that time — before reliable treatment was found — it was a death sentence. Moore wanted to do something bigger than himself at that point, and he joined the All Iowa AIDS Benefit. He chaired the event for the next 20 years.

Today, Moore is retired — he most recently tended bar at Blazing Saddles in the East Village for about 30 years — but he's still active in the LGBTQ community. He's involved with the First Friday Breakfast Club and the Prime Timers of Central Iowa and helped set up the annual Capital City Pride event for many years. He's 70 years old and healthy — a remarkable feat considering he thought he had just a year to live after his HIV diagnosis — and is proud of how far the country has come in LGBTQ rights since his childhood. But he's still a bit cautious.

"It doesn't mean you can't go backwards," he said. "Some of the protections we have gained does not mean that it can't go away. But I like to be optimistic."

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SISTER FREIDA PEOPLES

"I THINK DES MOINES IS SO INTERESTING BECAUSE IT HAS BEEN HOMOGENEOUS FOR SO LONG. IT'S WELCOMING DIVERSITY IN A WAY. THERE'S LESS FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN, AND I THINK THAT GOES BACK TO THE FARM CULTURE. IT'S LIVE AND LET LIVE. OBVIOUSLY, THERE'S A PLUS AND A NEGATIVE SIDE FOR THAT, BUT THERE ARE THINGS I LOVE VERY, VERY MUCH ABOUT IT."

SISTER FREIDA PEOPLES

Sister Freida Peoples was a teenager in New York City when the Stonewall Riots took place in June 1969. While he was openly gay, he didn't take part in the riots – he was still young enough that he had to attend school the next day.

"My parents would have killed me if I was out there," Sister Frieda Peoples said with a laugh.

But the Stonewall Riots were still a pivotal moment for Sister Freida Peoples, who joined the protests and marched the streets of New York in the following days.

In the early 1970s, Sister Freida Peoples, who identifies as non-binary, went to San Francisco to attend the University of California-Berkley. He worked at Hamburger Mary's, an LGBT-themed restaurant that began in San Francisco. After college, he worked as a disc jokey and often played at parties attended by gay men. That's how he connected with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in 1983, becoming one of the first black members of the group.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is a charity and protest organization that uses drag and religious imagery to call attention to LGBTQ issues. The organization began in 1979 in San Francisco and today has branches all over the world.

Around the same time, Sister Frieda Peoples saw some of his closest friends become afflicted by HIV and AIDS.

"I heard about a friend who died from pneumonia," he said. "I thought, 'Nobody dies of pneumonia.' It was shocking, and more and more people were coming down with this unique type of pneumonia."

Sister Frieda Peoples and the rest of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence focused their initial efforts on HIV and AIDS advocacy. Then the organization branched into politics about the time that Harvey Milk, who would become the first openly gay elected official in California, ran for office.

He continued to be affiliated with the organization and joined a monastery in northern California. He moved to the East Coast to study philosophy, and he went to Italy to receive a post-graduate degree. He stayed in Europe and moved to Ukraine, where he lived for nine years. He witnessed the demise of communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which has stuck with him to this day.

In 1999, Sister Freida Peoples accepted a job with Catholic Charities of Omaha, where he worked for 14 years before moving to Shenandoah in 2014 and Des Moines a year later. He enjoys Des Moines, and continues his advocacy with the Des Moines Pride Center and through OneIowa.

He believes Iowa presents a unique opportunity for LGBTQ activism.

"I think Des Moines is so interesting because it has been homogeneous for so long," he said. "It's welcoming diversity in a way. There's less fear of the unknown, and I think that goes back to the farm culture. It's live and let live. Obviously, there's a plus and a negative side for that, but there are things I love very, very much about it."

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JOHN SCHMACKER

John Schmacker could see the steady stream of names. He was serving in the U.S. Navy in the late 1960s and was stationed inside an office on the USS Oriskany aircraft carrier. One of his duties was to handle the captain's mail, and he read the names — about one or two men per month were being discharged on suspicion of being homosexual.

Schmacker and the other gay sailors on deck had to look out for each other. They toed an extremely fine line of being open to each other but keeping their true identities a secret to the rest of the ship.

"This was way before 'don't ask, don't tell.' In fact, they did ask," Schmacker said. "They were constantly watching for anybody that might even hint at having any homosexual tendency. They would many times be dishonorably discharged."

Schmacker knew a dishonorable discharge meant a lifetime mark on his record.

"I coped with that all of the time," he said. "I realize how much I was lying to save [myself]. But that's what you had to do."

After the Navy, Schmacker, who grew up in northeast Des Moines, returned to the city to work as an accountant. He was hired by a manufacturing company and rose through the ranks to become vice president and controller in the early 1980s. But the president found out Schmacker was gay, and the next week Schmacker was fired. At the time, there weren't any laws preventing workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation.

"It was such an unjust thing," Schmacker said. "One week I was a knight in shining armor at that company, and the next week I'm being tossed out the door."

That moment was defining for Schmacker. He promptly joined small LGBTQ organizations in Des Moines, which he described as "feeble" at the time. He became the president of the Gay Coalition of Des Moines for a couple of years. He then became president of what was called the Gay and Lesbian Resource Center.

In the middle of the AIDS epidemic, Schmacker was appointed to the governor's and mayor's AIDS task forces. In that role, he became a spokesperson for the gay community, speaking out against discriminatory language, actions and laws. Schmacker is also the founder of the Des Moines Gay Men's Choir, which he started in his basement in the early 1980s.

Schmacker is retired — he most recently worked as the chief financial officer for the American Red Cross Central Iowa Chapter — and he's proud of how far gay rights have come in the past few decades. But he knows there's more to do.

"There's been a lot of progress," Schmacker said. "But it's still difficult for young people to come out. The whole point of the gay equality movement was to earn the right to live outside the closet without penalty.

"There are still states and religious organizations that think sexual orientation can be changed or are hostile to the idea, so there's still a long way to go on social justice."

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JODEE WINTERHOF

JoDee Winterhof says her parents stimulated her passion for advocacy — even, she admits, if they didn't even know they were directly instilling those values.

Winterhof, senior vice president for policy and political affairs at the Human Rights Campaign, grew up in Walnut, a town of about 800 people in western Iowa. Her father was superintendent and principal for the local school district, and both of her parents were involved with church, community and economic activities.

"We were sort of a classic small-town family that was involved in everything," Winterhof said. "For me, the passion came from them and the example they set of building your own community. There's no question. Two of my brothers still live in Iowa, and they are both engaged in the community. I'm just the only one who might have taken it a bit far."

She attended Simpson College and started a career in politics. She initially worked for Iowa's U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin at a local level in the early 1990s. As her career progressed in other political roles, Winterhof eventually reconnected with Harkin and served as his chief of staff from 1999 to 2003.

Winterhof came out as lesbian in her late 20s, and by the time she served under Harkin, she was the only openly LGBTQ chief of staff in Washington, D.C.

"To be out and to have a boss that was supportive at the time, there's no question Tom Harkin was ahead of his time on those sorts of things," Winterhof said. "He was very supportive of my family and my children. It was wonderful."

Winterhof worked in consulting for about four years and then served as the Iowa state director and senior strategist for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign in 2007 and 2008. In 2013, Winterhof was chief of staff again — this time for U.S. Rep. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, the first openly bisexual member of Congress in U.S. history. Today, Winterhof works with the Human Rights Campaign, an organization focused on LGBTQ rights and advocacy.

"I felt I wanted to help the LGBTQ movement," Winterhof said of her decision to join the Human Rights Campaign. "After marriage equality was achieved, I wanted to fight for what was next. For me, it was time to get out there and roll up my sleeves."

Winterhof and the rest of the Human Rights Campaign are continuing to advocate for LGBTQ rights. They have been working on a bill called the Equality Act, which proposes adding sexual orientation and gender identity into the Civil Rights Act of 1964, protecting individuals from discrimination in employment, housing and more. It was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in early March.

"About half of the country doesn't have full legal protection in their state," Winterhof said. "Why don't we have the same protection everywhere? [The bill] has broader support than I could have envisioned a couple of years ago. This is the time and place for it."