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Dick Leitsch, Whose 'Sip-In' Was a Gay Rights Milestone, Dies at 83

By **Robert D. McFadden**

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Dick Leitsch, who in 1966 led a pioneering act of civil disobedience to secure the right of gay patrons to be served in a licensed bar, helping to clear the way for gay bars to operate openly in New York State, died on Friday at a hospice center in Manhattan. He was 83.

A close friend, Paul Havern, said the cause was liver cancer, which had spread. Mr. Leitsch, who lived in Manhattan, learned he had terminal cancer in February.

A gentle, soft-spoken Kentuckian, Mr. Leitsch (pronounced LIGHTSH) was one of the first leaders of the Mattachine Society, an early defender of gay rights when homosexuality was mostly underground and even a small protest took courage. He called his action a “sip-in,” and likened it to sit-ins by black protesters at segregated lunch counters in the South during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Three years before the Stonewall Inn uprising accelerated the gay rights movement in America, Mr. Leitsch challenged the common practice of bars’ serving gay customers under a no-questions-asked arrangement necessitated by an unwritten State Liquor Authority policy that regarded homosexuals as inherently “disorderly.” Bars that knowingly served them could have their liquor licenses revoked.

The policy, supported by no law and apparently unconstitutional because it precluded the right to free assembly, led to charades by gay men and lesbians. They would sometimes minimize their sexual identities by avoiding affectionate touching or dancing with one another or any other conduct that might be interpreted as “queer.” Bartenders looked the other way and poured the gin.

It was just another of the countless indignities and rights violations that gay men and lesbians endured in an age when vice squads raided bars frequented by gay clientele and entrapped men in homosexual “encounters.” Many publications, including The New York Times, referred to gay men and lesbians as “sexual deviates.”

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Hypocrisy infected the era. Gay men and lesbians were widely regarded as sick by the medical establishment, sinners by the clergy and criminals by the law. Judges accepted the testimony of undercover officers who had solicited sex from gay men and then arrested them. For those with a name, job or family to protect, lewdness charges could carry fines, jail time and ruinous publicity.

Criminals also took their cut. There were scores of illegal bars in New York, many of them private clubs run by the Mafia, that catered to gays and lesbians. Drinks were watered, prices were steep, police raids were scheduled (with forewarnings), payoffs were routine and liquor licenses, if they existed at all, were rarely challenged by the liquor authority.

“For decades, gay bars were our most visible institutions,” Perry Brass recalled in 2015 in *The Philadelphia Gay News*. “Gay men and lesbians found their only home in them. In New York, bars were raided cyclically: usually before elections, before major events like the 1964 New York World’s Fair, when Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr. closed the bars to keep innocent tourists from wandering in, or when cops decided they wanted to squeeze out a bit more payola from Mafia barkeepers.”

On April 21, 1966, Mr. Leitsch and three friends, Craig Rodwell, John Timmons and Randy Wicker, accompanied by a *Times* reporter and a *Village Voice* photographer, staged the “sip-in” at Julius’, a bar at West 10th Street and Waverly Place in Greenwich Village.

The bar had been serving a gay clientele since the 1950s. A clergyman had just been arrested there on charges of soliciting sex, and a sign said, “This is a raided premises.”

As the four stood at the bar in suits and neckties, a bartender set up glasses and asked, “What’ll you have?”

“We are homosexuals,” Mr. Leitsch announced, according to several accounts he gave to the news media. “We are orderly, we intend to remain orderly, and we are asking for service.”

The bartender clapped his hand over Mr. Leitsch’s glass — a signal moment captured by the *Voice* photographer, Fred W. McDarrah — and refused to serve them.

“I think it’s the law,” the bartender said.

The *Times* published an account the next day: “3 Deviates Invite Exclusion by Bars.” The Mattachine Society, citing the events at Julius’, said it would sue the State Liquor Authority to overturn the policy that prohibited bars from knowingly serving alcoholic beverages to gays on grounds that they were inherently “disorderly.”

The liquor authority chairman, Donald S. Hostetter, promptly denied that such a policy existed, and claimed that the authority had never threatened or revoked the licenses of bars that served gays.

Mr. Leitsch, in an interview for this obituary in March, said that the lawsuit had not been filed because the liquor authority had backed down. "The whole thing was bizarre," he said. "We didn't need to prove that the bars refused to serve us, or that the liquor authority revoked licenses for serving gays. They denied ever doing it."



Mr. Leitsch, left, in 2016 with Randy Wicker at the bar Julius' in Greenwich Village, where both participated in a "sip-in" protest demanding gay rights in 1966. They were marking the event's 50th anniversary. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

In 1967, New York State courts, ruling on two suits filed by bars, struck down theories that homosexuals were inherently disorderly, effectively ending the liquor authority practice of using gay patronage as an excuse for revoking licenses. Among other effects, the rulings opened the way for licensed gay bars, which proliferated in years to come.

"Dick Leitsch was one of the country's most militant and important gay activists in the decade before Stonewall," George Chauncey, a Columbia University historian who wrote "Gay New York" (1994), said in an email. "The sip-in he organized at Julius' is a brilliant example of lessons he took from the black civil rights movement about how to stage events that reframed public understanding."

After years of stony silence from public officials and potential allies in his fight against police raids and entrapment cases, Mr. Leitsch, starting in 1966, won the support of John V. Lindsay, the new Republican-Liberal mayor of New York; of William Booth, the commissioner of human rights; and of columnists for The New York Post, then a progressive paper, who wrote about police corruption. Weeks after the protest at Julius', Mr. Lindsay ordered the Police Department to halt the entrapment of gays, although many gay men said his orders were ignored, at least initially.

Historians of the gay rights movement say Mr. Leitsch was instrumental in ending police entrapment in New York. Besides helping to persuade Mr. Lindsay to ban it, he worked with bar owners, the American Civil Liberties Union, police brass and other city officials to gradually overcome the practice. He also advised gay men how to navigate arrests in sting operations, and urged entrapped men to request lawyers and plead not guilty, forcing courts to bring their cases to trial, where the testimony of arresting officers could be challenged. In court, gays were urged to present themselves as model citizens, in suits and ties.

The Mattachine Society's gradual approach to change became obsolete overnight on June 28, 1969, when the Stonewall raid triggered an explosive protest that roiled Greenwich Village for a week and transformed a gay men's reform agenda into an L.G.B.T. revolution.

On the morning after the raid, as the violent protests spread, Mayor Lindsay called Mr. Leitsch and pleaded, "You've got to stop this!"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't," Mr. Leitsch reportedly replied. "I've been trying for years to get something like this to happen."

David Carter, the author of "Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution" (2005), called Mr. Leitsch a pivotal figure in the fight for gay rights.

"The historical evidence suggests that Leitsch's total success in persuading the Lindsay administration to end entrapment and his partial success in legalizing gay bars constituted a liberalization that was the most essential precondition of the Stonewall uprising," Mr. Carter said in an email.

Richard Joseph Leitsch was born in Louisville, Ky., on May 11, 1935, the oldest of four children of Joseph Leitsch and Ann (Moran) Leitsch. His father owned a wholesale tobacco business. Richard, called Dick, and his siblings, John, Joanne and Laurene, grew up in a Roman Catholic household and attended parochial schools.

Dick was attracted to boys at St. Patrick's elementary school. At Flaget High School, he was a voracious reader, worked in the library stacks and had several homosexual encounters, he said. He graduated in 1953. His family was supportive when told he was gay. At Bellarmine University, in Louisville, he appeared in theatrical productions, but dropped out before graduating.

Mr. Leitsch moved to New York in 1959, met Mr. Rodwell and formed his first long-term partnership. Mr. Rodwell belonged to the Mattachine Society, and persuaded Mr. Leitsch to join. In the early 1960s he was inspired by Franklin Kameny, one of America's earliest gay rights activists, who urged gays to model their struggle after the civil rights movement.

At a time when many gay men concealed their sexual identities, Mr. Leitsch was open about his. As Mattachine's president from 1965 to 1969 and then as executive director, he faced television cameras, briefed reporters and lectured widely, never worrying about his jobs as a bartender, waiter and journalist for gay publications.

One Leitsch article detailed the Stonewall uprising for the Mattachine newsletter and later appeared in *The Advocate*, the L.G.B.T. magazine. "Those usually put down as 'sissies' or 'swishes' showed the most courage and sense during the action," he wrote. "Their bravery and daring saved many people from being hurt."

After Stonewall, Mr. Leitsch was criticized by younger, louder voices of the Gay Liberation Front as being insufficiently militant. "Dick and Mattachine were loathed by many of my young G.L.F. brothers and sisters," Mr. Brass recalled. "For us he represented gay accommodationists."

It passed. Mr. Leitsch was eventually seen as an early hero of the gay rights movement. Julius' became a landmark in the National Register of Historic Places and a setting for gay-themed films like "The Boys in the Band" and "The Normal Heart." It called itself the oldest gay bar in New York. Mr. Leitsch dined there often.

On the 50th anniversary of his protest, a crowd celebrated at Julius', and Andrew Berman, of the Greenwich Village Historic Preservation Society, hailed Mr. Leitsch and his sip-in. "This was one of the first, if not the very first, planned acts of civil disobedience for L.G.B.T. rights," he said.

Mr. Leitsch is survived by his brother, John, and his sister, Joanne Williams. His partner of many years, Timothy Scoffield, died in 1989 after developing AIDS.

In the crush of letters Mr. Leitsch received after his illness became known was one from former President Barack Obama. "Thank you for your decades of work to help drive our nation forward on the path toward L.G.B.T. equality," he wrote. "Our journey as a nation depends, as it always has, on the collective and persistent efforts of people like you."

William McDonald contributed reporting.

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