

## The GLOW Collection

Founded on April 9th, 1988, the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW) aimed to create an explicitly non-homophobic, non-racist, and non-sexist space for gays and lesbians living in and around Johannesburg. The organisation was founded in part by Simon Nkoli, an anti-apartheid activist who saw his political struggle as interlinked with his struggle for gay rights. Before he was unlawfully imprisoned for his association with the United Democratic Front (UDF) under the Delmas Treason Trial, Nkoli had been a member of the Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) and led its racially inclusive Saturday Group in Soweto. Nkoli, however, felt that GASA, a mainly white and apolitical organisation, was not working towards the anti-apartheid struggle and had not done enough to protest his imprisonment. Created after his release from prison, GLOW eventually had chapters across the city, including in Hillbrow, KwaThema, Berea, Soweto, and Yeoville. In 1990, GLOW would organize the continent's first Pride march, with marchers chanting, "We're here, we're queer, we're everywhere!" through the streets of Braamfontein.



Sheila Lapinsky (of OLGA) and Simon Nkoli



From 1991 Pride March edition of *Glowletter*

Looking through the range of correspondences, publications, lobbying material, and minutes in the collection, it becomes clear that GLOW offered a range of resources as a community based organisation aiming to increase lesbian and gay visibility. It produced a monthly *Glowletter* featuring organisational updates, advertisements for pen pals, international gay rights news, book reviews, comics, and letters from GLOW members reacting to a range of topics. GLOW also had several working groups, including a media group, a lesbian forum,

an education forum, and the AIDS working group, led by Simon. Working with the Township Aids Project, also a Simon-led initiative, the

AIDS working group held community workshops and video screenings on safe sex. The Glowletter was available at lesbian and gay-friendly bookstores in Johannesburg such as Phambili Books and the Johannesburg Library; copies were also sent to organisational partners and supporters of GLOW across South Africa. The Glowletter was not the only newsletter produced by the organisation; the Lesbian Forum also published its own, titled "Wet Velvet". One edition included a Lesbian Herstory documenting the struggle for lesbian rights and visibility in the Witwatersrand.

The minutes, Glowletters, and correspondences within the GLOW collection not only offer a portrait of the resources GLOW provided for the Johannesburg gay and lesbian community, but also shed light on tensions that existed within the organisation. In a June 1992 newsletter, then-General Secretary Tanya Cham-Sam wrote an annual report for the organisation summarizing events of the last year. While still highlighting the gains GLOW had made in terms of participating in the anti-apartheid struggle and increasing gay and lesbian visibility in South Africa Chan-Sam kept a critical eye to the organisation, saying GLOW needed to concentrate on pressing issues such as working towards a gay rights clause in the new South African constitution rather than "partying". GLOW, she said, could not be content with having a clause in the ANC's draft constitution, but instead "need[ed] to raise consciousness...to ensure that we make this a new South Africa for lesbians and gay men too." (Glowletter, "Speaking for Ourselves," June 1992).

The correspondences and publications in the archive demonstrate that GLOW received a great deal of support from international gay rights organisations, either in the form of funding or motivational letters. Grant letters in the collection show that much of GLOW's funding came from international sources. Groups also staged protests on their behalf from across the globe.

For instance, the London Anti-apartheid Group staged a picket outside the South African Embassy in support of the first Johannesburg pride march, held in October 1990. The group had also campaigned for Simon Nkoli's release from prison during the 1980s.

GLOW played an important role in the fight for the inclusion of a clause protecting South Africans from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Political lobbying towards inclusion of the clause began as early as 1990. GLOW sought the feedback of its community by sending out a questionnaire asking which specific rights members hoped to see in a lesbian and gay rights charter. Working under the umbrella organisation National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE), founded in 1994, the group prepared submissions to the Constitutional Assembly in support of the equality

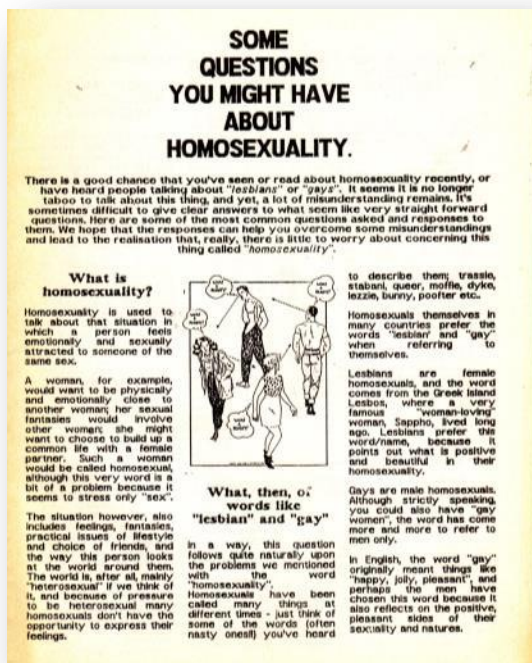
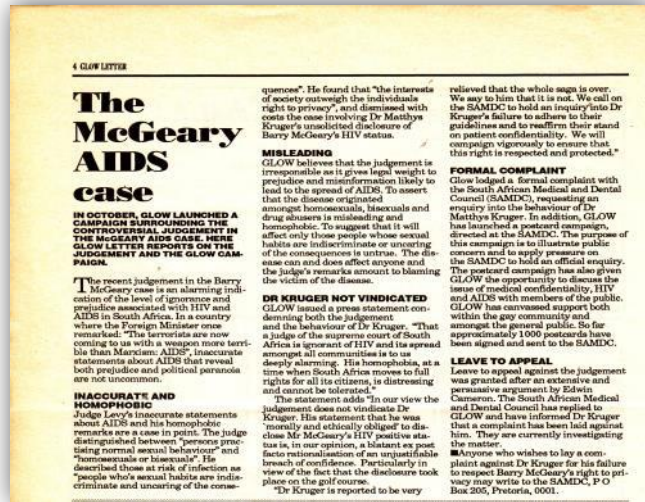


"What a Lesbian and Gay Rights Charter Means," from the April 1992 Glowletter.



clause. By 1996, this clause would become enshrined in the constitution, making it the first constitution worldwide to protect guarantee protection from discrimination based on sexuality.

GLOW also participated in other legal cases around gay rights issues and HIV/AIDS, most notably the case of Barry McGeary, a businessman living with AIDS whose doctor revealed his HIV/AIDS status to friends while playing golf. Both GLOW and the South African branch of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) protested this notification as breaching patient confidentiality. They also condemned it as increasing the paranoia surrounding incorrect understandings of HIV-transmission. GLOW produced petitions by community members and wrote letters to the South African Medical and Dental Council (SAMDC) in support of McGeary. By 1994, McGeary's doctor, Doctor Kruger, was found guilty of disgraceful conduct by the SAMDC and suspended.



Correspondence in the collection portray GLOW a tremendous resource for people questioning their sexuality, or lesbian and gay people searching for pen pals who understood the issues they faced daily. Gays and lesbians from as far as Ghana, the U.S, Norway, and the Ukraine wrote seeking international friendship. Other writers hoped to form lesbian and gay groups in their own communities. A 14-year old gay male student living in the (then) Orange Free State wrote that he knew a group of lesbian and gay students between the ages of 14 and 19 who sought a community similar to GLOW. They were struggling to find a meeting place where their parents would not know they were together. Writing to GLOW provided an outlet for people in rural areas who lacked the community GLOW offered in Johannesburg and sought similar resources. It also allowed GLOW to link people together living in similar areas, so they could discuss issues that affected them outside of the urban space.

Sifting through the GLOW archives makes it easier understand the impact the organisation had in building queer visibility in South Africa, campaigning for protection under the law, and organizing Johannesburg prides marches that navigated the tension between protest and celebration. The political work accomplished by GLOW in these critical years around the turn to a newfound democratic government paved the way for future activism around LGBT issues.

By Yasmina Martin – October, 2015

Yasmina is a recent graduate of Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts with a degree in Black Studies and French. She is currently based at the Wits History Department and WISER as a Fulbright student fellow, where she is studying transnational networks of LGBT activism through the lens of Simon Nkoli's leadership in GLOW. Her research is largely based on the GLOW and Simon Nkoli collections in the GALA archives.

To access the collection's inventory (GAL0001), please contact the GALA archivist, Linda Chernis: [linda.chernis@wits.ac.za](mailto:linda.chernis@wits.ac.za) or +27 1 1717 1797. Please note that GALA collections are stored off site and viewing appointments must be made three working days in advance. More information on GALA and archival collection can be found on the website: [www.gala.co.za](http://www.gala.co.za). Images used in this article come from the GLOW (GAL0001), Simon Nkoli (AM2623) and Donne Rundle (AM2799) collections.

