

ORIGINS OF THE SISTERS OF PERPETUAL INDULGENCE

In 1974, 75 and 76 at the University of Iowa, Fred Brungard and I co-produced the first Midwest Gay Pride Conferences. This was at a time when Iowa gay organizations consisted of 3 bars and two student groups.

At the same time I formed a traveling drag performance troupe called The Sugar Plum Fairies, consisting of myself, Tracy Bjorgum, Susan Short (a born female) Lisa (a transvestite) and Michael Salinas (who later became editor of one of the most important gay newspapers in the U.S.-The Bay Area Reporter). During a weekly planning session Susan said, "I know the Mother Superior in an Order of Catholic nuns in Cedar Rapids (Iowa). Mother Superior is a good friend of mine. When nuns die there they put their habits into storage. If I ask her if I can borrow some habits she'll probably loan them to us." Susan went to the Mother Superior and told her we were doing The Sound Of Music and she got the habits. The original names of the dead nuns were still sewn into the habit collars. We performed at the few gay bars across the state of Iowa. Most drag shows at the time consisted of classic diva tributes (Diana Ross, Judy Garland, etc.) Queens weren't ready for the iconoclasm about to engulf them! When we hit the stage doing a pompon routine to the U.of I. Fight song the audience erupted into pandemonium!

Following the final Pride Conference in 1976, Tracy and I realized we were preaching to the converted and needed a way of reaching the general public with our messages of gay liberation, challenging their homophobia. I suggested to Tracy we apply for a marriage license, knowing the statewide media would give us wide visibility. At this time most people did not think they knew a gay person. The whole word "gay" was not familiar to most Iowan's. In their minds queers were imaginary child molesters with horns and tails. We set out to show the people of Iowa that a gay person could be their neighbor, friend, relative and co-worker. Privately to our friends we called it 'A Fag In Every Living Room Campaign'.

We were the FIRST people to apply for a same-sex marriage license in the state of Iowa. The statewide mainstream newspaper The Des Moines Register carried our photo and story applying for the license . This is how I "came out" to my parents!

In 1977 I moved to San Francisco from a gay farm on the outskirts of Iowa City. I had “come out of the closet” in 1973 and lived every day in scag-drag, as a political statement. While packing for the move I decided to throw all my drag in the trash. I was getting out of drag and into the new leather/levi look that gay men were adopting. While packing for the move I came across those nun’s habits. It is amazing that history can turn on a small moment and an instant decision. I decided they would be the ONLY drag I would keep “in case one day I get bored”. If I had not kept those nun’s habits we might have become the CLOWNS of Perpetual Indulgence. :)

In 1978 I convinced Fred Brungard to move to San Francisco and live with me. We found a cottage apartment at 272 Dolores Street. The atmosphere in San Francisco at the time was VERY conformist. S.F. Chronicle columnist dubbed it “the castro clone” look. On Holy Saturday (day before Easter) 1979 I announced to Fred that I was bored and “the only thing different that I have are those nun’s habits”. Fred, myself and Bruce (Barouk) Golden dressed up in those habits and terrorized the Castro, Lands End and Polk Street. The reaction even in liberal and jaded San Francisco that first day out was electric, like someone had lit a stick of dynamite!

In June of 1979 the Gay Softball League played against the San Francisco Fire Department in a game in Kezar Stadium. I asked my friend Edmund Garron to come along to the game. I said, “Now, we can go as normal looking college cheerleaders or as nun cheerleaders.” We decided the habits I had from Iowa would be more fun. We ran around the rim of the stadium and ran our veils up the flagpole. We caused so much distraction with the crowd cheering us that the game had to be stopped temporarily. That was the moment, I believe, that Edmund caught the nun bug and saw the potential of a group of queer nuns, I then introduced my roommate Fred Brungard (who became Sister Missionary Position) to my friends Bill Graham (Reverend Mother) and Edmund Garron (Agnes- Sister Hysterectoria).

I had met Edmund in a dance class in San Francisco run by a lesbian friend, Francesca Dubee, from Iowa in 1977. Bill was a teacher in the gay Transcendental Meditation group I had formed with him in San Francisco in 1977. The 4 of us moved into a flat on Ashbury Street in 1979 which became known as The Convent. We discussed our mutual experiences we had in those nun’s habits earlier in the year. The general consensus between us was that we should form a group, making use of the intense energy this iconic symbol seemed to evoke not only in the general public, but also in

ourselves. Maybe we could use this as a tool for social activism and have some fun as well.

The 4 of us convened a meeting of our friends to form SPI later that year. The friends of the 4 of us formed the first Order of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and our apartment on Ashbury (The Convent) became the meeting space for the General Membership. Our telephone was the SPI telephone line.

In 1980, Fabian, a friend of Sister Missionary Position who became Mother Abbyss (formerly Mother Superior) came to stay the night in The Convent. After being exposed to our Sister activities he returned to Sydney, Australia and formed the second Order of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (SPI). The third Order of SPI in the world was in Toronto, Canada (which no longer exists) and the fourth Order of SPI in the entire world (second in the United States) was in Seattle, Washington founded by Mother Theresa Nervina in 1987. In 1990 the first French Order was formed in Paris by Archimere RITA du Calvaire-de-Marie-Madeleine-Car-Elle-Aussi-A-Beaucoup-Souffert .Shortly after that the first German Order was formed by Erzmutter JOHANNA Indulgentia in Heidelberg. Today Orders are formed or forming on four continents.

Our first experiences in those Iowa nun's habits in 1979 were the flame that became a roaring bonfire blazing across the world to this very day.

If only those Catholic nuns and Mother Superior in Cedar Rapids, Iowa knew what their habits had ignited!!!

Grand Mother Vicious Power Hungry Bitch
a Founder of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence
San Francisco