

Gilbert Baker, Gay Activist Who Created the Rainbow Flag, Dies at 65

By MATTHEW HAAGMARCH 31, 2017

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Gilbert Baker, heading the Stockholm Pride Parade in 2003, pieced together the first rainbow flags in 1978. He described himself as the “gay Betsy Ross.”
Credit Fredrik Persson/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Gilbert Baker, a self-described “gay Betsy Ross” who in 1978 hand-dyed and stitched together eight strips of vibrantly colored fabric into a rainbow flag, instantly creating an enduring international symbol of gay pride, was found dead on Friday at his home in New York City. He was 65. Cleve Jones, a friend and gay rights activist who confirmed the death, said that Mr. Baker had a stroke several years ago but had not been sick recently.

As the gay rights movement spread from San Francisco and New York in the 1970s, Mr. Baker was often asked by friends aware of his creative talents to make banners for protests and marches. His creations, like others during that time, often included the pink triangle, which protesters had claimed as an icon after its initial use by the Nazis to identify gay men in concentration camps during World War II.

Before a gay pride parade in 1978 in San Francisco, Harvey Milk, a city supervisor and gay rights leader who was assassinated that year, joined others in asking Mr. Baker to create an emblem to represent the movement.

Mr. Baker, with help from volunteers, filled trash cans with dye in the attic of the Gay Community Center in San Francisco and pieced together the first flags, unveiling them in the parade on June 25, 1978.

“We stood there and watched and saw the flags, and their faces lit up,” Mr. Jones said in a phone interview on Friday. “It needed no explanation. People knew immediately that it was our flag.”

The first flags had eight colors, each stripe carrying its own significance: pink for sex, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for sun, green for nature, turquoise for magic, blue for peace and purple for spirit.

“A flag translates into everything, from tacky souvenirs to the names of organizations and the way that flags function,” Mr. Baker said in an interview in 2008. “I knew instantly when I saw the reaction that it was going to be something. I didn’t know what or how or — but I knew.”

Since its introduction, the rainbow flag has become a universal symbol for inclusion, peace and love. It has been waved by gay rights supporters in China fighting for equality. It has been hung from apartment balconies as a sign of solidarity. After the United States Supreme Court legalized gay marriage in 2015, more than 26 million people on Facebook changed their profile photos to include the flag. The flag itself has changed since 1978, going to six colors from eight. Pink fabric was too expensive, Mr. Baker said, so it was removed, and turquoise and blue were combined into one color, royal blue.

Gilbert Baker was born on June 2, 1951, in Chanute, Kan., a tiny rural town that was a stop on the Santa Fe Railway. His mother was a teacher, and his father was a lawyer and a judge. Mr. Baker said he was outgoing growing up but had always thought of himself as an outcast because he was gay.

Mr. Baker spent a year in college before he was drafted into the Army. He served as a medic and was eventually stationed in San Francisco, where he remained after leaving the Army in 1972.

San Francisco was then a center for the women’s rights and civil rights movements, and after a police raid in 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan, a gathering spot for gay New Yorkers, more people began coming out as gay.

“For me and, really, a whole generation of people, that was really a defining time,” Mr. Baker said in 2008.

After the 1978 parade, Mr. Baker joined a flag company in San Francisco that supported his idea of mass-producing his creation, but he later left for a career in art and design. He was nevertheless always associated with the flag. He created rainbow flags for the recent ABC mini-series “When We Rise,” about the gay-rights movement.

In recent weeks he had finished creating 39 nine-color flags — the eight original colors, plus lavender to represent diversity — to commemorate the 39th anniversary of the first rainbow flag.

“He got up every day and made art,” Charley Beal, a friend who was the art director of the 2008 film “Milk,” about Mr. Milk, said in an interview.

Mr. Baker refused to apply for a trademark for his creation. “It was his gift to the world,” Mr. Jones said. “He told me when the flag first went up that he knew at that moment that it was his life’s work.”