We were the first work-based gay organization in the gay liberation movement.

"I won't be afraid any longer!" they said to each other, the gay woman and gay man who started it all. They had met and begun talking about a gay caucus during the 1970 annual meeting of the American Library Association. They keenly wanted to counteract the lies in the libraries about gay people, and they were ready to stand up and bear witness to gay pride and work openly in their profession to get positive gay materials into libraries and into readers' hands.

At the time, most of the non-fiction literature on gays still was by non-gay authors and it condemned, ridiculed, pitied, insulted, and dissected us. Even these dismal materials often were unavailable in libraries, or missing (stolen), or available only by special request and sign-out which can be intimidating. But the publishing industry had just begun to sight a new market, and publishers were then processing the first major crop (1971-72) of good books by gay authors on the gay experience.

The two Task Force founders met in New York after the ALA convention to put their commitment into practice. By word to friends and a press release to the gay media, they drew a few other people, and the group began to set goals and tackle jobs.

Those first gatherings did not have to plan for their continued existence in a total vacuum. Already the ALA had its social-activism wing, the Social Responsibilities Round Table which had launched itself the year before. The guts of SRRT is its task forces, self-created, informal groups of people who work together on particular issues or projects, such as Ethnic Materials Information Exchange, Task Force on Women, Alternatives in Print. The task forces get shares of SRRT's money (derived from minimal dues separate from ALA) toward their most basic expenses. So the new gay group
could and did take advantage of the existing sponsorship of a semi-autonomous division of ALA that deals with social issues and promotes social change.

Since we began under the SRRT umbrella, we have had excellent cooperation and support from straight people in SRRT. We have been relatively unsuccessful in getting broadscale help from gay librarians—not even donations. About a third of our small core membership are non-librarians, and at ALA conventions we depend on local gays who aren’t librarians for much of the carrying out of our essential activities, especially leafletting and hosting in our hospitality room.

Our basic focus so far has not been on librarians as workers, although we have just been asked to propose a candidate for ALA’s Advisory Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, and we’ve spent some time in the past 3 years publicizing the case of one Task Force member who lost his librarian job at a major university after he and his lover applied for a marriage license, in an effort to get ALA to censure that university library.

Our major work has been on gay materials in libraries—the lousy books present, the good ones absent. In an effort to reverse this situation, we have prepared and several times revised a bibliography of selected non-fiction materials. The current edition has books, pamphlets, articles, periodicals, and audio-visuals. We hope to add sections on fiction, plays, and biography to the next edition (early 1975). We have distributed the list as widely as possible not only to libraries of all kinds (college, high school, public, medical, etc.) but also to gay groups, hotlines, bookstores, students, counseling services, religious organizations, teachers, doctors, politicians, parents of gays, and of course gay individuals. Groups such as the Gay Nurses Alliance have helped circulate our Gay Bibliography to people in their own specialty fields.

We are also working on how gay materials are formally classified and numbered—thanks to pressure from a couple of our members, the Library of Congress classification system now has a separate number for materials on gay liberation as a movement; and on how libraries set up subject headings for library users to find items in the card catalog—libraries are beginning to shift away from "Sexual Deviation" and toward "Homosexuality," "Lesbianism,"
and "Gay Liberation," but we are pushing to eliminate even "Homosexuality" and have the word "Gay" used instead.

In order to make librarians aware that gay people are a class of clients who need positive not indifferent services from libraries, we have aggressively created a gay presence at ALA conventions. It doesn't take many of us to do this! A few smiling gays persistently leafletting at doorways to meetings have got our bibliography and fliers into the hands of as many as 4,000 librarians at a single convention. Librarians do love lists. Of course we've had a certain share of brusque refusals, usually at sight of the boldly-lettered GAY on our materials and the badges we wear—"I don't need this" or "We already have all that stuff."

We've put on program events featuring our annual Gay Book Award (see titles below); members of the Task Force speaking on job discrimination and on the effects of straight labels/gay terminology in libraries and with the general public and politicians; and special events such as gay plays, gay poetry readings (Sappho, Walt Whitman, Constantin Cavafy, Gertrude Stein), and an award for the first gay primer, in which Dick and Jane and Spot and Puff get to meet same-sex adult couples as a natural part of the world around them! Because we've planned far in advance to meet ALA's deadlines, our program events have been listed in ALA's official convention schedules, and we have drawn audiences of hundreds. We also use press releases and colorful displays including pictures to draw attention.

Our most famous publicity action was our gay kissing booth. For our allotted 2-hour turn in a booth in the main exhibit hall one afternoon at the 1971 ALA convention in Dallas (our first convention after our formation), we decided to bypass books and instead display live love. We put up big signs, "Hug-a-Homosexual" plus "Women Only" at one end of the booth and "Men Only" at the other, and we offered free same-sex kisses and hugs. No takers! We had to do all the hugging and kissing amongst ourselves, the eight of us—

but crowds of curious librarians packed the aisles around the booth, local TV news put our action on the air twice that evening and again the next morning, and the library press for months afterwards printed comments and letters, usually negative, about it.

Whether or not librarians generally now feel more positive about gays, they do know we are here and won't go away and will demand our rights and recognition.

Indeed, just two days after Hug-a-Homosexual, we got a pro-gay resolution passed first by Council (the elected policy-making body of ALA) and later by the general membership meeting: "The American Library Association recognizes that there exist minorities which are not ethnic in nature but which suffer oppression. The association recommends that libraries and members strenuously combat discrimination in services to, and employment of, individuals from all minority groups, whether distinguishing characteristics of the minority be ethnic, sexual, religious, or any other kind." Maybe some councilors and members voted for this because it seemed innocuously general, and maybe others voted for it in hopes we wouldn't embarrass ALA with another kissing booth. Nevertheless the resolution did become official policy of ALA, and our Task Force on Gay Liberation sponsored it, and we can and do make use of it.

In a less dramatic but equally important effort, we've offered, in our hospitality rooms at conventions, a private welcoming place for closeted gay librarians to talk with us and with each other. They're glad for a chance to be with their own and ease off the mask, and glad the place is away from main convention traffic so there's little risk they'll be spotted by a co-worker ("Hey, do you know I just saw X going into that hall where that gay meeting's going on?").

Our Task Force structure is very loose, with no formal membership and no body of rules. Meetings are held only at ALA conventions and if necessary just before; we have to work mostly by letter and telephone, since our members are scattered across the country. Some of our planned projects—such as reviewing articles on homosexuality in encyclopedias and proposing changes, and publishing a booklet on how some gay groups and individuals have tried to
get good gay materials into their local libraries and what worked and what didn't work—have had to be shelved because we haven't had people willing to do the slog work, the months of scouting, letter-writing, etc. So we welcome specific help with projects like these (not necessarily just these). And we're always grateful for donations; our printing bills alone exceed the money SRRT is able to allot us.

We get a great deal of mail from gay people in all kinds of situations. One person wrote: "I am 19 and discovering that all is not heterosexual with me. I need information, more information, and a belief that there are others like me with a need for another kind of love story." What will he find, or not find, in his library? Another correspondent said: "Although I am comfortable in my gayness and have a beautiful relationship, I am a small-town librarian—and a coward. Good luck to you!" What will help her open her closet door? If we and our supporters and successors get our library liberation work well launched, we'll be glad to go out of business.

Task Force on Gay Liberation
American Library Association
(Social Responsibilities Round Table)
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NOTE

For a copy of the Gay Bibliography, send a stamped self-addressed envelope to Barbara Gittings, Coordinator, P.O. Box 2383, Philadelphia, PA 19103. Copies in quantity, 5¢ each (includes cost of mailing).