

Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves

On June 27, 1982, the San Francisco order of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence distributed 16,000 copies of *Play Fair!*—the first pamphlet on safer sex for gay men—at the International Lesbian & Gay Freedom Day Parade.

June 27, 2024 By [Tim Murphy](#)

In 1979 San Francisco gay culture, the clones ruled. The dominant look in the Castro, the city's gay hub, was hypermasculine: moustaches, leather jackets, flannel shirts, white tank tops, Levi 501s and boots or Nikes. Over Easter weekend, a trio of gay men challenged both the clones' hypermasculinity and the antigay repression of the Catholic Church by dressing up as nuns. Their faces were painted white like harlequins, and they wore elaborately decorated, oversized wimples; the look would become the order's signature. In such getups, Ken Bunch (Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch), Fred Brungard (Sister Missionary Position) and Baruch Golden marched to a gay nude beach, where they sparked both shock and amused fascination. With the campy humor that would come to define them, the order expanded, and its members called themselves [The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence](#). They soon appeared at many events, fairs and fundraisers throughout the city.

In 1982, as gay men in San Francisco were developing strange new illnesses, such as Pneumocystis pneumonia (PCP) and the cancer Kaposi sarcoma, alongside other longstanding sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis, the Sisters wanted to distribute useful information on prevention in a nonjudgmental, funny, sex-positive way. The group—whose membership by this point had grown—worked with medical professionals to create and publish [Play Fair!](#), a pamphlet that was handed out to some 16,000 people at the International Lesbian & Gay Freedom Day Parade on June 27, 1982.

[Play Fair!](#) is considered to be the first community-produced safer-sex manual of the AIDS era. (It was later eclipsed by the better-known [How to Have Sex in an Epidemic](#), which came out in New York City the following year.)

Play Fair! was written before researchers had even confirmed that a new virus was causing the new illnesses in gay men—and even before the syndrome was renamed “AIDS” after initially being called “GRID” (gay-related immune disorder). So it's not surprising that, with the all-important exception of urging readers to use condoms, the pamphlet contained limited advice on avoiding what would come to be known as HIV, and focused on how to avoid more traditional STIs. *Play Fair!* exhorted readers to abstain from sex with others if they know they have an STI, to wash with soap and water and try to urinate as soon as possible after sex, and to refrain from douching (“it

can spread a little infection further inside you, making it a big infection”). Reflecting widespread suspicion at the time that poppers (inhalants causing a euphoric rush that gay men use for dancing or sex) might be the cause of the dire new illnesses, the pamphlet read: “Mother Superior has determined that popper inhalation can be dangerous to your health.

The pamphlet also urged readers to collect their sexual partners’ contact information so that they might call one another to pass on news of an STI or other illness, to avoid rimming (anal-oral contact, a key transmitter of often hard-to-clear parasites) and to inspect one’s own body as well as those of one’s sex partners for telltale warts or lesions.

Plus, the pamphlet was just plain funny and irreverent—something the Sisters recognized the gay community desperately needed at a time of medical and moral panic. It began:

Several months ago, Mother Superior noticed an unusual incidence of sniffing, coughing, grimacing, scratching and farting around the Convent. Several of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence were complaining about sore balls, swollen glands, scratchy throats, rashes, cramps, lumps and tingling between their legs.

And true to the Sisters’ anti-Catholic, shame-free spirit, it advised readers that the most important danger to avoid was...

GUILT:

This STD is subject to home remedies. Sister Roz Erection recommends putting your guilt in a blender set at “annihilate” for about five minutes, then flushing whatever’s left down the toilet. Another recipe is to bake a large dose of care into a cake, having a big piece for yourself and sharing the rest with people around you. Or, you can mail your guilt (in a plain brown wrapper) to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and we’ll get rid of it for you. SYMPTOMS: feeling bad after a trip to the baths, bushes or tea rooms; low self-esteem. Seldom asymptomatic. SYMPTOMS APPEAR: from 2 to 3 years of age and persist in many cases throughout life. IF UNTREATED: can result in loss of ability to be happy; loss of spontaneity; impotence; sexual dysfunction; epidemic of sexually transmitted disease. HOW YOU GET IT: Judeo-Christian tradition of morality; Catholic schools; 324 hours of TV a day when young. CURE: Respect and love yourself and others.

According to the Sisters’ [website](#), the pamphlet “was so well received that it went through a second printing within just a few months. It was paid for in part by sex party benefits and the sale of ashes from the burned down Barracks Bath House.”

In [following years](#), new orders of the Sisters cropped up in countless cities in the United States and beyond, raising money via over-the-top events for AIDS services and awareness campaigns. In 1983, the original order of San Francisco Sisters organized the city’s first AIDS vigil, marching behind a banner that read: “Fighting for Our Lives.” The Sisters were also early supporters of transgender rights.

In 1999, a few years into the long-awaited advent of effective treatment regimens for the treatment of HIV, Play Fair! was medically updated and [reissued](#)—but its tongue-in-cheek tone and admonitions against the dangers of guilt remained.

In 2016, more than 10,000 people participated in the Sisters' Easter Anniversary in Golden Gate Park. In 2023, The Los Angeles Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence were awarded a Community Hero Award at Dodger Stadium on Pride Night (despite the [protests of some](#)).

And today, 45 years after the Sisters were founded, their orders are going strong in cities worldwide, where they continue to serve their communities and promote human rights, respect for diversity and spiritual enlightenment.

© 2024 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<https://www.poz.com/article/sisters-doin>