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# Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Practice of Psychology

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*The American Psychological Foundation (APF) Gold Medal Awards recognize distinguished and enduring records of accomplishment in four areas of psychology: the application of psychology, the practice of psychology, psychology in the public interest, and the science of psychology. The 2011 recipient of the Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Practice of Psychology is Charles Silverstein.*

*Dorothy W. Cantor, president of the APF, will present the APF Gold Medal Awards at the 119th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association on August 5, 2011, at 4:00 p.m. Members of the 2011 APF Board of Trustees are Dorothy W. Cantor, president; William Howell, vice president/secretary; Gerald Koocher, treasurer; Elisabeth R. Straus, executive vice president/executive director; Norman Anderson; David H. Barlow, Camilla Benbow; Sharon Stephens Brehm; Charles L. Brewer; Connie Chan; Anthony Jackson; Ronald F. Levant; Sandra Shullman; Archie L. Turner; and Kurt Geisinger, APA Board of Directors liaison.*

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## Charles Silverstein

### Citation

“For his 40-year career challenging the criteria of social morality as the basis for diagnosing sexual disorders. For his presentation before the American Psychiatric Association to eliminate homosexuality as a mental disorder. For his founding two counseling centers for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in order to deliver unbiased treatment, and for his founding of the *Journal of Homosexuality*. For his development of graduate-level training programs for the treatment of sexually variant people. For his eight books, many chapters, and individual articles on the treatment of LGBT people using the modalities of individual, group, and couple therapy and the development of sex therapy techniques.”

### Biography

Brooklyn-born in 1935, Charles Silverstein was raised in an era when the local hero was someone who could hit a ball more than two sewers away. Unfortunately, he could not, so athletics was obviously not in his future. For reasons that are now buried in ancient history, he decided to train as a commercial photographer, and in 1949 he began high school at the School of Industrial Art (now the School of Art and Design) in New York City. After graduation, Silverstein worked briefly in the field of commercial pho-

tography, only to learn that he had neither the aptitude nor the interest for the field.

In 1955, Silverstein was accepted to the State University of New York at New Paltz, where he pursued a degree in early education. His family was thrilled by this decision since none of them had ever attended college; his father (a truck driver) had never finished elementary school, and his mother had not completed high school. His was a poor family, and Silverstein was required to earn his weekly spending money. At first, he washed dishes at the dormitory for the standard college wage of 75 cents an hour, but he was soon appointed official college photographer, earning the top salary for a student of 90 cents an hour (a beer cost 10 cents in those days).

At the time, New Paltz had a 7:1 ratio of women to men, so his friends back in Brooklyn were envious, assuming that his dating card would always be filled, but since Silverstein was gay and still “in the closet,” his social life was bleak. Academically, however, he flourished and graduated on the dean’s list.

Upon graduation, Silverstein began teaching fifth grade in Larchmont, New York. He became widely known in the community for his special projects, such as a program featuring abstract dance and electronic music, an animated film on the death of Abraham Lincoln, and his biggest project, another animated film on the Battle of the Alamo featuring a set constructed with 120 pounds of lump sugar and 1,000 toy soldiers. While savoring every day of teaching children, Silverstein decided to return to college and train as a clinical psychologist. He resigned from teaching in 1965.

He entered the doctoral clinical psychology program at City College of the City University of New York in the fall of 1965. In general, these were wonderful years because he was part of a small group of PhD students who studied together and became good friends. Unfortunately, Silverstein was no better at taking exams than he was at hitting a ball, and after three years of full-time study he failed his comprehensive exams twice and was terminated from the program in 1968.

The next year was emotionally very difficult. Silverstein was out of a job and out of a profession. He marked time as a staff psychologist at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx while making up his mind about the future. He decided that he would not be deterred in his plan to become a psychologist, and he was accepted to the doctoral program in social psychology at Rutgers University in New Jersey. His dissertation under the supervision of Peter Suedfeld was in the area of information processing, a line

**Charles  
Silverstein**



of research that stemmed from the claims of “brainwashing” after the Korean War. His study used 12 groups (eight of whom were control groups), all of whom spent a day in the college sensory deprivation chamber. When preparing for the Rutgers comprehensive exams, Silverstein studied and slept in the sensory deprivation chamber in order to mask out ambient noise. He passed the comprehensives and received his PhD in 1975.

During the Rutgers years, Silverstein lived a double life. By day he was a commonplace graduate student, but when he returned home to New York City at night he changed his garb into that of a gay liberationist. Those were the days when homosexuality was considered a crime, a sin, and a mental pathology, and never did he allow anyone at either City College or Rutgers to know he was gay. With the self-righteousness and determination of any civil rights advocate, he learned the advantages of coalition building in order to change society’s attitude toward homosexuality.

In 1971, Silverstein founded and became the first director of Identity House, a part-time gay and lesbian peer counseling center in the basement of the rectory of an Episcopal church. It was a place where gay women and men could talk about the problems of living in a discriminatory world. Two years later, he left Identity House to organize and direct the Institute for Human Identity (IHI), a full-time counseling center staffed by licensed professionals.

On February 8, 1973, Silverstein and a few others from the gay liberation movement appeared before the Nomenclature Committee of the American Psychiatric Association in order to petition for the removal of homosexuality from their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. Silverstein presented evidence to show that there was no psychological justification for keep-

ing the diagnosis of homosexuality in the *DSM*. Homosexuality was removed from the *DSM* in December 1973.

A year later, Silverstein was asked to serve as founding editor of the *Journal of Homosexuality*. Many notable psychologists joined him on the editorial board and contributed research papers to this interdisciplinary scholarly journal. The first issue was published in 1977.

Over the course of his career, Silverstein has participated in various activities to promote the advancement of gay rights. Although not a behaviorist himself, he joined the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy with the explicit goal of challenging the use of aversion therapy on gay people in order to change their sexual orientation. He was struck by the number of behaviorists who joined forces against aversion therapy, particularly Gerald Davison, who in his 1974 presidential address argued against sexual reorientation on moral grounds.

In 1977, while still director of the IHI, Silverstein wrote the first of his eight books, *A Family Matter: A Parents’ Guide to Homosexuality*. The same year he coauthored (with Edmund White) *The Joy of Gay Sex*, an illustrated sex manual that was banned and burned in some parts of America, England, and France. Many copies of the book were confiscated from American libraries. Silverstein resigned as director of IHI in 1977 but has continued his association with the counseling center as a supervisor of young therapists.

Along the way, Silverstein served as a faculty member at Rutgers University, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and New York University Medical School. In 2005, he received the Outstanding Professional Contribution Award from Division 44 (Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues) of the American Psychological Association (APA), and in 2009, a Presidential Citation from APA.

William Bory, Silverstein’s lover of 20 years, moved in with him on February 1, 1973, just a few days before the presentation to the psychiatrists. Neither anticipated a day when gay people might legally marry. Bory worked as a Legal Aid attorney in New York City until his death on November 12, 1993.

At present, Silverstein is a member of the New York State Psychological Association’s Committee on Ethical Practice and attends meetings of its Independent Practice division’s Executive Board, where he has appointed himself official yenta. A memoir of his work will be published in October 2011, and he maintains a private practice in New York City.

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