



## As DOMA Collapses, I Remember Libertarian Gay Activist Roy Childs

By Steve Mariotti – July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013

---

As someone who believes unconditionally in personal and economic liberty, the Supreme Court's decision to strike down the Defense of Marriage Act warmed my heart. It also brought back memories of one of the warmest people I've ever known, the great libertarian essayist, critic and gay activist Roy A. Childs, Jr. (1948-1992).

Roy edited the *Libertarian Review* from 1977 until it folded in 1981. Next, he joined the Cato institute as a research fellow, eventually becoming a policy analyst. He was best-known, though, for his brilliant essays for Laissez Faire Books -- the largest seller of libertarian-related books. But I will always remember Roy as the man who dared challenge Ayn Rand on not only Objectivism, but also on her die-hard homophobia. As someone who had met Rand and knew how fearsome she could be, I admired his nerve!

I was so impressed with Roy's essay, "An Open Letter to Ayn Rand," published in the Society for Individual Liberty's Individualist newsletter in 1969, that I wrote him a letter congratulating him on having the courage to stand up to her. I will never forget this sentence from Roy's essay: "Let us walk forward into the sunlight, Miss Rand. You belong with us."

I'm not sure that I fully grasped the significance of that line when I first read it, but when I learned that Roy was a leader in the gay liberation movement, it became even more resonant.

I met Roy when I moved to New York City from Flint, Michigan in 1979. I was 26 and had left my position as a financial analyst at Ford Motor Company to become an entrepreneur. My friend Don Lavoie -- one of the top young economic scholars of the time -- was getting married and moving out of New York to chair the economic department at George Mason University. I was taking over his room in a three-bedroom apartment at 62 Pierpont Street in Brooklyn Heights, and Roy Childs was going to be one of my roommates.

Back in Michigan, I had helped David Nolan draft the December 11, 1971 platform that had launched the Libertarian Party. The platform declared: "We hold that each individual has the right to exercise sole dominion over his own life, and has the right to live his life in whatever manner he chooses, so long as he does not forcibly interfere with the equal right of others to live their lives in whatever manner they choose."

We believed that right extended to all people, including homosexuals. I crafted the party plank that read: "We favor the repeal of all laws creating 'crimes without victims' now incorporated in

Federal, state and local laws -- such as laws on voluntary sexual relations, drug use, gambling, and attempted suicide."

That was a pretty radical idea at a time when people were likely to lose their jobs or even be imprisoned for being gay.

We had been inspired by Austrian School economist F.A. Hayek, the Nobel Prize winner who argued in his 1960 book *The Constitution of Liberty* that rule of law requires everyone, including those who wield governmental powers, to be bound by the same set of rules. Hayek called this principle *isonomia* (Greek for "equal law"). It has come to be known as "equality before the law" or "equal treatment under the law."

When I met Roy Childs on November 6 1979, he was lying on his back in the middle of my friend Charles Fowler's living room. At 387 pounds, Roy had a serious weight problem, and often felt most comfortable lying flat on his back. Without looking up he said, "You're the famous Steve Mariotti. Thanks for your letter! You're a handsome devil -- too bad you're straight."

I laughed and knew then that we would be friends for life. I just didn't realize how short a time that would be for him.

Roy was a magnificent, larger-than-life man with an incredible knack for making you feel important and interesting. He listened to my ravings patiently and encouraged me to develop my idea that low-income people could become self-empowered through entrepreneurship. He understood my contempt for Robert McNamara and hatred of the Vietnam War, and my love for SDS leader Carl Oglesby.

Roy was profoundly intelligent and well read, yet never pedantic. His courage was inspiring; he was fearless. He was indifferent to money and fame; he was a lover of ideas and of freedom. We shared books and ideas, and would talk for hours. We became intellectual soul mates and best friends.

One day while I was reading in the living room, Roy came and got me. He said "We are going on a surprise trip." Don Lavoie came along and we all squashed into a taxi. Roy's massive girth took up most of the back seat, so once we got into Manhattan, we asked the cabbie to stop on Water Street. I got out and sat in the front seat with the driver. This made us all laugh so hard that I almost forgot my curiosity over our destination.

As we drove up Sixth Avenue, Roy asked me to close my eyes. He told me how much he admired the language I had crafted with David Nolan and Carl Oglesby for the Libertarian Party platform. He said he had often quoted my words, and that they had become important in the international struggle for gay rights.

Finally, the cab stopped on Greenwich Street. Next thing I knew, Roy was leading me down the stairs into Stonewall Inn, the legendary gay bar where an early morning police raid on June 28, 1969 had sparked the riots that had kicked off the gay liberation movement.

Back then, Stonewall was one of the few places where the poorest and most marginalized people in the gay community -- drag queens, hustlers and homeless gay youth -- could congregate. Police raids on gay bars were routine, but that night, enough was enough. The officers quickly lost control of the situation at the Stonewall Inn, as a crowd of gay residents of Greenwich

Village poured into the narrow street to protest the ongoing police harassment. Riots erupted over several nights, while during the day Village residents pulled together, organizing activist groups and founding several gay newspapers.

To be honest, though, the main thing I was thinking as we descended into Stonewall was that I hoped people wouldn't think I was gay.

I felt nervous, but Roy seemed to know everyone in this historic bar. To my surprise, Roy had me stand on a stool and as he waved a small towel to get everyone's attention, he announced, "This is Steve Mariotti -- the one who with Carl Oglesby wrote the platform that made us human beings."

I received a standing ovation from the entire bar. I was deeply moved; it was the greatest compliment I've ever received. I gave Roy a hug and kiss and spent the rest of the evening shaking hands and hearing stories.

Soon after, unfortunately, Roy's health deteriorated, and he began to go downhill rapidly. He lived now on 19th Street and 7th Avenue, and I went to see him to say goodbye.

Almost every gay leader in Manhattan was there. I sat by Roy's side as he lay on his back in the boiling heat naked, sweating and groaning. He was over 415 pounds, and he was dying. Gay porn was playing on a large-screen TV, and I was so embarrassed that I sat with my back to the screen. It was heartbreaking to see my dear friend in such bad shape.

Roy was great friends with Charles and David Koch, and we all admired his rapport with Charles, who can be shy and standoffish. It was Charles who sent Roy to the Pritikin Institute in Florida to lose weight, which is unfortunately where Roy fell, had to be hospitalized and died at only 43 in 1992. I was a speaker at his funeral.

Roy Childs was a hero, a true freedom fighter. He was a wonderful friend and will forever be etched in my mind as an embodiment of kindness and leadership. I wish he were still around to see how the gay rights movement take a giant step forward with the Supreme Court's historic decision last week. He would be thrilled.