

FORMER BAY WINDOWS EDITOR TO BE HONORED WITH HISTORYMAKER AWARD

The Boston Phoenix scooped the *Boston Globe*—and most of the *Boston media*—on revealing the systematic cover-up of child sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. Many newspapers, ranging from the *Globe* to the *Patriot Ledger* to the *Fall River Herald*, among others, had reported on various cases of allegations of sexual abuse by priests. But it wasn't until March 23, 2001, when the weekly *Phoenix* published "Cardinal sin," a 7000-word investigative piece by Kristen Lombardi detailing the sordid history of pedophile priest John Geoghan and Cardinal Bernard Law's cover-up of his underling's sexual abuse of child parishioners, that the public was given a glimpse of the Archdiocese's deliberate practice of protecting serial child molesters within its ranks, and its no-holds-barred legal maneuvering to fend off victims who sought justice. The piece was the first in a multiple-award winning series of *Phoenix* editorials and stories, edited by Susan Ryan-Vollmar, that detailed the abuse and Law's complicity.

In the days following publication of "Cardinal sin" the *Boston Herald* cited it at length in an editorial calling for Law to be compelled to testify in the litigation in order to give Geoghan's victims some closure. David Brudnoy devoted an hour to the article on his revered WBZ radio show, amplifying it to a national audience. And nine months later, the *Globe* revisited the Geoghan story for the first article in [its own blockbuster series on the Archdiocese's pedophile priest problem](#).

As we all well know by now, the *Globe* Spotlight Team's sprawling reportage brought about Law's resignation and elevated the Catholic clergy sex abuse scandal to an international story. The paper also rightfully earned a Pulitzer prize for its exhaustive work, which also served as the basis for the Oscar-winning film, "Spotlight." But there's no doubt that the *Phoenix's* foundational work influenced Spotlight reporters, as author David France makes clear in his meticulously researched and sourced 2004 book, "Our Fathers: The Secret Life of the Catholic Church in an Age of Scandal." In a chapter detailing the genesis of the *Globe's* investigative series, France notes that when then-editor Marty Baron emailed Spotlight Team editor Walter Robinson to ask whether there was merit to victims' claims that Law helped cover up Geoghan's crimes, Robinson's first move was to order his team to "reread the *Phoenix* pieces" and contact attorneys, as the *Phoenix* had, that specialize in clergy sexual abuse cases, to see if they could advance the story.

"The *Globe* took the story places the *Phoenix* never could have," said Ryan-Vollmar. "I'm obviously proud of the *Phoenix's* contributions, but without the *Globe's* crusade, victims would never have been vindicated and as incredible as this is to imagine, Cardinal Law would probably still be in Boston and priests would still be abusing children."

An unintended, but beneficial, consequence of the *Globe's* coverage, Ryan-Vollmar added, was that by 2004, church leaders and their lobbyists, politically weakened by the sordid revelations, were unable to exert their once-considerable influence on Beacon Hill in opposition to same-sex marriage. [Though they tried mightily](#) with an aggressive lobbying campaign, ultimately conservative Catholic legislators like state Sen. Marian Walsh and state Reps. Christopher Fallon, Kathy Teahan, and David Torrisi bucked the church to cast critical votes in support of marriage equality.

In a year when the *Globe* enjoyed renewed attention to its coverage of the Catholic clergy abuse scandal thanks to "Spotlight," it is fitting that The History Project, the keepers of Boston's LGBTQ history since 1980, will [honor Susan Ryan-Vollmar with its 2016 HistoryMaker Award Oct. 5](#).

The award is given annually to an individual whose lifetime achievements have had a significant and positive effect on Boston's LGBT community. Past honorees include Congressman Barney Frank; Mary L. Bonauto, Civil Rights Project director at GLBTQ Advocates & Defenders; Grace Sterling Stowell, executive director of the Boston Alliance of GLBT Youth (BAGLY); state Representative Byron Rushing; and Abe Rybeck, founder of The Theatre Offensive.

"As the world celebrates those who built upon Susan's solid, quieter work," said The History Project in announcing the award, "we are thrilled to honor Susan as a true HistoryMaker."

Daring 'to go where no one else would'

As a former *Bay Windows* reporter who worked for Ryan-Vollmar during her tenure as editor of the paper from 2005-2008, I can attest that Ryan-Vollmar's influence did not stop when she left the *Phoenix*.

She became editor of *Bay Windows* at a critical point in LGBT history. Locally, activists were locked in the pitched battle to defend marriage equality in the only state where it was legal. Nationally, George W. Bush had just won re-election thanks in part to anti-gay marriage amendment ballot initiatives in 11 states, which all passed handily. Our lives and our rights were under what felt like constant attack by an emboldened right wing.

As LGBT organizations pursued the necessary—and highly effective—strategy of gently changing hearts and minds through patient persuasion, the times also called for more aggression in seizing the moral high ground in the public debate on LGBT rights and exposing the hate-filled agenda of our opponents. Ryan-Vollmar was fearless in calling out the extremists working to derail the quest for LGBT equality.

Perhaps more important, though, was her insistence on doing the same to the mainstream political, religious, and media figures that abetted them.

Case in point: The death of Pope John Paul II, just four months into Ryan-Vollmar's tenure as *Bay Windows*' editor. Mainstream media headlines lauded a "hero for the ages," and an "all embracing man of action," but his decades of anti-gay rhetoric and behavior were only mentioned in passing, if at all. Ryan-Vollmar immediately sketched out a different way to cover his death that resulted in a powerful issue that thoroughly catalogued the pope's voluminous attacks on our community. The centerpiece was a front page editorial, "[The Holy Father's homophobia](#)," in which she spoke an inconvenient truth in the first sentence: "The pope hated gays."



An inconvenient truth: Ryan-Vollmar noted Pope John Paul II's homophobia upon his death. Image courtesy of The History Project.

"The editorial content dared to go where no one else would by criticizing the Pope in very Catholic Boston," recalled Sue O'Connell, *Bay Windows*' co-publisher. "And the issue also called out the mainstream media for failing to acknowledge his homophobia."

The coverage generated the angriest letters to the editor I saw in my nine years at the paper, and "Beat the Press" host Emily Rooney lambasted it on the air (thus proving Ryan-Vollmar's critique of the mainstream media). As is often the case, what can seem impolitic and outrageous in the moment is, with hindsight, seen as courageous. That's what happened with *Bay Windows*' coverage of the pope's death when, a year later, the issue won a Special Award in the New England Press Association's (now the New England Newspaper & Press Association) annual Better Newspaper Competition. "A newspaper must be courageous," the judges wrote. "Bay Windows showed its courage by taking the rest of the media to task for ignoring an important issue."

Coverage of the Pope set the tone for *Bay Windows*' approach to the news: it would be aggressive and unsparing. In 2007, when then-Gov. Mitt Romney launched his first campaign for president, Ryan-Vollmar had my colleague Ethan Jacobs and I sift through public documents and previous news articles not available online to compile Romney's considerable record of pro-LGBT statements and actions. As he campaigned, Romney tried to obscure his pro-gay history in Massachusetts and courted his party's right wing by decrying same-sex marriage and denigrating LGBT families. Among the many Romney items published on Dec. 7, 2007 were extensive excerpts from an interview Romney did with *Bay Windows* during his 1994 challenge to Sen. Ted Kennedy in which Romney cast himself as "a centrist and a moderate" who could more effectively advocate on gay issues than the "extremist" Kennedy. With follow-ups by the *Globe*, the *New York Times*, Associated Press, and CNN, the coverage helped cement the perception of Romney as an opportunistic flip-flopper. He was out of the race by early February.

"Bay Windows was always proficient at boxing above our class, but when Susan joined us as editor, it was a bit like Muhammad Ali becoming coach of the local Y's boxing team. She had a vision for the paper that was beyond what most LGBT newspapers had at that time," said O'Connell, who noted that Ryan-Vollmar's relatively unusual career path—returning to the LGBT press after succeeding at a much larger and more mainstream outlet—meant that she had more experiences to draw upon than many other editors at LGBT papers at the time.

'A powerful news source'

That experience was needed for *Bay Windows*' coverage of legislative efforts to undo the Supreme Judicial Court's 2003 ruling in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, which made Massachusetts the first state to allow same-sex couples to marry. As the battle to put an anti-gay marriage amendment on a statewide ballot raged on, drawing intense media coverage from every outlet in the state, *Bay Windows*, with a reporting staff of just two, made them all play catch up.

The paper regularly broke news about decisions by key lawmakers like House Majority Leader John Rogers and state Rep. Anthony Petrucci to withdraw their support for the anti-gay amendment. *Bay Windows* also published investigative stories that exposed the small band of anti-gay bigots funding the supposed "grassroots movement" against marriage equality.



AstroTurf: Bay Windows investigated the tiny cabal behind the anti-gay marriage movement in Mass. Image courtesy of The History Project

"During the marriage fights, *Bay Windows* was a powerful news source," said Marc Solomon, the former executive director of MassEquality and author of *Winning Marriage: The Inside Story of How Same-sex Couples Took on the Politicians and Pundits and Won*. "I know for a fact that Speaker Sal DiMasi and his staff—as well as the top staff of Senate President Therese Murray—read it regularly and got a more in-depth understanding of where the pulse of the LGBT community was on the marriage fight, and how the community was feeling about those crucial lawmakers' activities."

Even as *Bay Windows* reported critically on anti-gay marriage activism, Ryan-Vollmar also insisted that *Bay Windows* cover MassEquality just as closely. The paper held "all of us accountable—advocates, lawmakers, and the like," said Solomon, recalling a series the paper did on MassEquality's lobbying strategy. "It led to some tough internal conversations and we then hired two lobbyists who were very close to Senate President Therese Murray."

In the end, Solomon said, "Susan represented the best in advocacy journalism ... she performed a crucial function and for that, our community in New England and around the country should be grateful."

Helping others share their stories

In her current capacity as a communications consultant, Ryan-Vollmar engages in what she describes as "media advocacy," by helping shape news and opinion coverage on issues ranging from homelessness to civil legal aid to the arts. But she continues to amplify the stories of the LGBT community. As part of the communications team of the Massachusetts Transgender Equal Rights Coalition (of which I was also a member), she helped shape public understanding of the need for civil rights protection for transgender people. She regularly advocates on behalf of people living with HIV/AIDS, which disproportionately impacts gay men and transgender women. And last year, Ryan-Vollmar traveled with the Boston Gay Men's Chorus on its historic tour of the Middle East. While in Turkey, the Chorus bumped up against a hostile government, which unleashed tear gas and water cannons on participants in Istanbul's LGBT Pride March, which the Chorus was supposed to lead. The incident was covered heavily by international press, and Ryan-Vollmar led the Chorus' media response.

"Susan continued to tell our story—keeping the focus on the Chorus, the music and the mission," said Craig Coogan, the group's executive director. Communications efforts for the tour netted the Chorus a 2016 Excellence Award in Communications from the Massachusetts Nonprofit Network.

"The opportunity to help others share their stories and tell sometimes uncomfortable truths has been a gift," said Ryan-Vollmar. "As the campaign for president is showing us now, there's a desperate need for truth-telling. There's nothing to be gained by pretending that people who say racist things aren't racists. Or those who engage in sexism aren't sexist. Or that someone who can be baited with a tweet is qualified to be president. There is power in naming this stuff for what it is and giving voice to those who might otherwise be silent. That's one of the many ways in which the world becomes a better place."

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