



Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans
History Month

Every February since 2005

Gilbert Baker (June 2, 1951 – March 31, 2017) was an American artist, activist, and designer of the rainbow flag. He was born in Chanute, Kansas. His father was a judge and his mother was a teacher.

Gilbert served in the US Army from 1970 to 1972. He was stationed in San Francisco at the beginning of the gay rights movement. After an honourable discharge, he was taught to sew by fellow activist Mary Dunn. He used his skill to create banners for protest marches. Later, Gilbert used the drag name "Busty Ross", an allusion to Betsy Ross, the apocryphal creator of the US stars and stripes.

By 1978, activists in the Castro District of San Francisco — including Cleve Jones, Gilbert and rising politician Harvey Milk — needed a symbol for their movement. Gilbert didn't like two common symbols: the Greek letter lambda seemed obscure, and the pink triangle that the Nazis had forced gay concentration camp victims to wear was too dark. Harvey urged Gilbert find a symbol of hope.

Huddled in the attic gallery of the Gay Community Centre at 330 Grove Street, Baker and thirty volunteers hand-dyed and stitched the first flags, creating a prominent symbol of pride in the LGBTQ community. These original flags had eight colours representing aspects of the human experience: hot pink, red, orange, yellow, green, turquoise, indigo, and violet. They represented: sex, life, healing, sun, serenity with nature, art, harmony, and spirit. Today, hot pink and turquoise are not used. Gilbert refused to trademark his creation, seeing it as a symbol for the LGBT community.

"We needed something beautiful, something from us," Gilbert said. "The rainbow is so perfect because it really fits our diversity in terms of race, gender, ages, all of those things. Plus, it's a natural flag — it's from the sky!"

In 1994, Gilbert moved to New York, continuing his creativity and activism, including the world's largest flag (at that time) celebrating the 25th anniversary of Stonewall. In 2003, for the 25th anniversary of his rainbow, he created his largest yet — stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Florida Strait.

In 2015, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired examples of the flag, curators ranking it an internationally recognised symbol. The rainbow has marked victories like equal marriage and mourned victims such as those in Orlando, on some of the world's grandest canvasses - from the White House to the World Trade Centre, and more.

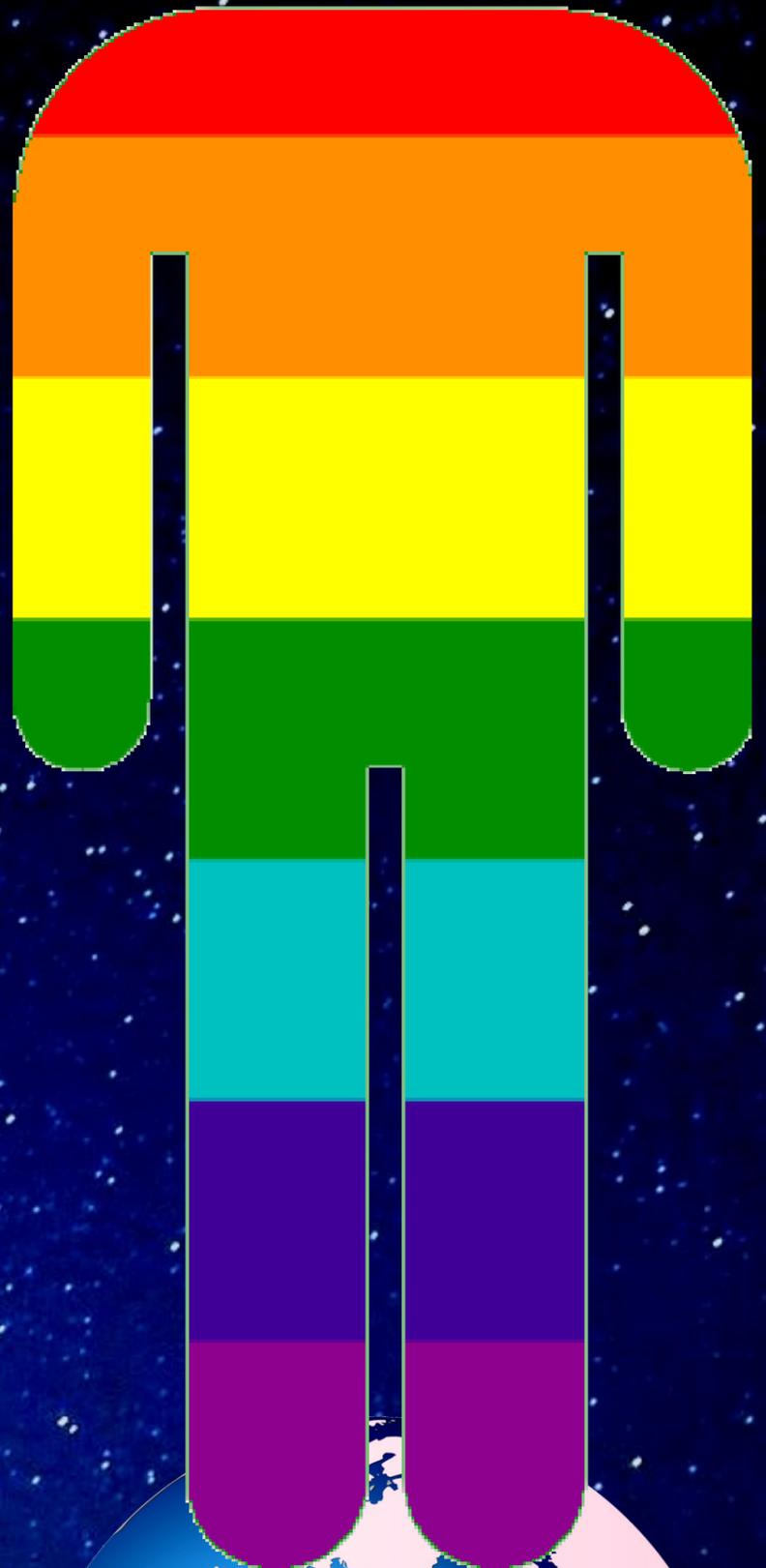
Gilbert died at home in his sleep on March 31, 2017 aged 65. California senator Scott Wiener said he "helped define the modern LGBT movement". In April a font in his honour, 'Gilbert', was released. Harvey Milk's nephew Stuart tweeted "Godspeed Gilbert Baker, not just the now iconic flag Uncle Harvey inspired you to create, but your rainbow lives on in all of us!"

Cleve Jones, Gilbert's best friend for 45 years, remembers him as a creative, big-hearted force of nature. "He was still a hippie at heart, part of the psychedelic generation."

mapping our world

2018

Geography



Gilbert Baker