

Emeryville COOL Fun Facts

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I was excited to learn that in May, Emeryville's city council named the small street in front of the Emery High School gym after former teacher Steve Dain. While Dain's legacy is well-known in LGBTQAI+ communities, I thought our residents might appreciate the chance to get to know this ground-breaking hero in our town's history. PLEASE TAKE A LOOK.

Steve Dain was a beloved P.E. teacher at Emery High who taught 7-12th grade girls' PE from 1966 to 1975 (when he was awarded teacher of the year). What led Dain to stop teaching at Emery High, you ask? Nothing other than good ol' transphobia!

In November 1975, Dain joined a ground-breaking program at Stanford that provided hormone therapy to transgender people. He took a leave of

absence from teaching in December, planning to return in the fall. After a few months experiencing living openly as male, he decided to undergo gender confirmation surgery in May. He planned to transfer to a new school district, but the Emeryville school board convinced him to stay in a hearing just weeks after his surgery (PROPS TO STEVE, a school board meeting is one of the last places I'd want to go while recovering from any type of surgery!).

The situation took a turn when Emeryville appointed a new school superintendent over the summer, Lewis Stommel. Stommel seems to have been a total bigot obsessed with persecuting Dain. When Dain tried to attend a back-to-school meeting in the fall, Stommel made a citizen's arrest of him, saying that he was "trespassing" and creating a "willful disturbance" at the meeting. Stommel later suspended Dain from teaching at Emery High.

As a former teacher myself, let me tell you what happens at a back-to-school faculty meeting: nothing important.

This is to say that there is no way Dain was disrupting a meeting, and in fact, was doing a great deal for students (and colleagues) in being a role model for living openly as his authentic self.

As a testament to Steve's positive influence, 15 year-old Tamara Sutton, presented a petition to the school board signed by about half of the students at Emery High calling for Dain's reinstatement. Sutton's letter states that Dain was "a very good teacher" who "taught us more than physical education" and that he gave students "a sense of pride, self worth, and fair play."

Dain's teaching colleagues were almost unanimously in support of him, as was the teachers' union (in another shout-out to organized labor, the CTA

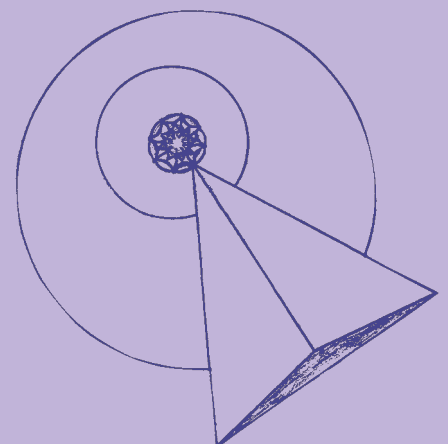
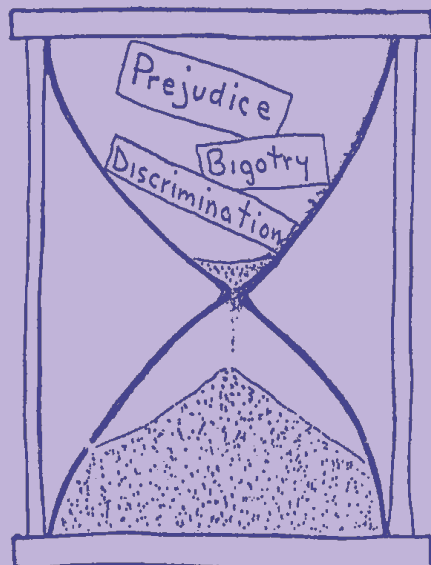
provided him a lawyer). However, after more than two years of fighting his termination in court, Dain gave in and resigned, and never returned to teaching at Emery High.

While a travesty, Dain's experience with EUSD turned him into a beloved icon and mentor to trans people around the country. I first learned of him earlier this year through reading trans activist and author Lou Sullivan's diaries *We Both Laughed in Pleasure* (the only book I've completed during this pandemic!). Sullivan describes meeting with Dain to explore his own gender identity and gain access to transition. For many trans men of this era, meeting with Dain has often been described as a rite of passage.

I recommend checking out the *LA Times'* coverage of the story from November 22, 1976 where Stommel goes on a long rant about Dain's genitals, insists on referring to Dain as "it", and perpetuates racist stereotypes about the mostly Black student population of Emery High. He says Emeryville is full of "broken families and confused kids." SOUNDS LIKE A TOP-NOTCH ATTITUDE TOWARDS EDUCATING OUR YOUTH.

Let's remember that the 1970s were a decade filled with mounting opposition to LGBTQAI+ rights. This included California's Proposition 6, the failed ballot initiative that attempted to ban gay people from teaching (more proof that THE 1970S WERE A HELLSCAPE NOT UNLIKE TODAY).

Shout-out to our city council for this making this recent decision to honor a hero in trans history. Let's also consider going a step further with my totally unsolicited suggestion to the school board: how about we rename the entire school after Dain (after all, Joseph Emery already has an entire city in his name)? Go big or go home! (P.S. just a reminder, no decision is "apolitical")



Do you have an unsung Emeryville hero you'd like others to know about? Hot takes on people our places are named for? Ideas for future issues?

Leave a message at (510) 519-7283