

“Identity House started forming in 1971. Well, following 1969 there was a proliferation of organizations around gay life at that point. IHouse became one aspect of the proliferation. There was the Women’s Firehouse, Columbia had the Gay Academic Union where I used to do workshops, there was the women’s coffee house just below Christopher Street, which was a little nook that had a coffee house downstairs and I would do panel discussions... so there was a lot of stuff happening at the same time. IHouse was one of the only ones strictly devoted to mental health and enabled people to talk one-on-one so they didn’t have to go to the bars. It wasn’t part of the sex scene but of course all sorts of liaisons sprang up during that period. (Laughing) A lot of hanky-panky was going on.

Michael Altman and I were working for the city as case workers and we start hanging out together and we don’t know each other as gay yet. One day we’re having lunch and I’m talking about living upstate with Lucy and he’s talking about friends and we sort of come out to each other. We meet in the East Village apartment of Bernice Goodman and her partner Bea Kreloff. The meeting was to talk about putting together a peer counseling and psychotherapy service for gay people. Mike and I had no training at the time. We were just caseworkers. Two Gestalt therapists who were there, Patrick Kelley, Karen Humphrey, and a couple of others who were either Existential or Humanistic therapists push for it to be modeled on a format of consensus and membership similar to the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. The idea was to prevent the organization from becoming hierarchical and bureaucratic. We start to meet regularly to flesh out the way the organization will be structured and the son of Bea Kreloff, a graphic artist, comes up with the first logo. We all figure out how best to provide services to the LGB community and we start counseling at The Church of the Beloved Disciple on 28th Street! All of a sudden I’m working as a peer counselor and people are starting to come in after fearfully walking up and down outside before they get the courage to come in to talk. From the beginning we attract a wide range of people some of whom also had a mentally illness and we provide resources and referrals. As peer counselors we are all in supervision groups with therapists who also begin joining training groups on various mental health topics. (Laughing) I was eating, sleeping, and dreaming Identity House on top of having a full time job!

So, here we are putting together a new organization. All the therapists and peers who remained with IHouse begin meeting again to form a new structure that will preserve peer counseling as the main focus with psychotherapy as back up and equally important an organization that maintains gender parity. A group of us were trying to write bylaws and a mission statement and we’re trying to figure out how we can be a normal non-profit except none of us know what we’re doing! (Laughing) We were focused on bringing people out of the fog and bringing people out of the darkness. That was the exciting part! It was also at a time when the marches started. I didn’t march until probably the third year because I worried about work. I was working for the city and I didn’t know what the reaction would be. In 1973 I realized I needed more training and began at the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. I started seeing clients and practicing psychotherapy under supervision because there was no licensing. The NYIGT was the only institute that had always accepted gay people for training and to be faculty and it became a third home for me.”

Lee Zevy, 2019