

Pioneering Michigan activist Hal Lawson dies at 78

BY TIM RETZLOFF

FLINT—Hal Lawson, founder of the Detroit Mattachine, the first formal organization for homosexuals in Michigan, and an activist affiliated with innumerable local and statewide gay groups for over 45 years, died Saturday, June 21 at Genesys Regional Medical Center in Grand Blanc. He was 78 and had been in declining health for several months.

He was born Halsey Irving Lawson Jr. in Detroit on Jan. 28, 1925, the only child of Halsey Sr. and Elizabeth. During World War II, at age 18, he was drafted into the U.S. Army. He fought in the European theater, served with the postwar occupation of Germany, and worked for Armed Forces Radio. Military service also gave him his initial opportunities to act on his same-sex desires.

Upon returning home in 1946, Lawson attended Wayne State University, becoming active in the campus radio guild and taking courses from faculty involved in “The Lone Ranger” radio show, then broadcast from Detroit. He soon met Jai Moore, a classmate who introduced him to local gay life and such bars

as the Ten Eleven, LaRosa’s, and the Golden Slipper. At a cocktail party celebrating a DIA exhibit opening, Lawson met another lifelong friend, David Whitney Brewer.

When Lawson’s parents moved to California in the mid-1950s, he visited the offices of the early homosexual rights group ONE and made contact with gay pioneers Jim Kepner and W. Dorr Legg. Picking up a copy of the Mattachine Review, he returned to Detroit with enthusiasm for the emerging homophile movement.

On August 26, 1958, Lawson, Moore, and Brewer convened with an agent of the national Mattachine Society to form the Detroit Area Council, with Lawson as its chair. The group had a promising start, holding meetings, publishing a newsletter, establishing a library, and slowly building its tiny membership, until news came back in the summer of 1959 that a spy had infiltrated a Mattachine convention in Denver that Lawson had attended. As he later recounted, “We were sort of peeking out of the closet. We immediately slammed the door.” His move to Flint for romantic reasons that October helped seal the end of the Detroit chapter in March 1960.

After the demise of Detroit Mattachine, Lawson nonetheless remained dedicated to gay causes. He traveled back and forth to the Motor City to participate in ONE in Detroit when it was formed in 1965. Then, following the spark of the Stonewall riots, he became increasingly active in various organizations, from the Association of Suburban People in the 1970s to Unlimited Seniors in the 1980s to PRIDE Community Center in the 1990s. He served as education officer for the Michigan Organization for Human Rights and as correspondence secretary for Dignity-Integrity/Flint. Lawson put his recognizable announcer’s bellow to use as an emcee for various functions and as a host to the gay radio program “Another Voice.”

Perhaps dearest to his heart was his connection with in the Unitarian Universalist Association. Lawson’s role in the early formation of the UU Gay Caucus was chronicled in Paul Landen’s 1992 Michigan State University dissertation on sexuality issues within the church. “Hal was one of the elders of our congregation,” said Rev. Lisa M.S. Friedman, minister of the UU Church of Flint, where Lawson was a member for over 40 years. “He was always very

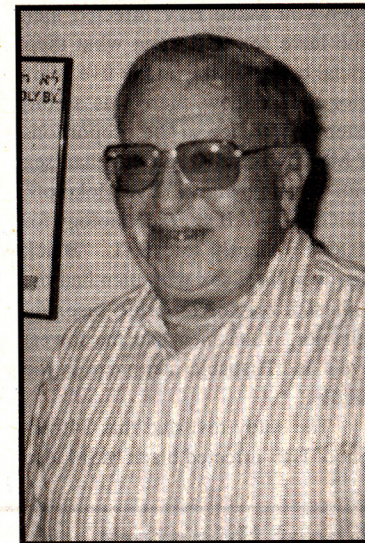
outgoing,” she added.

Lawson was also long involved in many non-gay groups, including the ACLU, the AARP, and Mensa, an international organization for people with high IQs. “The most interesting thing about Hal Lawson was his mental capacity,” recalled Bob Hill, past president of Dignity-Integrity/Flint president. “He was unique in his ability to read and remember.”

“The big G word—gregarious,” was how Detroit Mattachine co-founder Jai Moore described his longtime friend. “He participated in everything and did a good job in everything he did.”

“He was always a stalwart for the gay rights cause,” said Edward C. Weber, retired curator for the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan, which now houses the Detroit Mattachine papers that Lawson and Brewer had saved. “They formed this society that made them outlaws for the time,” Weber noted with admiration.

Lawson held countless jobs over the years, working for radio stations WJR, WWJ, and WTAC, selling real estate, and teaching at Mott Community College and General Motors Institute. He was also



Hal Lawson.

onetime announcer for the Toledo Mud Hens.

He was preceded in death by his companion David Brewer in 2001. He is survived by many friends and loved ones, including close friend John Greenwood.

A memorial service for Hal Lawson will be held at 3 p.m., Saturday, July 19 at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Flint, G-2474 S. Ballenger Hwy. in Flint. Contributions will help pay for the costs of his cremation.