

“OFF TO A RUNNING START”

The meeting that launched DC Front Runners

In the August 7, 1981, issue of the *Washington Blade*, a small item was featured in the ‘Close Up’ section on page 12 (shown here) announcing an open invitation to attend an organizational meeting for “all Gay runners interested in starting up a running club.” This was the spark that led to the formation of the lasting and prosperous DC Front Runners running, walking and social club. The meeting was also listed as a Washington-area event in the ‘Calendar’ section (shown on next page).

After discovering some old issues of the *Washington Blade* recently made available online ([Dig DC Library](#)) as PDF files, this writer found a humble but auspicious listing. It pinpoints the birthday of the club. The first formal meeting was August 13, 1981. Coincidentally, the meeting time of 7:00 pm on a Thursday is now one of the gathering mainstays for our club’s weekly fun runs. (The current Thursday-night run was added during the 1990s.) The meeting took place at the Gay Community Center on Church Street, between 14th and 15th Street, in what is now a small, empty two-story shop building around the corner from VIDA Fitness at Metropole in the Logan Circle neighborhood, and was certainly part of a what many might call a rather sketchy part of town at the time.

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A-12 — WASHINGTON BLADE — August 7, 1981

OFF TO A RUNNING START

All Gay runners interested in starting up a running club are invited to attend an organizational meeting to be held at the Gay Community Center, 1469 Church Street, N.W., August 13 at 7.

A small ad hoc steering committee has already begun considering items for the meeting agenda, including the choice of a name, the formal club structure, the possibility of organizing a seasonal race, and the options available for affiliating with local and national Gay and non-Gay running organizations.

The group will also discuss the 4.4 mile fun run scheduled for 9 a.m., August 15 on the towpath along the canal, starting underneath Key Bridge.

For further info, call 332-6619 (Chris) or 265-3277 (Dan).

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How did it start? An announcement in the *Washington Blade*, Aug. 7, 1981.

It’s fascinating to view the club’s origin in the context of the era — the ad ran the same week that MTV (the first 24-hour video music channel) launched! In 1981: President Ronald Reagan was shot; Sandra Day O’Connor became the first female U.S. Supreme Court justice; NASA tested the first Space Shuttle in orbit; the first London Marathon began with only 7,500 runners; and here in D.C. the *Washington Star* ceased publication and filed for bankruptcy. The *Human Rights Campaign Fund* was less than a year old; Billie Jean King became the first prominent professional athlete to come out as a lesbian; and the *Moral Majority* started its anti-homosexual crusade. AIDS was still unknown, but in 1981 the CDC reported five homosexual men in LA with a “rare form of pneumonia”. The disease would have a grievous impact on the group in the years ahead.

Looking at these historical pages of the *Washington Blade* yields an engrossing glimpse of the gay community in D.C. In 1981, there were possibly fewer LGBT-oriented organizations and clubs — and ‘LGBT’ was not yet a term of choice — but one can see an impressive number of pioneering groups: D.C.’s Different Drummers were fundraising to go to Provincetown; Parents & Friends of Gays (later PFLAG) were meeting;

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Close Up

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Tow Path Fun Run circa August, 1981. Jim Marks, Dan Weil, Chris Winter, and Joe DePoma.

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and the Whitman-Walker Clinic advertised a Gay Men's VD Clinic. There were activities for gay ice skaters, bridge players, gay married men, "Older Wiser Lesbians", bible-study, deaf, and Jewish groups, and many more. In addition to the Gay Community Center, there was a Gay Activists Alliance (GAA, later GLAA). There was a Walt Whitman Republican Club and a Gertrude Stein Democratic Club. The *Lost & Found* nightclub was throwing a "Nancy Reagan Look-A-Like Contest" to benefit the D.C. Sports Association. The Lambda Rising bookstore, The Bike Shop at District Hardware, Metropolitan Community Church, Dignity Washington, as well as a number of other churches and synagogues were all advertising in the city's gay newspaper.

Against this background, we had Dan Weil and Chris Winter [the club's first coordinator] inviting gay running enthusiasts to form a club. They hadn't formally decided on the name yet, they hadn't agreed upon any bylaws, and they hadn't decided yet to link to a national or international network. But all of these issues were on the agenda for discussion at the formational meeting, as was the consideration of organizing a seasonal race of their own.

There were previous Pride runs — at least as early as 1979 the GAA advertised that they were sponsoring a "Gay Pride Run to be held during Gay Pride Week". And there would be several versions of financially successful DCFR club races, Pride runs, or pledge runs put on, but it would be over 30 years later that an annual race event of the capacity and scale of the current **DC Front Runners Pride Run** was inaugurated. It's a delightful coincidence, that the new 5K event series uses the tagline "**GET YOUR PRIDE WEEKEND OFF TO A RUNNING START**", echoing so closely, albeit through complete happenstance, the founders' very headline that activated the club back in 1981.

Now, thirty-six years after that modest newspaper listing, the club is steadfast, dynamic, and industrious; grown to more than 360 members, with probably thousands having run with the club over the years.

— Seth Kalish

 DC Front Runners, August 2017

*Lesbian Resource and Counseling Center: Rap Group; 7:30-9:30 pm, open to all Lesbians. Individual peer counseling and crisis counseling, 7-10 pm, walk-in, no appt neccy; 1519 P St., NW. For info, 265-4666 or 229-8890.
 August 13
 *Gay Running Club Organizational Meeting. Gay Comm. Center, 1469 Church St. NW; 7 pm. For info, 332-6619 (Chris) or 265-3277 (Dan). (See Close Up)
 *Parents & Friends of Gays/D.C., meeting; 8 pm. For info, 726-3223.
 *Benefit for Different Drummers at the Exile; (9th & K Sts., NW) Concert performances at 10 pm & midnight; \$2 admission. For info, 671-8817 (Mary); 667-1633 (Mike).
 August 20
 *Parents & Friends of Gays/Annandale, meeting; 8 pm. For info, 726-3223

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