The struggle for equality continues, but the anniversary of Stonewall is also a time to reflect on 25 years of progress.

By PETER M. NARDI

Through the month of June, in most major cities around the nation (today in Los Angeles), hundreds of thousands of lesbians and gay men will commemorate 25 years of resistance and struggle against those who wish to deny us equal rights. The climactic event, a demonstration surrounding the United Nations building in New York on June 26, will remind those in power around the world that basic freedoms and dignity are still denied to gay men and lesbians.

However, change has indeed occurred since patrons of the Stonewall Inn took to the streets of Sheridan Square in New York City around 1 a.m. on June 28, 1969, to protest a seemingly routine police raid of yet another gay bar. That night, those inside and outside the bar resisted; for several days afterward, they protested their treatment and began to organize to change a society that had made their very lives illegal.

While there were incidents of resistance before Stonewall, including a protest in Los Angeles after police shut down the Black Cat bar in Silver Lake in 1967—the demonstrations and rebellion at the Stonewall Inn have become a political metaphor for the modern gay-liberation movement. Yes, we have seen new attempts to deny equal rights to lesbians and gay men, from the state of Colorado to small towns in Oregon. But that does not diminish the many achievements of the struggle against discrimination during the past 25 years.

For example, 25 years ago there were no policies, laws or ordinances prohibiting discrimination against lesbians and gay men. Today, eight states (Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Hawaii, Connecticut, New Jersey, Vermont, California, Minnesota), the District of Columbia and more than 100 municipalities and counties have enacted legislation making it illegal to discriminate in employment, public accommodation and housing on the basis of sexual orientation. In addition, the governors of New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Washington have issued executive orders banning discrimination in public employment.

Twenty-five years ago, lesbian and gay relationships were not recognized and the concept of “domestic partner” had yet to be heard. Today, numerous municipal governments (including Laguna Beach, West Hollywood, Berkeley, San Francisco, Seattle and Cambridge, Mass.), dozens of private universities and colleges (including the Claremont Colleges, Stanford and the University of Chicago) and many private corporations (including Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream, MCA/Universal, Levi Strauss and Lotus Development) have extended various benefits to the partners of gay employees. Recognizing the relationships of gay men and lesbians as families has occurred in the highest court in New York state, in custody cases throughout the country and in second-parent adoption rulings.

Twenty-five years ago, 49 states had sodomy laws (Illinois having repealed its in 1961); today 23 states still have such laws, 17 of which apply to both homosexual and heterosexual sexual acts. This is a far cry from the days when the death penalty was enacted against sodomites in 1610 by the Virginia Colony.

Twenty-five years ago, there were no hate-crime laws that included sexual orientation. Today, 20 states, about a dozen cities and counties and the District of Columbia have hate-crimes legislation that includes sexual orientation. And in 1990, the federal hate crime statistics bill was enacted requiring the collection of data on hate crimes to include those related to sexual orientation.

These are important steps in the struggle against discrimination.

Of course, there are serious obstacles yet to be overcome. Since 1974, yearly attempts to add sexual orientation to the federal Civil Rights Act have failed to get out of committee, thus allowing many private institutions to deny equal rights to gay men and lesbians, as the firing of gay employees by the Cracker Barrel restaurant chain has unfortunately illustrated.

Seven states are considering proposals, similar to the one ruled unconstitutional in Colorado, that would remove housing and employment protection for lesbians and gay men. And many court battles involving child custody, domestic-partner benefits and inheritances; hate crimes, and employment discrimination show how lesbians and gay men continue to be targets of special discrimination.

Yet we need to celebrate our victories and acknowledge the many ways our lives have been changed with the help of those men and women who firmly believe in equal treatment under the law and who valiantly defied the forces of repression over the decades. Thank you to the resisters of Stonewall.

Peter M. Nardi is professor of sociology at Pitzer College and co-author (with David Sanders and Judd Marmor) of “Growing Up Before Stonewall: Life Stories of Some Gay Men” (Routledge, 1994).