Finding aid of the Sheldon Ramsdell Papers

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Collection number: 1996-28

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society
San Francisco, California

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Sheldon Ramsdell Papers
Dates: 1974-1994
Collection number: 1996-28
Creator: Ramsdell, Sheldon
Collection Size: 4.75 linear feet, 3 manuscript boxes, 1 carton
Repository: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society
San Francisco, California 94105

Abstract: Journal, ephemera, correspondence, and other materials collected by political activist and photojournalist Sheldon Ramsdell.


Languages: Languages represented in the collection: English

Access
Collection open for research.

Publication Rights
Copyright to unpublished manuscript materials has been transferred to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

Preferred Citation

Acquisition Information

Biography
Sheldon "Shelley" Ramsdell was a photojournalist, publicist and political activist who co-founded Vietnam Veterans Against the War in the 1960s. Since the early 1980s, Ramsdell was a advocate for people with AIDS, gays, lesbians, and veterans. He was also an activist in the Democratic Party on labor union issues.

Ramsdell was born on August 31, 1935. After receiving an honorable discharge from the United States Navy in 1958, he went on to co-found, in 1967, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, one of the most influential anti-war groups of the era, which in 1971 staged a dramatic march on Washington in which veterans tossed their medals over a fence onto the Capitol Steps.

Ramsdell was a press aide for the veterans' group and served in the same role for the presidential campaign of Senator Eugene McCarthy and New York Congresswomen Belle Abzug.

After moving to San Francisco in 1984, Ramsdell became an increasingly vocal AIDS activist and member of ACT UP. Ramsdell substantial photography portfolio reflected his eclectic interests and included shots of Abby Hoffman, some of Barbara Streisand's first publicity photos, Bette Midler, William S. Burroughs, and Joel Gray. His photographs were exhibited in the New York Public Theater and on NBC TV's Today Show, and were published in a range of newspapers and magazines.
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Ramsdell died of AIDS related complications in San Francisco on March 25, 1996

Scope and Content of Collection

The Sheldon Ramsdell Papers document the activities of photojournalist and activist Sheldon Ramsdell. Most of these materials relate to Ramsdell's activities in San Francisco including his participation in ACT UP Golden Gate, his fight to overturn the ban on gays in the military, his battle with HIV, and various other causes in which he was heavily involved. His personal journals from the late-1980s to the mid-1990s dramatically illustrate Ramsdell's personal battle with AIDS as well as his more public struggle for civil rights.

The collection is divided into 2 series: Personal and Activism. The Personal series contains one subseries: Journals/Notebooks. The Activism series also contains one subseries: AIDS.

The Personal (1974-1994) series includes materials from the personal life of Sheldon Ramsdell. The subseries, Journals/Notebooks consists of 19 personal journals and notebooks. These journals cover a range of topics including Ramsdell's personal struggles with AIDS, reflections on current politics and issues, news clippings, letters, and other personal information. Also found in this series are newspaper clippings about or written by Ramsdell, items from a memorial service for a friend of Ramsdell's, information about an experimental HIV treatment Ramsdell was undergoing, a play, and an Oral History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

The series Activism (1975-1993) documents Ramsdell's participation in various causes. The subseries AIDS Activism contains materials which illustrate Ramsdell's activities as an AIDS activist in San Francisco, particularly as a member of ACT UP Golden Gate and participating in the fight against Proposition 64, the "LaRouche Initiative" which sought to place AIDS back on the state's List of Communicable Diseases subject to Public Health law. Other material documents Ramsdell's participation in attempts to overturn the United States Military's ban on homosexuals and other materials particularly surrounding the formulation of President Clinton's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy. The rest of the materials cover several other causes including petitioning for prison reforms, outreach to religious leaders and believers, interactions with the San Francisco Human Right Commission, and an analysis of 1988 Presidential Candidate Michael Dukakis' rhetoric regarding AIDS.

Subjects and Indexing Terms

Gay men
AIDS (disease)
Photography
Diaries

Separated Material

Several folders of newspaper clippings and photocopies of newspaper clipping from the San Francisco Examiner and San Francisco Chronicle, widely available elsewhere, were removed.

Series 1 Personal 1974-1994

Physical Description: 11 carton, 14 folders and 10 notebooks

Series Description

This series includes materials from the personal life of Sheldon Ramsdell. This series contains 19 personal journals and notebooks. These journals cover a range of topics including Ramsdell's personal struggles with AIDS, reflections on current politics and issues, news clippings, letters, and other personal information. Also found in this series are newspaper clippings about or written by Ramsdell, items from a memorial service for a friend of Ramsdell's, information about an experimental HIV treatment Ramsdell was undergoing, a play, and an Oral History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Finally, this series includes two photograph albums, loose color snapshots and a box of personal effects. One of the albums is by Dan Yoder, a friend of Randy Shilts, who died in 1995. The personal effects include address books, passport issued in 1968, Yoder's and Ramsdell's wallets (with personal id), a rubber stamp and several pipes.

Box: Folder 1: 1
   Spiral Bound Journal 11/2/91 to 12/12/91
Box: Folder 1: 2
   Spiral Bound Journal 12/10/91 to 1/9/92
Box: Folder 1: 3
   Spiral Bound Journal 1/10/92 to 2/18/92
Box: Folder 1: 4
   Spiral Bound Journal 2/92 to 4/1/92
Box: Folder 2: 1
   Spiral Bound Journal 4/3/92 to 7/9/92
Box: Folder 2: 2  Spiral Bound Journal 8/1/92 to 11/11/92
Box: Folder 2: 3  Spiral Bound Journal 11/13/92 to 2/2/93
Box: Folder 2: 4  Spiral Bound Journal 2/2/93 to 5/19/93
Box: Folder 3: 1  Spiral Bound Journal 6/7/93 to 6/30/94
Box: Folder 3: 2  Black Journal 8/6/89 to 10/89
Box: Folder 3: 3  Red/Black Plaid Notebook 12/6/89 to 8/15/91
Box: Folder 3: 4  Cacti Covered Journal 1/1/91 to 7/2/91
Box: Folder 3: 4  Red Cover “Community Quotations” Notebook 7/8/91 to 8/8/91
Box: Folder 3: 7  Notebook labeled “confidential” 5/8/92 to 7/21/92
Box: Folder 3: 8  Blue Marbled Notebook 8/31/91 to 10/24/91
Box: Folder 3: 9  Plaid Notebook 4/12/93 to 6/26/93
Box: Folder 3: 10  White "Reporters Notebook" 9/14/93 to 10/27/93
Box: Folder 3: 11  White "Reporters Notebook" 9/18/93 to 11/27/93
Box: Folder 4: 2  Denis Bittern Memorial Service 1986
Box: Folder 4: 3  Videx Experimental AIDS Treatment Program 1989
Box: Folder 4: 4  "Maria Elena" by Hank Villate 1979-1977
Box: Folder 4: 5  Writings 1974-1989
Box 5  Carton of photograph albums, snapshots and personal effects circa 1968-1994

Series 2 Activism 1975-1993

Physical Description: 13 folders

Series Description
This series documents Ramsdell's participation in various causes. There are two subseries AIDS Activism and Other Causes. The AIDS Activism contains materials which illustrate Ramsdell's activities as an AIDS activist in San Francisco, particularly as a member of ACT UP Golden Gate and participating in the fight against Proposition 64, the "LaRouche Initiative" which sought to place AIDS back on the state's List of Communicable Diseases subject to Public Health law. The subseries Other Causes documents Ramsdell's participation in attempts to overturn the United States Military's ban on homosexuals and other materials particularly surrounding the formulation of President Bill Clinton's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy. The rest of the materials cover several other causes including petitioning for prison reforms, outreach to religious leaders and believers, interactions with the San Francisco Human Right Commission, and analysis of 1988 Presidential Candidate Michael Dukakis' rhetoric regarding AIDS.

Box : Folder 4: 7-12  AIDS Activism
Box : Folder 4: 7  HIV information Undated
Box : Folder 4: 9  Mobilization Against AIDS 1988
Box : Folder 4: 10  Proposition 64 1986
Box : Folder 4: 11  ACT UP Golden Gate 1992-1993
Box : Folder 4: 12  ACT UP, "Mayor's Call to Action on the HIV epidemic" 1990

Box : Folder 4: 13 - 4: 21  Other Causes
Box : Folder 4: 13  Gays in the Military
Box : Folder 4: 14  March on Washington 1993
Box : Folder 4: 17  Religious Outreach 1975-1993
Box : Folder 4: 18  Religious Outreach Contacts Undated
Box : Folder 4: 19  Human Right Commission 1989-1990
Box : Folder 4: 20  California Medical Facility Papers 1992-1993
Box : Folder 4: 21  

Michael Dukakis Campaign Rhetoric 1988