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DICK LEITSCH, WHOSE 'SIP-IN' WAS A GAY RIGHTS MILESTONE, DIES AT 83

By Robert D. McFadden— June 22, 2018



Dick Leitsch, who in 1966 led a pioneering act of civil disobedience to secure the right of gay patrons to be served in a licensed bar, helping to clear the way for gay bars to operate openly in New York State, died on Friday at a hospice center in Manhattan. He was 83.

A close friend, Paul Havern, said the cause was liver cancer, which had spread. Mr. Leitsch, who lived in Manhattan, learned he had terminal cancer in February.

A gentle, soft-spoken Kentuckian, Mr. Leitsch (pronounced LIGHTSH) was one of the first leaders of the Mattachine Society, an early defender of gay rights when homosexuality was mostly underground and even a small protest took courage. He called his action a “sip-in,” and likened it to sit-ins by black protesters at segregated lunch counters in the South during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Three years before the Stonewall Inn uprising accelerated the gay rights movement in America, Mr. Leitsch challenged the common practice of bars’ serving gay customers under a no-questions-asked arrangement necessitated by an unwritten State Liquor Authority policy that regarded homosexuals as inherently “disorderly.” Bars that knowingly served them could have their liquor licenses revoked.