



Starting a Pink Pistols Chapter

by Gwendolyn S. Patton

Pink What?

Here you are, thumbing through a magazine, reading the newspaper, or wandering through the latest happenings on the Web, and you run into something that catches your eye: the Pink Pistols. *What's that*, you ask yourself.

- Is it a rock group?
- Is it a women's organization?
- Is it a movie about a bumbling detective?
- Is it a group of scary vigilantes bent on world domination?

After reading a bit, you find that it's none of the above. It's an organization dedicated to the legal, safe, and responsible use of firearms for self-defense of the sexual-minority community. You also see that they're trying to change peoples' perceptions about gay people and their vulnerability to violence. After all, if some gay people might be armed with guns, waylaying them and beating them up could be *dangerous!* A bad guy might get shot doing that!

Now, you may or may not be gay yourself. But you think that this is a good idea. You like the concept of self-defense, you agree that it is an individual right to own a firearm, and you can go along with the idea that carrying a concealed weapon for defense -- the confluence of these two ideas -- might just be a useful thing. And hey, with violence towards queer people rising every year despite every effort to reduce it, something has to be done!

So you pop over to www.pinkpistols.org and check out the list of local chapters. Oh no! There isn't one in your area! The closest chapter is half a state away, much too far to be of any use. What can you do now?

Well, you have several options:

- You can give up. It is everyone's inalienable right to give up if they want to. Quitter.
- You can explore your right to carry a concealed firearm on your own, just

as an individual.

- You can declare yourself a member of the Pink Pistols anyway, even though there isn't a nearby chapter, then explore your right to carry a concealed firearm in your area.
- You can declare yourself a member, then drive half a state to the nearest chapter.
- You could start a Pink Pistols chapter!

If you chose the first option, you probably aren't reading this, you quitter. If you chose the second option, you still aren't reading this, but bravo for going on to explore your rights! If you chose the third option, you're in good company -- we've estimated that there are approximately 4-6,000 members of the Pink Pistols nationwide that have done just that, who do not necessarily belong to any given chapter. These members are called "at-large members". You get to be an at-large member simply by deciding to be one -- there is no form to fill out, no dues to pay. Ever.

If you chose the fourth option, you probably will only get together with other members once in a while, but that's better than nothing! Any at-large member who gets together with a chapter is called an "active member". The *only* difference between an active member and an at-large member is that they get together with a chapter for socializing or shooting practice. There's still no form to fill out, and no dues. But you will be more visible, since you're where people can see you, and very likely, people will know that the group you're with are Pink Pistols. So you'll have to be willing to be openly associated with the group. Some people don't like being visible, and don't like being known, so they never make the shift from at-large to active member. And some queer people don't like to let it be known they own guns, because of the disapproval of the queer community, so they keep it secret. It's like being in the closet. Some of us call it "being in the gun safe".

Then there's option number five -- starting your own chapter. Anyone can start a chapter of the Pink Pistols -- queer or straight. The process is simple, but it can be more demanding than being just a member.

Let's talk about the process first.

What to call your chapter?

The first thing National needs to know is what your chapter is going to be called. This is strongly linked to the area your chapter is to serve. In order to cover this topic well, some history needs to be told.

In the Beginning, there was the Essay, and Jonathan of Rauch, he of the Salon, did cause to be writ, “Thirty-one states allow all qualified citizens to carry concealed weapons. In those states, homosexuals should embark on organized efforts to become comfortable with guns, learn to use them safely and carry them. They should set up Pink Pistols task forces, sponsor shooting courses and help homosexuals get licensed to carry. And they should do it in a way that gets as much publicity as possible. “

And Lo! Did Doug Krick of Boston read of these words, and was inspired to gather unto himself friends, that they might go to the range to shoot together, and to go forth to the restaurant when they did hunger and thirst, and to speak of things that did interest them. And they called themselves the Pink Pistols, and it was good. Then did those in the city of Baltimore did clamor, “Verily! We should like to call ourselves Pink Pistols, and gather for shooting at the range, and feasting, and speaking of things!” And so was it written that they would be the Baltimore Pink Pistols, and the original ones, being the first in Boston, should henceforth be the Boston Pink Pistols. And so did the Chapters begin.

(Ahem.)

The basic concept behind the Pink Pistols is providing an environment where people of sexual minorities (and those who agree with them in principle) can get together to learn to defend themselves with firearms. Said simply, “teach queers to shoot”. The other side of the equation is that the public needs to know about it, so their perception of the queer community as helpless and passive is altered. This is best done when the members of a chapter can easily get together on a regular basis, both for socializing and for shooting practice. It also makes it easy to organize events for bridge-building with the community if the members of the chapter are located in close proximity. A chapter should not try to establish a service area larger than the

members can comfortably travel in what they consider to be a reasonable length of time.

A chapter should be named for the region it serves. There was a period of time in Pink Pistols history when some members named their chapters for the entire state they served. This was discouraged by National, but not forbidden, so some chapters still claim state-wide service areas. This encouraged at-large members in those states to join online mailing lists for those chapters instead of forming their own, local chapters. They could not comfortably travel to the shoots for the actual chapter, so they ended up “members” of a chapter they could not attend, and felt constrained from doing anything about it. It also fosters an inappropriate belief that online mailing lists constitute the entirety of our membership, *which they do not*.

Please do not try to name your chapter for a larger area than you can comfortably serve. Name it after your local city, region, or metro area. “Central Ohio”, “Delaware Valley”, “Northern Virginia”, “Houston” -- all of these are excellent names that cover reasonable service areas. “Utah”, “Colorado”, “Nevada” -- these do NOT. These states are too large to cover with a single chapter, and history has shown that members do not attempt to voluntarily subdivide such a chapter into sub-chapters.

Once you have a name for your chapter, let National know. You are entitled to a free website, subdomain, and forwarding email address from National based on your chapter name. A basic website page will be created for you. You will have full access to the page so you can change it as you see fit.

Mailing List - Yes or No?

You may choose to use a mailing list to keep your members in touch with one another or not -- it is entirely up to you. We do recommend having some means of getting in touch with your members, if only by phone tree. You may choose within your chapter to kick in a few bucks each and do a paper newsletter rather than a mailing list. However you wish to be in contact, you may of course post the details on your webpage. If you create a Yahoogroup, let National know, and a subscription box can be added to the basic page for you automatically.

We can't stress enough that the number of members in an online mailing list does NOT equate to the number of members in a chapter, and does not necessarily have anything to do with how "good" a chapter is. A chapter may promote a mailing list widely and get subscribers from all over the country, even resort to spam in order to get subscribers totaling in the hundreds, but if the cannot all get together to shoot, *the number is utterly meaningless*. A chapter's effectiveness is based upon *active members*, not mailing list subscriptions.

And having hundreds of memberships from all across your state may actually be counter-productive. Many of those people may otherwise be motivated to start their own chapters, if not tied up in your own list. If they already feel committed to your chapter, they may not feel free to strike out on their own. Do not encourage too many long-distance members to your local list. Instead, encourage long-distance members to join the National lists, or to find lists for local chapters closer to themselves. (And some long-distance "members" aren't really members -- they're only there to mine your mailing list for email addresses and to fill your list with their own agenda. Watch out for them.)

Find Places to Meet

You will need places to gather your members -- a range of some kind to shoot at, and someplace you can socialize at. There are all sorts of ranges, from outdoor gun clubs to indoor ranges. They all have different facilities, rules, and attendant costs. Check the Yellow Pages, or ask at a local gun shop

where the best ones are in your area, then go try them out. Find the nicest ones, then talk to the owner and find one that will welcome your group.

Remember -- we're a club! Ask if they have group rates for clubs! If you need it, print off the membership card from the website, fill it out, and laminate it. It could save you significant money!

When choosing a socializing place, there are several factors:

- Do you want to meet on the same day as the shoot, or on a different day?
- Do you want to have a meal when you socialize? Drinks?
- If on the same day, before or after the shoot? If before, **NO ALCOHOL**. Do not drink and shoot! If after, you can drink, but the guns need to be put away. Many states invalidate your carry permits if you drink.
- What time do you want to socialize?
- Will you just be chatting, conducting business, or both?
- How many people do you anticipate?
- What will it cost?

Restaurants make logical and simple places to meet. They usually don't care who comes in, may require a reservation for large groups, and a certain amount of noise isn't an issue. Cost is a part of the food bill. If they serve alcohol, check the local laws regarding whether you can carry there! Some municipalities forbid firearms where alcohol is served, some forbid them where 51% of revenues are derived from alcohol, some just forbid you to be legally drunk while carrying a weapon -- or to drink at all while carrying. Good rule of thumb is to have "designated defenders" who don't drink at all and who guard the group, and the others can drink and are disarmed, if the laws are picky.

A local GLBT Center may make a good meeting place, but sometimes their politics can make it difficult to get in. Many of them do not approve of firearms, and will not allow our chapters to rent meeting space, or have signs posted forbidding firearms. But many are approachable, or educable. There is usually a charge for meeting space. You will probably need to pass the hat to cover it.

You can also consider meeting at a member's house, and rotate the duty around. That is very cost effective, especially if you each bring refreshments. But it does require a measure of mutual trust that may not come easily or early, and your members may not wish their addresses displayed

Once you've selected your places and times, make them known on your website, around your community, in local publications, then show up. Even if it's just you alone the first time or two, show up. Be consistent. Go have lunch, go have a nice shoot.

Getting the Word Out

Something must be said about making your chapter known around your community. There are a number of resources available to you.

- Get a secure phone number. National uses www.maxemail.com for a secure voice mail line that sends the voice mail recording to an email address. It cannot be traced to a street address using a reverse directory, so is safe for flyers and cards. It also doubles for receiving and sending faxes.
- Consider getting a P.O. Box. You may not get a lot of mail, but having your street address on it may be unwise. A small letter-sized PO Box is inexpensive in most areas and if you select "personal use", the Post Office cannot reveal your actual address.
- Armed with a safe phone number and address, you can make flyers and cards, and post them around the neighborhood on bulletin boards.
- Make use of community calendars in GLBT newspapers, even in mainstream press -- they are usually free. You may have to resubmit your information periodically.
- Put your group information in local "resources" lists in whatever GLBT Center or sites in your area will accept you.
- Issue a press release announcing the existence of your chapter to the local GLBT newspaper. (National can help with this, and will issue a national-level release you can modify or use without modification.)
- Check out www.prweb.com for press release resources for announcing your community events

What comes next?

National will set up your website, your subdomain, your email address, and send you the FTP information to maintain everything. Then your chapter is yours to run. With only a very few important caveats, chapters are autonomous, and do what they want, make their own internal rules, do things their own way.

“A Few Important Caveats,” Gracie?

Okay, yeah, there are some things we ask of chapter founders that we don't ask of at-large members or the average active member. This is because chapter founders have accepted a greater responsibility, a greater visibility, and hold the honor of the organization in their hands. What we ask is small, easy, and costs nothing.

- We don't require membership forms from any member, but we would appreciate a contact phone number at National for all chapter founders willing to supply one, and a mailing address would be nice, too. This is purely voluntary, but we'd really like it.
- Stay in touch! We know that things change in everybody's lives -- jobs disappear overnight, finances shift, health fluctuates -- and when they do, sometimes priorities change, and you have to put your attention elsewhere for a while. That is perfectly understandable. But let us know, please! If you are going to be out of commission for a while, tell us!
- If you need to leave your chapter, either permanently or for an extended period, please find a successor. If you don't have a successor to leave in your place, let us know, and we will mark your chapter as temporarily closed until someone comes along to reopen it (hopefully you). Please don't just move and abandon your chapter!
- Please do not sit and stew if you have a problem. National is here to help you. If your problem is with someone at National, there is more than one person at National -- we can always find a mediator for you.
- You can run your chapter as you wish, *except* in such a way that would cause trouble for or change the way other chapters must operate. This includes any action that causes the IRS to investigate the organization, causes a change in our Board of Electors filing status, violation of any

laws. You *can* incorporate your chapter, providing you acknowledge in your official documents that you are still part of the organization, and that you do not own the trademarked names and logos. The basic rule of thumb is to avoid “Imperial Entanglements”. A change that only affects your chapter is fine -- but if it would require other chapters to do something, you can’t do it. (Yes, this includes things like organization-wide dues, elections of officers, membership forms. We are NOT going to have these. Don’t ask for them.) You want to elect officers in your own chapter, cool beans. Don’t demand that the whole organization do the same.

- We can endorse candidates, but we are NOT lobbyists. We are an “activist association” under Board of Electors rules. This does not mean we cannot try to change the minds of legislators, merely that we *cannot take money* to do so. The legal definition of a lobbyist is someone who is paid to affect legislation by persuasion of legislators, but merely being the member of an activist organization does not make one a lobbyist. Along with this, if you endorse a candidate, it must be made perfectly clear that *only your chapter* has endorsed him or her unless you have authorization from National to state otherwise. Only National can issue a blanket endorsement in the name of the entire organization. We usually send out a questionnaire to all candidates with pertinent questions relating to issues of interest to our members, debate their answers, then issue a grade for that candidate.
- NO SPAM. Don’t spam. We do not engage in unsolicited commercial emails. If it is reported that your chapter is spamming, National will investigate. If we determine you are spamming, we will ask you to stop. If you do not, or if you tell us to sod off, you will have your right to use the Pink Pistols name revoked. Period.

Most chapters never have to worry about these things. These are very high-end, ultra-political, or special-case issues that we’ve found have been problems in the past. We used to never even mention them, but found them to be necessary after a few years of operation. Most of the time, you can just ignore these caveats, as they will rarely apply to you at all.

Geez, What Can I Do?

I know ... you've read all this so far, and you're thinking, "Heck, you don't want me to do this, you don't want me to do that, what the..." If you're anything like most of our chapter founders, you're a strong person with a lot of motivation, and you may be starting to chafe a little, wondering if "all these rules" are worth it.

But bear with me a minute. Look back at how they're all worded. With only a couple of exceptions, everything has been worded as a suggestion.

- We *suggest* that you name your chapter for a reasonably-sized region -- but we won't stop you from naming it after a state if you insist.
- We have a few named after states, and we haven't demanded they rename them.
- We *ask* that you give us a phone number, and an address if you feel comfortable with it. We don't demand it.
- We *request* that you stay in touch, and that you find someone to replace you if you need to quit. If you don't do it, the world won't end. We'll figure out a way to handle it.
- We've got chapter founders that don't like the people at National because they have been moderated on the National mailing lists, and associate being asked to follow mailing list rules with intolerable levels of fascism. They have stormed off the main lists in a huff. They still run their chapters, as they see fit.

We only have one inviolable rule: *Don't hurt the organization*. Don't screw it up for everyone else. That's it. As a chapter founder, you hold our honor in your hands. *Everything else* is just a suggestion.

Okay, We're meeting...Now What?

Be Consistent

Well, the first thing is to keep meeting! Be consistent. Try to meet for the same things on the same day at the same time every month. If you have your social meeting on one day and the shoot on another, hold the same schedule every month so people get used to it. If you have them both on the same day, you will have more flexibility to add additional meetings over the course of the month, but everything will be crammed into a single day at first. It's up to you.

Dealing with the Press

You will likely attract the attention of the press at some point. This is a Good Thing. Remember, teaching queers to shoot is only half the equation -- showing the public that some queers are armed is the other half. This is best done through the intervention of the press. But be careful! There is some evidence to show that the press can have a decided liberal bias, a bias against firearm ownership. You need to have your facts straight, your statements clear, and be ready to speak when the time comes.

There is a wealth of prior media coverage on the Pink Pistols website that you can and should refer to for examples of how others have dealt with the press. You also have the resource of the National Media Spokesperson to draw on, someone who has worked with the press on a national scale, and has been working with them in the context of the Pink Pistols for years. Advice is freely available, everything from tips on how to approach an impending interview to help writing a press release.

Something to keep in mind is that your members may not always want a lot of press attention, even though it is, in the long run, beneficial to the organization and the community. They may not feel comfortable being "outed" as gun owners, or may not be completely out as gay, or might be straight and not want it broadcast that they are members of a queer organization. This is their absolute right! You violate it at your peril. It is enticing to have interview after interview from newspapers, television, even independent film pro-

ducers. The press will butter you up, make you feel important. And if you get favorable coverage, it will only feel better, more powerful. You may not notice that your members are uncomfortable. If they say things like “I don’t like all the press being around,” listen to them.

A good thing to do if your members are complaining of too much press, or worse, abstaining from showing up at shoots or meetings because of press presence, is hold special photo-ops for the press. Announce it to your members, and invite whoever wishes to attend. Sometimes, you’ll get nearly as many as you would for a regular meeting, and you maintain the good feelings at your usual time. Alternatively, you can schedule multiple monthly shoots, and declare one of them off-limits to press, giving members who feel uncomfortable a “safe haven”. Other options include making alternate meetings “press-free”. It’s up to you to gauge your members’ comfort zone.

What if you get bad press?

There’s not much you can do. If they say things that are untrue, you can demand a retraction, and should do so as soon as possible. Be polite, but firm. Write to the reporter if the information is available, and include a copy to the managing editor. If you do not receive a reply in a couple of days, follow up.

If it is an editorial or a commentary, or the facts are essentially correct, but the tone or conclusions are unfavorable, write a letter to the editor as a rebuttal. We strongly suggest that you keep your cool. Do not write when angry; do not just dash off an email and stomp on the send button. Write thoughtfully, succinctly, and carefully. State your case clearly and factually, with respect and firmness. You may not get them to change their opinion, but they may print yours.

Building Bridges With the Community

One of the most valuable things you can do is to get involved with your local straight community. After your chapter is established, look for something you can do that will show your chapter is conscious of good citizenship. Be cognizant of charity events, parades, community service awards, and other opportunities to show your colors.

One pitfall you should assiduously avoid is impatience with “liberal” GLBT establishments that are intolerant or fearful of firearms. GLBT support centers are frequently, if not typically, critical or opposed, to dissemination of Pink Pistols information or literature, much less hosting Pink Pistols meetings. But keep this maxim in mind: one should not be in a hurry to ascribe to malice what can be more easily explained by ignorance.

The common experience is to approach one of these centers, be rebuffed, and take an adversarial attitude towards them, even an inimical attitude, in an attempt to *force* them to accept your chapter. Threatening, cajoling, wheedling, and attempting to shame the center using “discrimination” as the argument is not only going to be ineffective, it is going to progressively poison the relationship with layer after layer of animosity. Eventually, nothing you ever say or do will get you into that center short of a commando raid -- which negates the purpose.

This is a case where patience is your friend. IGNORE the GLBT center if they are intolerant or unresponsive. Build your chapter around them. Explore alternative avenues of communication with the community, such as bookstores, newspapers, clinics, and bars. You are not in this for the short haul, you are in this for the long haul -- *outlast* the opposition, *don't beat them!*

Case Study: Delaware Valley and William Way Center

When the Delaware Valley chapter was founded in 2001, the William Way Center in Philadelphia was immediately contacted. They did not reply. The chapter participated in the 2001 Pride Parade sponsored by the Center that summer, simply by filling out the form and sending in their fee. They showed up and marched. They raised a bit of a stir by being asked at the reviewing stand what they stood for in front of the entire city -- a question they answered with the stock response right off the website, shocking the audience.

After the parade, emails were again sent to the William Way, requesting links on their website. No response was ever received. Phone calls were

made, messages were left, but no response was ever received. After a three months, all attempts to contact the Center were *abandoned*. A different strategy was adopted -- sites linked to from the William Way Center were contacted, and links to the Delaware Valley site were acquired *there* instead. No attempt was made to ever meet at the Center. Instead, all socializing was done at a restaurant a mile from the shooting range.

A good working rapport was built with the local gay newspaper, which led to a front-page story on the chapter in July of 2001. This article won the newspaper an award, which did not hurt the relationship. A mainstream newspaper did the same in late summer of 2002, publishing the article in three different affiliated newspapers. In the fall of 2002, Fox TV News attended a lunch and shoot, and did a very favorable story on the organization as a whole, and the chapter founder was a guest on a half-hour live gay call-in show on a local public television station. The Fox News spot was later shown on Fox Cable News, and the public television show was not only re-run at least five times, but was shared throughout the region to affiliated stations, and turned into a series of promotional spots for the station.

Around this time, the Delaware valley chapter founder became the National Media Spokesperson for the entire organization. In April of 2003, and again in June, she appeared in JANE Magazine in connection with an article on the Pink Pistols. That summer, Curve Magazine interviewed their founder on the Pink Pistols, and in December, OUT! Magazine interviewed her. During this time, there were several radio interviews across the country.

In January of 2004, the William Way Center contacted her and asked if the Delaware Valley chapter would like to be involved in SportsWeek, the 10-day themed event being held that summer culminating in Pride Day. The wait was over. A charity shooting event was proposed, and the William Way accepted the offer.

By waiting and not forcing the issue, the Center eventually came to the Pink Pistols. During that time, the Center was not needed in order to further the functioning of the chapter more than adequately. Do not be convinced that you must have the cooperation of the local GLBT center in order to “reach” the local queer community.