
PART III: MOVERS AND SHAKERS ON THE NATIONAL SCENE

There is a tendency among Californians, of which I am one, to think that everything in the gay movement began in California. Although the organizations mentioned in the previous section certainly had their origin in California, activists in other parts of the country were encouraged by developments in California and either joined in or went off on their own.

One of the most significant figures in the movement was Franklin Kameny who, beginning in 1957, spearheaded a new period of militancy in the homosexual rights movement. As founder and president of the Washington, DC Mattachine Society, he promoted the slogan "Gay Is Good," and launched a systematic challenge to the U.S. government's exclusion of gays and lesbians. Joining with him was Jack Nichols, who later moved on to New York City where he and his partner, Lige Clarke, began publishing a column in *Screw* entitled the "Homosexual Citizen." Jack and Lige became the most celebrated and recognizable gay male couple in America. Together they were involved in the launching of the first homosexual weekly, *GAY*. After Lige Clarke was murdered in Mexico in 1975, Jack carried on without him and remained one of the leading advocates for gays and lesbians in the country.

Also included in this section is Barbara Grier who was active in DOB, wrote for and later edited *The Ladder*, cofounded the largest lesbian press in the world, and has continued to be a major spokesperson for the lesbian cause. Quite a different personality is Barbara Gittings, who in her search for her own identity found the gay movement. For a time she too edited *The Ladder* and, though not a professional librarian, was a major figure in changing attitudes in the American Library Association about gays and lesbians.

Some people became activists early in their lifetimes. Stephen Donaldson, for example, founded the first gay student organization in the world. He was also gang-raped while in jail, while being detained for protesting at the White House with a group of Quakers. Rather than avoid the issue of rape, Stephen used his experience to campaign for greater public awareness of male rape.

There was a wide divergence in personality and approach of those in the gay movement. *Randolfe Wicker*, for example, was the leading counterculture force in the movement: a radical hippie, ever pushing the gay cause forward, taunting the authorities to change. Different folks make different strokes, and the exact opposite of *Wicker* was *Arthur Cyrus Warner*. An early member of the *Mattachine Society* in New York, *Warner's* real interest was in changing the legal status of homosexuality. His legal briefs, his consultations, and his behind-the-scenes activity brought about changes often without people knowing he had been involved.

Almost inevitably there was burnout in the movement. An example of this is *Richard Inman*, an early advocate of homosexuality in Florida; in fact, he was nearly the only voice to speak out for gays in that state in the 1950s and 1960s, even founding his own organization to carry on the battle. He, however, was too much of a loner to be a leader in the movement; after unsuccessfully suing the city of Miami in 1966, he became disillusioned with the chances of progress and gradually withdrew from the battle, feeling he had too little support among the gay community to continue his crusade.

Franklin E. Kameny (1925-)

David K. Johnson



Photo by Kay Tobin Lahusen

In October 1957, Franklin E. Kameny's life was forever changed. Fired from the federal civil service for his homosexuality, that month Kameny began a Herculean struggle with the American establishment that would transform the homophile movement. As historian John D'Emilio has noted, Kameny spearheaded a new period of militancy in the homosexual rights movement of the early 1960s. From his base in the nation's capital, he brought traditional reform movement tactics—publicity, lawsuits, lobbying, public demonstrations—to the homophile movement. As founder and president of the Mattachine Society of Washington, DC, Kameny showed that gays,

similar to other minority groups, could stand up for themselves and demand equal rights as "homosexual American citizens." One of the first gay leaders to proclaim that homosexuality was neither sick nor immoral—a philosophy he eventually refined into the slogan "Gay Is Good"—he persuaded gays and lesbians to move beyond the strategies of 1950s' self-help groups and to adopt the political strategies of the civil rights movement. A victim of the federal civil service's antigay purges, Kameny launched the first systematic challenge to the government's exclusion of gays and lesbians, attacking the Cold War era notion that gay men and lesbians posed a risk to national security. A tireless advocate for other purge victims and a persistent critic of government security officials, he more than any other individual deserves credit for the federal civil service's 1975 decision to abandon its antigay exclusion policy. As the first gay activist in the United States to take on the

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federal government, Kameny inaugurated many of the tactics and strategies that have since become standard in the gay and lesbian rights movement.

Kameny was born in Queens, New York, in 1925 to a modest, middle-class Jewish family. His Polish-born father worked as an electrical engineer for an automotive parts company; his mother, born on New York's Lower East Side, had been a secretary for the famous lawyer Max Steuer. A precocious child, Kameny took an early interest in science and by the age of six had decided on a career in astronomy. After skipping several grades and graduating from Richmond Hill High School at the age of sixteen, he studied physics at New York's Queens College. With World War II came nightly blackouts, which made for prime stargazing for the budding astronomer, but the war eventually took Kameny away to Europe, where he served as a U.S. Army mortar crewman. His knowledge of the German language also made him the unofficial company interpreter. Until then, Kameny had been painfully shy, but, according to his mother, his service in the war brought him out of his shell. After the war, he finished his undergraduate education and won a scholarship to Harvard to study astronomy.

Early on, Kameny developed an absolute belief in the validity of his intellectual processes and habit of challenging accepted orthodoxies. As a teenager, he announced to his parents that he was an atheist. As a teaching fellow at Harvard, he refused to sign a loyalty oath without attaching qualifiers: "If society and I differ on something, I'm willing to give the matter a second look. If we still differ, then I am right and society is wrong," Kameny declared. "And society can go its way so long as it doesn't get in my way" (Johnson, 1991). But Kameny was less sure about his sexual orientation. At Harvard he spent most of his nights at the observatory gazing at the stars. It was not until he was researching his doctoral dissertation in Arizona that Kameny fell in with a gay crowd. After his first night in a gay bar in Tucson, Kameny thought to himself, "I've come home." Similar to many gay men who come out later in life, Kameny spent the next several years making up for lost time.

After completing his PhD at Harvard, Kameny moved to Washington, DC to accept a position as a research and teaching assistant in the astronomy department at Georgetown University. In the 1950s the federal government, engaged in the arms race with the Soviet Union, was sponsoring much of the nation's scientific research. Within a year Kameny transferred to the Army Map Service, where Cold War pressures promised fast advancement. In his new position, Kameny traveled to observatories around the country to calculate distances between points in the United States and overseas using astronomical observations, helping the Army more accurately target its growing arsenal of nuclear weapons. In October 1957, the Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite, and the space race was off and running. As one of

only a handful of astronomers in the country, Kameny looked forward to working in the U.S. space program and contemplated serving as an astronaut.

But along with the government's scientific patronage came demands for political and sexual conformity. In 1957, while on assignment in Hawaii for the Army Map Service, Kameny was suddenly called back to Washington for an interrogation by government investigators. "Information has come to the attention of the U.S. Civil Service Commission that you are a homosexual," the investigators began, in a phrase that would haunt thousands of government workers throughout the Cold War. "What comment, if any, do you care to make?" When Kameny asserted that his private life was none of the federal government's concern, he was dismissed from his job and his scientific career ended. At the dawning of the space race, this skilled astronomer was jobless and dependent upon charity (*Kameny v. Bruckner*, 1960).

According to U.S. Civil Service policy, Kameny's homosexuality made him "unsuitable" for federal employment. Thousands of federal employees had been similarly dismissed or forced to resign since the McCarthy era, when Republican enemies of the Truman administration began insisting that gay federal workers posed a risk to national security because of their vulnerability to blackmail. In 1950, the U.S. Senate opened hearings on the "Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government," which highlighted, despite a lack of evidence, the claim that gays and lesbians were subject to coercion by foreign agents. To help ferret them out of the government, the U.S. Park Service administered a "Pervert Elimination Campaign" in the major parks in Washington, DC, arresting hundreds of gay men. One journalist called the hysteria that engulfed Washington at the time "the panic on the Potomac"; the officials behind the effort labeled it "the purge of the perverts." By the late 1950s, the Eisenhower administration's more restrictive security program diminished the hysteria while it institutionalized the purges as an intrinsic component of the national security state.

Most gay men and lesbians forced out of their jobs in this way quietly resigned. Kameny was among the first to challenge his dismissal. When administrative appeals failed and the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled against him, his attorney abandoned the case. Forced to write his appeal to the Supreme Court himself, Kameny outlined a strategy that served him for the next several decades. In the brief he charged that the government's antigay policies were "no less illegal and no less odious than discrimination based upon religious or racial grounds" (*Kameny v. Bruckner*, 1960). He asserted that because of his homosexuality he was being treated as a second-class citizen. Moreover, based on his interpretation of the 1948 Kinsey study finding that approximately 10 percent of the population is exclusively homosexual,

Kameny charged that 15 million Americans were subject to the same treatment. Deploying the language of the black civil rights movement, Kameny demanded that the court examine the entire history of antigay purges.

In 1961, when the Supreme Court refused to rule on his unprecedented claims, he decided to enlist others in the cause and founded the Mattachine Society of Washington (MSW). The first Mattachine Society was founded in California in 1951 as a sort of gay fraternal order, providing social services to gays and lesbians, but it moved beyond that. Kameny's group rejected the internal focus and secretive nature of the existing group and adopted a political activist approach. Mattachine of Washington dedicated itself, according to its constitution, "to act by any lawful means to secure for homosexuals the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (p. 3). Its goal was to change the homosexual's place in society. Elected the group's first president, Kameny was soon one of the few homosexuals in the United States willing to appear publicly and use his own name.

With an eye on the black civil rights movement, Kameny set about recasting homosexuality—traditionally considered a moral or a mental health problem—into a civil liberties issue. "It is time that considerations of homosexuality were removed from the psychoanalyst's couch and taken out of the psychiatrist's office," he argued. "The average homosexual . . . is far more likely to have employment problems than emotional ones" (Kameny, 1969, p. 20). Kameny lobbied the local affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), eventually persuading it to take a stand against the federal government's antigay policies long before the national union would. Calling his group the "NAACP of the homosexual minority," Kameny championed the cause that gays were a political minority group. Although Donald Webster Cory had first advanced the idea that gays and lesbians constituted a political minority in 1950 in *The Homosexual in America*, Kameny was the first to put this notion into action. He continually reminded public officials that he and his constituency were not just homosexuals but "homosexual citizens," arguing that sexual identity and political rights were not incompatible.

Because they were fighting for what they believed were basic American rights, the Mattachine Society of Washington used traditional methods: distributing press releases, testifying before committees, lobbying government officials. Where earlier gay organizations had shunned publicity, MSW sought it out. Where earlier groups had brought various authorities in to speak to their membership, MSW sent speakers out to educate the nongay population about homosexuality. As Kameny argued, on issues of homosexuality, "we are the experts and the authorities" (*Kameny v. Bruckner*, 1960). MSW published a monthly newsletter and sent it to people they thought would be interested—such as FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. When Hoover

requested that his name be taken off their mailing list, the group told him that they would, as soon as he took them off of his list of subversive organizations. When Congressman John Dowdy (D-Texas) tried to rescind the right of MSW to solicit funds in the District of Columbia, Kameny requested public hearings on the matter and became the first openly gay person to testify before a congressional committee. He garnered much favorable publicity in the local press by eloquently defending his group's contribution to the welfare of what he called "the largest minority in the District of Columbia after the Negro" (testimony, 1963).

Kameny, convinced that antigay prejudice was based primarily on emotion, not reason, put little faith in attempts to educate or persuade. As he declared in a historic speech to the New York chapter of the Mattachine Society in 1964, "The Negro tried for 90 years to achieve his purposes by a program of information and education. His achievements in those 90 years, while by no means nil, were nothing compared to those of the past 10 years, when he tried a vigorous civil liberties, social action approach" (D'Emilio, 1983, p. 153). So when Washington police raided the Gayety Buffet and arrested and abused several gay men, "we demanded a meeting," Kameny remembered, "which was not the kind of thing they expected" (Johnson, 1991). Kameny got the men to sign affidavits concerning their treatment and got the local ACLU chapter to support them. At the meeting with the police, Kameny elicited an admission that gay people had the right to assemble in bars and a promise that this type of harassment would not be repeated. In the spring and summer of 1965, when efforts to meet with federal government representatives failed, Kameny—at the initial suggestion of MSW member Jack Nichols—organized an unprecedented series of gay pickets in front of the White House and other government buildings in Washington, DC. He also launched a series of test discrimination cases in the courts, all signaling a new period of militancy.

Kameny was convinced that the success of the gay movement hinged on debunking the psychiatric profession's assertion that homosexuality was a mental illness. Whereas earlier groups sponsored debates by medical authorities on the causes and cures for homosexuality, Kameny took strong, unabashed progay stands, proclaiming, "there is no homosexual problem; there is a heterosexual problem." As a scientist, Kameny pointed out the flaws in medical pronouncements based solely on the observation of psychiatric patients, not the millions of mentally healthy gay and lesbians beyond the medical gaze. In 1965, at the initial suggestion of member Jack Nichols, MSW was the first gay organization to declare that homosexuality was not a sickness but "a preference, orientation, or propensity, on a par with, and not different in kind from, heterosexuality" (McCaffrey, 1972, pp. 182-187). But with negative theories of homosexuality so pervasive, even among gay

people themselves, Kameny realized he needed a more positive approach. By 1968 he coined the slogan "Gay Is Good"—consciously inspired by Stokely Carmichael's empowerment chant "Black Is Beautiful"—to help bolster the self-esteem of gays and lesbians.

Kameny spread his activist agenda through speaking engagements around the country, radicalizing existing gay organizations and helping myriad new groups get started in other cities. Kameny also succeeded in forming coalitions of gay organizations, first regionally and then nationally. He founded the East Coast Homophile Organizations (ECHO) in 1963 and was involved a few years later in the formation of the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO), which in 1968 formally adopted "Gay Is Good" as the motto for the movement. Within his own group, however, Kameny's uncompromising positions cost him support. He believed that MSW's purpose was to advance the cause of gays and lesbians as a class, not to serve the needs of individual members. His dominance of the group and his single-minded focus on the enemy failed to inspire broad-based participation. Kameny was defeated in an election for the presidency of MSW in 1965, although he remained a member of its governing board.

With the rise of a grassroots gay liberation movement in the wake of the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, much of the philosophical and legal groundwork laid by Kameny and other early activists began to bear fruit. Throughout the decade Kameny had orchestrated a series of test cases brought by fired gay civil servants. Several early victories were appealed or overturned. But in 1969, in *Norton vs. Macy*, the U.S. Court of Appeals demanded a proven connection between the off-duty sexual conduct of federal civil servants and their suitability for employment, establishing the "nexus criteria" later invoked in many federal employment situations. After several similar court defeats, the Civil Service Commission capitulated. On July 3, 1975, the Civil Service Commission's General Counsel personally telephoned Kameny to inform him that the Commission had expunged the term "immoral conduct" from the list of disqualifications in its new employment regulations. The battle Kameny inaugurated eighteen years before had been won. This change by the federal government, the nation's largest employer, set the tone for more liberal hiring policies throughout the private sector.

Around the same time the American Psychiatric Association (APA) began to reconsider its definition of homosexuality as a pathology. After appearing on numerous television debates with professional psychiatrists, Kameny succeeded in getting the APA itself to sponsor a panel of openly gay men and women at its 1971 annual convention in Washington, DC. To increase the pressure, Kameny, along with members of the Gay Liberation Front and antiwar protesters, stormed the convention, grabbed the microphone, and declared, "Psychiatry is the enemy incarnate. . . . You may take

this as a declaration of war against you" (Bayer, 1981, p. 105). Under attack from gay activists and a growing number of psychiatrists, the APA voted in 1974 to remove homosexuality from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders*. Frank was on hand at APA headquarters in Washington, DC to savor the victory and participate in a press conference.

If the 1970s gave Kameny several victories, it also offered new venues for battle. Prior to that time, the District of Columbia, Kameny's adopted home, was governed by a presidentially appointed city council. With no local political life, Kameny's early activism naturally focused on the national level. But in 1971, when U.S. Congress permitted the District to elect a non-voting delegate to the House of Representatives, Kameny ventured into local politics and became the first openly gay person to run for U.S. Congress. Although he came in fourth in the six-person race, he succeeded in using the election to increase publicity for his "personal freedoms" platform and to politicize the local gay community. In announcing his candidacy, Kameny declared, "I am a homosexual American citizen determined to move into the mainstream of society from the backwaters to which I have been relegated. Homosexuals have been shoved around for time immemorial. We are fed up with it. We are starting to shove back and we're going to keep shoving back until we are guaranteed our rights" (Tobin and Wicker, 1972, pp. 128-130). This was the opening salvo in a lengthy engagement in local politics in the nation's capital.

After the election, Kameny's campaign committee reorganized and expanded into the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), a nonpartisan group dedicated to securing "full rights and privileges" of citizenship for the gay and lesbian community of the District of Columbia through "peaceful participation in the political process" (Tobin and Wicker, 1972, p. 132). Patterned after the Gay Activists Alliance in New York, GAA/DC was instrumental in securing passage of the DC Human Rights Law in 1973, one of the nation's first laws to ban discrimination against gays and lesbians in housing, employment, and public accommodations. Over the past twenty-five years, what is now the Gay and Lesbian Activists Alliance has been a powerful advocate for the gay community with local officials, the media, the police, and school systems. As its most consistently active and vocal member, Kameny has been instrumental in many victories, such as the elimination of funding for the vice squad in 1975 and repeal of DC's sodomy law in 1993.

Since his unsuccessful congressional campaign, Kameny has served the District of Columbia in a variety of appointed and elected positions. In 1975, after lobbying by GAA, he was appointed to Washington, DC's, Human Rights Commission, the first openly gay mayoral appointee in the nation's capital. After serving there for seven years, he was appointed to the city's Board of Appeals and Review. As an outspoken advocate of statehood

for the District of Columbia, he was elected a delegate to the DC Statehood Constitutional Convention in 1981, where he helped draft a constitution for the proposed State of New Columbia. Since 1969 he has served intermittent terms on the Executive Board of the National Capital Area Civil Liberties Union.

After being fired from the federal government in 1957, Kameny held a number of temporary jobs using his scientific background, but he was never again able to work in the field of astronomy. Since the 1960s Kameny has managed to integrate his full-time activism and need to make a living by working as an independent paralegal, offering counsel to gay and nongay military personnel, civil servants, and contractors having problems with the federal government. In this capacity, Kameny has consistently attacked the government for running a "sexual-conformity program rather than a security program" (Kameny, 1969, p. 21), pointing to a lack of evidence that homosexuals are any more likely to pose a risk to national security than heterosexuals. His basic advice to people being interrogated by government officials about their sexuality never varies: "Say nothing. Sign nothing. Get counsel. Fight back." Using his knowledge of the federal bureaucracy, Kameny succeeded in 1974 in forcing the Department of Defense to conduct the first public security clearance hearing. His gay client, Otis Tabler, was eventually granted a clearance, marking a watershed in the Pentagon's program. Since then, gays and lesbians have been subject to special scrutiny and harassment, but they have generally been granted necessary clearances. Kameny has succeed in getting other federal agencies to liberalize their security clearance programs, including the highly secretive National Security Agency (NSA), which first issued a security clearance to an openly gay man in 1980. An executive order issued by President Clinton in 1995 banned discrimination based on sexual orientation in the granting of government security clearances, leading to a happy retirement for Kameny from paralegal work.

Kameny was also instrumental in beginning the first systematic legal challenge to the U.S. military's policy of discharging gay and lesbian service members. As early as 1965, Mattachine of Washington targeted the military ban by picketing the Pentagon and blanketing the building with flyers on "How to Handle a Federal Interrogation." Kameny also assisted in the much publicized case of Leonard Matlovich, whose 1975 lawsuit placed the gay Air Force sergeant on the cover of *Time* magazine. Although the suit eventually led to an out-of-court settlement in Matlovich's favor, the Pentagon responded by strengthening its ban on homosexuals in the military. As the Pentagon continued systematically to discharge openly gay and lesbian soldiers, Kameny, often acting as counsel, helped ensure that they at least received honorable discharges. Since the Clinton administration's aborted

attempt to lift the ban on gays in the military and the rise of the Pentagon's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue" policy in 1993, a number of new, specialized organizations have emerged to monitor the situation and aid gay and lesbian service members. As with many other areas of gay and lesbian life, in the 1960s Kameny was one of the few people working on the military's antigay policy; today, it is the concern of a number of national professional organizations.

One of the few gay leaders from the 1960s still involved in the movement, Kameny's influence spans four decades. When Bruce Voeller and a group of fellow New Yorkers founded the National Gay Task Force in 1973—the first truly national gay organization—Kameny was one of two long-time national activists asked to sit on its board of directors, where he served until 1982. Despite his longevity in the movement, his philosophy and tactics have remained remarkably consistent. Although his brashness may have increased over the years as the cultural climate changed, Kameny has always preferred to work through established legal and political channels. Rather than just protest outside, Kameny goes inside and makes the bureaucracy work for him. His ability to use the legal system was recognized in 1988 when he received the prestigious Durfee Award for his contributions to "the enhancement of the human dignity of others through the law or legal institutions." Although he prefers to work on the inside, Kameny is not opposed to civil disobedience. His first dignified demonstration in front of the White House in 1965 has since led to numerous arrests defending the rights of homosexuals. In his fight to overturn the District of Columbia's statue outlawing consensual sodomy, he advocated and participated in sit-ins and other forms of direct action planned by groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation. Ultimately, he is a pragmatist. "If society becomes intransigent, you escalate the battle as necessary. You plan a strategy using 'small guns' before 'big guns' in a calculated fashion" (Johnson, 1991).

His ultimate goal has always been to accord gays and lesbians the same rights and privileges enjoyed by all citizens. As an assimilationist, he has been criticized by more radical elements in the gay movement for participating in a system that is fundamentally oppressive to all minority groups. But Kameny feels he has forced society to change to fit his demands, thereby giving gays and lesbians the choice of participating in that society on equal footing without having to deny their sexuality. According to Kameny the gay movement's ability to "get things done" rests on not becoming "isolated in ivory towers of unworkable ideologies." Pointing to Kameny's "concrete ideas" and "willingness to be a martyr" for those ideas, fellow homophile leader Dick Leitsch, president of New York Mattachine, wrote in 1964, "A man like Frank is the most valuable single item the homophile movement possesses" (Kameny papers, December 28, 1964). Kameny's ability to

combine the pragmatism of a bureaucrat with the indefatigable spirit of an activist succeeded not only in changing U.S. government policy but in transforming the movement.

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