

BARBARA GITTINGS

b. July 31, 1932

d. February 18, 2007

GAY PIONEER

"I've had the satisfaction of working with other gay people all across the country ... to change prejudiced hearts and minds."

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In the 1950s gay activism was in its infancy. "There were scarcely 200 of us in the whole United States," Gittings said of her fellow crusaders. "It was like a club—we all knew each other."

Although she lived in Philadelphia, Gittings started the New York chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) in 1958. Founded in San Francisco, the DOB was the first lesbian civil rights organization in the United States. From 1963 to 1966, Gittings was the editor of the DOB's publication, *The Ladder*, the first national lesbian magazine.

With fellow activist Frank Kameny, Gittings helped organize the Annual Reminders—the first public demonstrations for gay equality. Held in front of Independence Hall each Fourth of July from 1965 to 1969, the protests paved the way for the Stonewall riot in 1969. At the 1965 Annual Reminder, 40 openly gay and lesbian picketers from New York, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia participated. By 1969 their numbers had more than tripled.

After 1969, Kameny, Gittings and others suspended the Annual Reminders to marshal support for a 1970 march on the first anniversary of Stonewall. Proceeding from Greenwich Village to Central Park, it is remembered as the first New York City Pride Parade.

Gittings and Kameny waged a multi-year campaign to declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder. At the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1972, Gittings and Kameny formed a panel on homosexuality. When no gay psychiatrist would serve on it with them for fear repercussions, Gittings recruited Dr. H. Anonymous (John E. Fryer, M.D.), who appeared masked and using a voice modulator. Together they asserted that the disease was not homosexuality, but toxic homophobia.

In 1973, with Gittings and Kameny present by invitation, the APA announced its removal of homosexuality as a mental illness. Hence, the label and its consequences no longer encumbered the gay rights movement.

Gittings also successfully crusaded to promote gay literature and eliminate discrimination in libraries. She volunteered with the Gay Task Force of the American Library Association and soon became the group's coordinator—a position she held for 16 years. She edited the Task Force's bibliography and wrote a history of the group, titled "Gays in Library Land." The American Library Association awarded her a lifetime membership.

Gittings appears in "Gay Pioneers," a documentary co-produced by WHYY/PBS and Equality Forum. In 2001 the Free Library of Philadelphia established the Gittings Collection—the second largest assemblage of gay and lesbian materials in a public library. In 2012, with unanimous City Council approval, Philadelphia designated a block in its gayborhood "Barbara Gittings Way."



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