

FRANK KAMENY

b. May 21, 1925

d. October 11, 2011

GAY PIONEER

Frank Kameny was the chief strategist and father of the LGBT civil rights movement.

"The momentum is there, and that's not going to be stopped."

A World War II veteran with a Ph.D. from Harvard University, Frank Kameny worked as an astronomer for the Army Map Service. In 1957 he was fired for being gay. The termination fueled a lifetime of activism.

Kameny fought his dismissal in the federal courts and in 1961 filed the first gay rights appeal to the US Supreme Court. The same year, Kameny cofounded the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C. The Mattachine Societies became the first gay civil liberties organizations in the United States. Later, Kameny helped start organizations that would become the National LGBTQ Task Force and the Human Rights Campaign.

Kameny, along with Craig Rodwell, took the lead in organizing the Annual Reminders—the first public demonstrations for gay equality. Held each Fourth of July from 1965 to 1969 in front of Independence Hall, the protests paved the way for the Stonewall riot in 1969. For the first Annual Reminder, Kameny and fellow crusader Barbara Gittings enlisted 40 gay and lesbian picketers from New York, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia. By 1969 the number of protesters had more than tripled. During this time, Kameny coined the slogan, "Gay Is Good."

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



With Gittings, Kameny waged a multi-year campaign against the American Psychiatric Association (APA) for its classification of homosexuality as a mental illness. For the APA's annual meeting in 1972, Kameny and Gittings formed a panel on homosexuality. When no gay psychiatrist would participate for fear of professional repercussions, Gittings recruited Dr. H. Anonymous (John E. Fryer, M.D.), who appeared masked and using a voice modulator. The three of them asserted that the disease was not homosexuality, but toxic homophobia.

In 1973, with Kameny and Gittings present by invitation, the APA announced a change of heart. Kameny described it as the day "we were cured en masse by the psychiatrists." The label of mental illness would no longer encumber the gay rights movement.

In 1975 the US Civil Service Commission lifted its ban on gay employees. Two years later, Kameny became the first openly gay candidate to run for Congress.

Kameny appeared in "Gay Pioneers," a documentary co-produced by WHYY/PBS and Equality Forum. In 2007 the Washington City Council honored him as a "true freedom fighter." Later he received a formal apology for his dismissal from the Army Map Service. President Obama invited Kameny to the signing of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act, and lauded him for his seminal efforts. Kameny had worked against the ban on gays in the military since the 1970s.

More than 70,000 items from Kameny's personal archives reside in the permanent collections of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution. His home is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. "Gay Is Good: The Life and Letters of Gay Rights Pioneer Franklin Kameny," edited by Michael G. Long, was published in 2015.

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