

VIRGINIA APUZZO

b. June 26, 1941

PIONEERING ACTIVIST

**Virginia Apuzzo
co-authored the first
gay and lesbian civil
rights plank for the
Democratic Party.**

*“I thought I’d have to live my life
with this deep, dark secret.”*

Virginia “Ginny” Apuzzo is a New York native and a former nun who played a pivotal role in LGBT civil rights and the fight against AIDS during the 1980s and ’90s.

Apuzzo joined the Sisters of Charity in the Bronx when she was 26, but left after the Stonewall riots (1969) to come out publicly as a lesbian and establish herself as an activist, educator and civil servant.

“I read about Stonewall in the newspaper,” Apuzzo said in “Stonewall Uprising,” a PBS documentary. “Here I’d thought I was the only one ... it was as if suddenly a brick wall opened up.”

Apuzzo joined the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and served for many years as its executive director, working to include LGBT issues in the 1976 Democratic Party platform. In 1978 she cofounded the Lambda Independent Democrats.

In 1980 she became one of the first openly lesbian delegates at the Democratic National Convention when she co-authored the first gay and lesbian civil rights plank for the Democratic Party. In 1997 Bill Clinton appointed her to the White House senior staff as assistant to the president for administration and management, making her the highest-ranking out lesbian in the federal government.

Apuzzo joined the Women’s Caucus, an arm of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, with her partner, Betty Powell, who was the first black lesbian on the group’s board. The two became increasingly vocal about lesbian rights after butting heads with well-known feminists whom they accused of insufficiently embracing lesbians in the women’s movement.

It was during her tenure with New York City’s Department of Public Health that Apuzzo became one of the earliest, most vocal female AIDS activists in the country. In New York she created a volunteer infrastructure to address the community’s needs and established one of the first telephone hotlines to help with AIDS education and resources. Apuzzo testified at the first congressional hearing on AIDS, blasting the government’s lax response to the virus, and continued to lobby passionately for federal funds.

“It was the most tragic time of my life,” she said, “each year seeing whole segments of the gay male activist community wiped out.”

In 1985 New York Governor Mario Cuomo named her vice chair of the New York State AIDS Advisory Council. She publicly challenged pharmaceutical companies over the rising cost of AIDS drugs and helped rewrite insurance policies. Years later, she worked with President Clinton to secure disability benefits for people living with the disease.

Apuzzo was a tenured professor at Brooklyn College. In 2007 New York Governor Eliot Spitzer appointed her to the Commission on Public Integrity, where she worked until she retired.



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