

JEAN O'LEARY

b. March 4, 1948

d. June 4, 2005

PIONEERING ACTIVIST

*"I wanted to do something special,
to have an impact on the world."*

**Jean O'Leary was
a pioneering LGBT
activist and the
cofounder of National
Coming Out Day.**

Jean O'Leary was a pioneering LGBT activist who founded Lesbian Feminist Liberation, one of the first gay women's rights groups in the United States. She also organized the first National Coming Out Day in 1987 with Rich Eichberg.

Raised in Cleveland, Ohio, O'Leary joined the Sisters of Holy Humility of Mary after graduating from high school. She left the convent after earning a degree in psychology from Cleveland State University and moved to New York City to pursue a doctorate at Yeshiva University. In New York she became involved in the budding gay rights movement.

O'Leary was an early member of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Gay Activists Alliance. She created Lesbian Feminist Liberation to draw attention to gay issues related to women. In 1977 O'Leary organized the first meeting of gay rights activists in the White House with the help of Midge Costanza, an out lesbian on the president's staff. During the event, O'Leary said, "This is the first time ... a president has seen fit to acknowledge the rights and needs of some 20 million Americans."

Her involvement in politics led O'Leary to become one of only three openly gay delegates to the 1976 Democratic National Convention. She served on the Democratic National Committee for 12 years and was the chair of the committee's Gay and Lesbian Caucus from 1992 to 2002.

During the 1980s, O'Leary was active with National Gay Rights Advocates, the largest nationwide LGBT group in America. It was among the first groups to publicly respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis, advocating for access to legal support and treatment. Sean Strub, founder of POZ magazine, said O'Leary's early AIDS activism, "particularly in expediting access to new treatments, saved many lives."

O'Leary and other gay and lesbian activists of the era have been criticized for not including transgender issues in their fight for equality. O'Leary later apologized, saying, "How could I work to exclude transvestites and at the same time criticize the feminists who were doing their best back in those days to exclude lesbians?"

O'Leary died of lung cancer at age 57, leaving behind a partner, a son and a daughter. The longtime AIDS activist Bob Hattoy said, "Jean taught gay men about feminism, she taught lesbians about AIDS, she taught feminists about gay and lesbian issues, and she taught Democrats about everything."



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