

MEL HEIFETZ

b. November 4, 1935

PHILANTHROPIST

“I have spent my entire life working with [the gay community] to achieve the same equality that everyone else enjoys.”

Mel Heifetz is a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania-based real estate developer, business owner, activist, and philanthropist best known for his unparalleled support of the city's LGBTQ community. Over the last 70 years, he has donated millions to benefit LGBTQ institutions and initiatives nationwide, directly and through major political contributions. For over 25 years, he has supported LGBTQ rights in Uganda, Colombia, and Thailand.

He has contributed millions of dollars to support LGBTQ institutions, issues, and candidates.

Raised in South Philadelphia, Heifetz was the child of working-class Jewish parents. By age 9, he was cleaning his parents' hair salon and accompanying his father door-to-door selling household goods. As a Boy Scout, he quickly reached the rank of Eagle Scout, the organization's highest achievement.

At 18, Heifetz enlisted in the Army and served in Germany. Because of the military's ban on gay soldiers, he kept his sexuality secret.

After returning home, Heifetz studied real estate for a year at Temple University.

His purchase of a small Philadelphia coffee shop, the Humoresque, marked his first business venture.

Under his ownership, the Humoresque welcomed gay and interracial couples at a time when homosexuality and mixed-race relationships were illegal. Police harassed Heifetz until they finally raided his business, arresting him and his customers on trumped-up disorderly conduct charges. Though unsuccessful, volunteer attorneys from the American Civil Liberties

Union defended him in court. The incident catalyzed Heifetz's lifetime of activism and forged his enduring relationship with the ACLU.

Over the following decades, Heifetz acquired properties and accumulated wealth. During the 1980s, he financially supported nonprofits combating the HIV/AIDS crisis and provided health insurance to scores of people infected with the virus.

He built numerous successful LGBTQ-friendly businesses, including Sisters, Philadelphia's first and only full-time lesbian bar, and the city's first gay hotel, the Alexander Inn, along with hotels and bars in Key West, Florida. He paid off the substantial mortgage of Philadelphia's William Way LGBT Community Center and founded the Philadelphia Foundation's GLBT Fund of America. In 2017, he endowed the foundation with \$16 million to help ensure future funding for LGBTQ organizations. His contributions have been instrumental in assisting homeless LGBTQ youth and creating permanent housing for them as they enter adulthood. He has supported Democratic candidates, spending millions on the campaigns of Bill and Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden, with whom he has forged personal relationships.

Heifetz has received numerous honors for his philanthropy and activism, including the Human Rights Campaign's Equality Award, the Philadelphia Award, and Equality Forum's Frank Kameny Award. The Gill Foundation counts him among its OutGiving Network, “whose generosity has made a significant impact on the march toward equality.”

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