

Dr. Franklin E. Kameny spearheaded a new period and style of activism in the fledgling homosexual civil rights movement of the early 1960s. He thereby created a militant homosexual civil rights movement, which through nearly five subsequent decades has significantly altered the rights, perception, and role of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people in American society.

As founder and president of the Mattachine Society of Washington, Dr. Kameny showed that gay men and lesbians, like other minority groups, would demand equal rights as "homosexual American citizens." Kameny's style and tactics differed markedly from those of earlier homosexual leaders in his affirmation of the normalcy of American homosexuals and their inalienable right to the same liberties and treatment accorded other American citizens.

He adopted traditional reform movement tactics—publicity, court suits, lobbying, public demonstrations—to launch the first challenge to anti-gay policies adopted by the federal government during the McCarthy era. By unabashedly proclaiming that homosexuality was neither sick nor immoral, Kameny helped move gays and lesbians out of the shadows of 1950s apologetic, self-help groups and into the sunlight of the civil rights movement, setting the tone for a movement that continues today. He was, in many ways, America's first gay activist.

Dr. Kameny's home since 1962 has been at 5020 Cathedral Avenue, NW, in Washington, D.C. Kameny initially rented the home but subsequently purchased the home from its builders, the Fletcher family. The home has served as a workspace, archives, informal counseling center, alternative headquarters for the Mattachine Society of Washington, and as a home for visiting gay and lesbian activists and those needing meeting space. Perhaps most important, for 40 years, countless numbers of women and men have found a safe place to discuss, plan, confide, and dream at Dr. Kameny's 5020 Cathedral Avenue home.

At an early age, Kameny developed a habit of challenging accepted orthodoxies. As a teenager, he announced to his parents that he was an atheist. As a teaching fellow at Harvard, he refused to sign a loyalty oath without attaching qualifiers. "If society and I differ on something, I'm willing to give the matter a second look. If we still differ, then I am right and society is wrong," Kameny declared. "And society can go its way so long as it doesn't get in my way." Consequently, when he realized that he was attracted to men, he suffered little of the traditional guilt associated with "coming out." According to his philosophy, society's long-standing homophobia, not his sexuality, was at fault.

Upon graduation from Harvard in 1956, Dr. Kameny moved to Washington, D.C., to accept a position as a research and teaching assistant in the astronomy department at Georgetown University. In the 1950s the federal government, engaged in an arms race with the Soviet Union, was sponsoring much of the nation's scientific and technical research. Within a year Kameny transferred to the Army Map Service, where Cold War pressures promised fast advancement.

Along with the government's scientific patronage, however, came demands for political and sexual conformity. In 1957, Army security officials interrogated Dr. Kameny concerning alleged homosexual activity. When Kameny asserted that his private life was none of the federal government's concern, he was dismissed from his job, his scientific career ended. At the dawning of the space race, Dr. Kameny was jobless and depending upon charity.

According to U.S. Civil Service policy, Kameny's homosexuality made him "unsuitable" for federal employment. Although hundreds of federal employees had been similarly dismissed since the McCarthy era--which gratuitously linked homosexuality to communism as a threat to national security-- Kameny was the first to challenge this policy. When administrative appeals failed and the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled against him, his attorney abandoned the case. Forced to write his appeal to the Supreme Court himself, Dr. Kameny outlined a strategy that served him for most of the next two decades. In the brief he charged that the government's anti-gay policies were "no less illegal and no less odious than discrimination based upon religious or racial grounds." He asserted that because of his homosexuality he was being

treated as a second-class citizen. Moreover, based on the 1948 Kinsey study finding that approximately 10 percent of the population is homosexual, Kameny charged that 15 million Americans were being subjected to the same treatment.

In 1961, when the Supreme Court refused to rule on his unprecedented claims, he decided to enlist others in the cause and founded the Mattachine Society of Washington. The idea of a gay organization was not new. The first Mattachine society had been founded in California in 1951 as a kind of gay fraternal order, providing social services to gays and lesbians. It borrowed its name from medieval court jesters who wore masks and were therefore allowed to articulate unpopular truths. But the Washington group rejected the internal focus and secretive nature of the earlier group and adopted a political activist approach. Mattachine of Washington's main goal was no less than to change the homosexual's place in society. It sought "to act by any lawful means to secure for homosexuals the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Elected the group's first president, Dr. Kameny was soon one of the few homosexuals in America willing to appear publicly and use his own name.

Although 5020 Cathedral Avenue was never listed officially as the headquarters of the Mattachine Society of Washington, it was listed as the secondary contact point: two press releases (appendices 1 and 2) from 1969 and 1970 reference the house and Dr. Kameny's personal telephone number, 202-362-2211, as contact points for further information regarding security clearance cases, as documented in early (1969 and 1970) issues of the *Gay Blade*, Washington, D.C.'s newspaper for the gay and lesbian community (appendix 3). A second telephone number, 202-363-3881, located at 5020 Cathedral Avenue, was maintained by the Mattachine Society for individuals to contact the society for information about activities and for information on blackmail issues, security clearances, and entrapment and harassment issues. By the late 1960s, the Mattachine Society's newsletter, *The Insider*, listed the second phone line as the contact number for the publication. The number was also listed by the *Gay Blade* as the contact for the organization (appendices 4 and 5).

With an eye on the black civil rights movement, Kameny quickly set about recasting homosexuality--traditionally considered a moral or, more recently, a mental health problem--into a civil liberties issue. "It is time that considerations of homosexuality were removed from the psychoanalyst's couch and taken out of the psychiatrist's office," he argued. "The average homosexual. . . is far more likely to have employment problems than emotional ones."

Because they were fighting for what they believed were basic American rights, members of Mattachine of Washington used traditional methods--distributing press releases printed in Dr. Kameny's home, testifying before committees, lobbying government officials. A significant amount of the planning and organization of these took place at 5020 Cathedral. Pioneers now recognized as the leaders of the modern gay rights movement often met at Kameny's home. The pioneers include Barbara Gittings, the founder of the lesbian advocacy organization the Daughters of Bilitis; Donald Webster Cory [Edward Sagarin], author of the groundbreaking work "The Homosexual in America;" Kay Tobin Lahusen; Lige Clarke, Randolfe Wicker; and Jack Nichols, who gathered with Kameny to discuss strategies for the fledgling gay rights movement. Activities like meetings and mimeographing the Mattachine Society of Washington's press releases--tasks now considered ordinary but that were part of an extraordinary movement, took place at 5020 Cathedral.

Where earlier gay organizations had shunned publicity, the Mattachine Society of Washington sought it out. Where earlier groups had brought various authorities in to speak to their membership, Mattachine sent speakers to educate the non-gay population about homosexuality. Kameny, convinced that the prejudice they were facing was based primarily on emotion, not reason, put little faith in attempts to educate and persuade. As he wrote in 1964, "The Negro tried for 90 years to achieve his purposes by a program of information and education. His achievements in those 90 years, while by no means nil, were nothing compared to those of the past 10 years, when he tried a vigorous civil liberties, social action approach." So in the spring and summer of 1965 Dr. Kameny helped organize a series of gay pickets in

front of the White House and other government buildings in Washington, D.C. He also launched a series of test discrimination cases in the courts, all signaling a new period of militancy. Also organized out of 5020 Cathedral Avenue was the Gay Speakers Bureau. Founded in 1969, it listed the second phone line at 5020 as its contact number.

Dr. Kameny was convinced that the success of the gay movement hinged on debunking the psychiatric profession's assertion that homosexuality was a mental illness. So where earlier groups sponsored debates by medical and religious authorities on the causes and problems of homosexuality, Kameny took strong, unabashed pro-gay stands, proclaiming, "there is no homosexual problem, there is a heterosexual problem." As a scientist himself, Dr. Kameny pointed out the flaws in medical pronouncements based solely on the observation of psychiatric patients, not the millions of mentally healthy gay and lesbians beyond the medical gaze. In 1965, at the initial suggestion of Mattachine member Jack Nichols, the organization was the first gay organization to declare that homosexuality was not a sickness but "a preference, orientation, or propensity, on a par with, and not different in kind from, heterosexuality

Kameny spread his activist agenda through speaking engagements around the country, radicalizing existing gay organizations, such as the Mattachine Society of New York, and helping a myriad of new groups get started in other cities. Kameny also succeeded in forming coalitions of gay organizations, first regionally and then nationally. He founded the East Coast Homophile Organizations (ECHO) in 1963 and was an active participant in the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO), which in 1968 formally adopted "Gay is Good" as the motto for the movement. The residence at 5020 Cathedral Avenue was the site of meetings connected with ECHO and NACHO conference planning and organizational matters between 1963 and 1968.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the counter-culture loosened moral strictures and respect for authority across the board, the gay rights movement entered a new stage. Its numbers grew dramatically and its demands became more radical in the wake of the Stonewall Riots in New York, where a routine police raid on a gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, in June 1969 first sparked armed confrontation between gays and the police. The Stonewall Inn is now a historic site.

As the cultural climate changed, much of the organizational and legal groundwork laid by Dr. Kameny and other early activists began to bear fruit. Throughout the decade Kameny had orchestrated a series of test cases brought by fired gay civil servants, many of whom were members of MSW. Several early victories were appealed or overturned. But in 1969, in *Norton vs. Macy*, the U.S. Court of Appeals demanded a proven connection between the off-duty sexual conduct of federal civil servants and their suitability for employment, establishing the "nexus criteria" later invoked in many federal employment situations. By 1975, after several similar court defeats, the Civil Service Commission relented and modified its regulations, expunging homosexuality as a disqualification for federal employment. The battle Kameny inaugurated 18 years before had been won.

By the 1970s the American Psychiatric Association (APA) began to reconsider its definition of homosexuality as a pathology. After appearing on numerous television debates with professional psychiatrists, Dr. Kameny succeeded in getting the APA itself to sponsor a panel of openly gay men and women at its 1971 annual convention in Washington, D.C. Along with members of the Gay Liberation Front and anti-war protesters, Kameny stormed the convention, grabbed the microphone and declared, "Psychiatry is the enemy incarnate . . . You may take this as a declaration of war against you." Under pressure from gay activists and a growing number of psychiatrists, the APA voted in 1973 to remove homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders. During the campaign to remove the stigma of illness from homosexuality, Dr. Kameny and colleagues conferenced over the telephone and in person at his home on Cathedral Avenue.

In 1971, when Congress permitted the District to elect a non-voting delegate to the

House of Representatives, Dr. Kameny ventured into local politics and became the first openly gay person to run for Congress. Although he came in fourth in the six-way race, he succeeded in using the election to increase publicity for his "personal freedoms" platform and politicize the local gay community. In announcing his candidacy, Kameny declared, "I am a homosexual American citizen determined to move into the mainstream of society from the backwaters to which I have been relegated. Homosexuals have been shoved around for time immemorial. We are fed up with it. We are starting to shove back and we're going to keep shoving back until we are guaranteed our rights." This was the opening salvo in more than 20 years of involvement in local politics.

The Kameny for Congress campaign also opened the gates for active participation by gays and lesbians in national and local partisan politics. Kameny's campaign manager, Paul Kuntzler, actively involved in Democratic Party politics since the John F. Kennedy campaign, became one of a number of local activists urging inclusion of gay and lesbian delegates in local Democratic Party organizations and campaigns. Within a year, the Washington, DC gay and lesbian community was campaigning for inclusion of GLBT planks at the 1972 Republican and Democratic conventions in Miami. Kameny was among those attending both conventions in Miami.

The Kameny campaign's measurable success in several key precincts drew the attention of local press and politicians to the existence of a gay bloc of voters. Recognizing the 'gay bloc' as an important swing vote in city wards, local aspirants to positions on Washington's school board, local council, and for mayor actively courted gay and lesbian voters. The 'gay bloc' was widely attributed a key role in the election of District of Columbia Marion Barry in 1978. Several years after Kameny's campaign for Congress and local gay participation in local and national politics, the first local GLBT Democratic Party organization, the Gertrude Stein Democratic Club, formed.

After the election, Kameny's campaign committee reorganized into the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), a non-partisan group dedicated to securing "full rights and privileges" of citizenship for the gay and lesbian community of the District of Columbia through "peaceful participation in the political process." Kameny and GAA were instrumental in securing passage of the DC Human Rights Law in 1973, one of the nation's first laws to ban discrimination against gays and lesbians.

Under the newly elected city government, local gay and lesbian activists and GAA petitioned then-Mayor Walter Washington to appoint Dr. Kameny to a government position. Washington appointed Kameny to the 15-member Human Rights Commission. Serving on the commission for seven years, 1975-1982, Kameny, at first, was the only openly gay person serving in the D.C. government.

After serving on the Human Rights Commission, he was appointed to the city's Board of Appeals and Review, where he served six more years. As an outspoken advocate of statehood for the District of Columbia, he was elected a delegate to the D.C. Statehood Constitutional Convention in 1981, where he helped draft a constitution for the proposed State of New Columbia. And since 1969 he has served intermittent terms on the Executive Board of the National Capital Area Civil Liberties Union.

After being fired from the federal government in 1957, Dr. Kameny held a number of temporary jobs using his scientific background, but never again worked in the field of astronomy. Since 1968 Kameny has managed to integrate his full-time activism and need to make a living by serving as a para-legal, offering counsel to gay and non-gay military personnel, civil servants, and contractors having problems with the federal government, much of that counseling occurring at 5020 Cathedral Avenue. Otto Ulrich, whose case for a security clearance helped overturn a Civil Service ban on homosexuals 1973 recalled in an oral history (Rainbow History Project, July 27, 2001) first consulting Dr. Kameny at the 5020 Cathedral Avenue residence in the late Sixties.

Using his knowledge of the federal bureaucracy, Kameny succeeded in 1974 in forcing

## **Dr. Franklin E. Kameny**

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the Department of Defense to conduct the first public security clearance hearing. His gay client, Otis Tabler, was later granted a clearance, marking a watershed in the Pentagon's program. Since then, gays may be subject to special scrutiny and harassment, but they are generally granted the necessary clearance. Dr. Kameny has succeed in getting other federal agencies to liberalize their security clearance programs, including the National Security Agency, which first issued a security clearance to an openly gay man in 1980.

As the nation's foremost expert on homosexuality and the federal government, Kameny was also involved in the first legal steps to challenge the U.S. military's policy of automatically discharging gay and lesbian service members, including the much-publicized case of gay Air Force Sergeant Leonard Matlovich. Matlovich met with Kameny at 5020 Cathedral Avenue in March 1974 to gain Dr. Kameny's support and assistance. Although this suit, initiated in 1975, eventually led to an out-of-court settlement in Matlovich's favor, the Pentagon responded by strengthening its ban on homosexuals in the military. With the Pentagon continuing automatically to discharge openly gay and lesbian soldiers, Kameny, often acting as counsel, helps ensure that they at least receive honorable discharges.

One of the few gay leaders from the 1960s still involved in the movement, Dr. Kameny's influence spans three decades. When Bruce Voeller and a group of fellow New Yorkers founded the National Gay Task Force in 1973--the first truly national gay organization--Dr. Kameny was one of two long-time national activists asked to sit on its Board of Directors, where he served until 1982. As a NGTF Board member, Kameny was among a group of gay rights leaders who met with officials of the Carter administration in 1977--the first such White House meeting in American history. Today, almost any issue involving the federal government or the District of Columbia and their approach to homosexuality also involves Dr. Kameny and 5020 Cathedral Avenue

Kameny was the leader in the effort to repeal DC's sodomy law. This effort began on August 9, 1963, when Kameny testified as President of the Mattachine Society of Washington before a subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives. "If it is objected that homosexual acts are against the laws of man in the District of Columbia, then we say that this committee makes the laws of man in the District of Columbia and the remedy for the situation lies with the committee. Change the law and make the acts legal. I take this opportunity formally to recommend to this committee that section 22-3502 of the District Code, insofar as it applies to the District of Columbia, be repealed." His recommendation was not well received.

In October 1971, Kameny organized four members of the Gay Liberation Front to sue the DC Police to end their use of the sodomy law to harass gay men. The case was successful, but was applied only to the four plaintiffs.

A report was issued in 1975 by rape victim advocates for the reform of the sexual assault laws and the repeal of penalties against private, consensual sex. A task force was formed to study the reform of the sexual assault laws. Kameny attended every meeting and was consulted regularly, despite not being an official member. Based on the task force's work, the DC Council passed the Sexual Assault Reform bill in 1981. The U.S. Congress -- bowing to anti-gay sentiment in a national campaign -- killed the bill. New legislation was introduced every year starting in 1984 but it languished in the D.C. Judiciary Committee.

In 1993 a sodomy law reform bill was introduced to the D.C. Council. The bill, written by Dr. Kameny, stated simply "No act engaged in only by consenting persons 16 years of age or older shall constitute an offense under this section." Kameny was the first person to testify. He said that sodomy should be legalized and considered "good, moral, and rewarding." The bill passed the DC Council unanimously and the mayor signed it in a public ceremony. This time the Congress did not act, allowing the reform bill to become law on September 13, 1993. The law was repealed completely in 1995 in legislation similar to the 1981 bill.

Despite his longevity in the movement, his philosophy and tactics have remained remarkably consistent. Although his brashness may have increased over the years as the cultural climate changed, Dr. Kameny has always preferred to work through established legal

and political channels. Rather than just protest outside, Kameny goes inside and makes the bureaucracy work for him. His ability to use the court system was recognized in 1988 when he received the Durfee Award for his contributions to the "enhancement of human dignity through the law." In one of his more recent creative attempts at using existing structures, Kameny has formed a corporation in Washington, D.C., under the name "Traditional Values Coalition," thereby preventing a California-based anti-gay organization of the same name from operating in the city.

Though he prefers to work on the inside, Dr. Kameny is not opposed to civil disobedience. His first dignified demonstration in front of the White House in 1965 has since led to numerous arrests defending the rights of homosexuals. In his ongoing fight to overturn the District of Columbia's statute outlawing consensual sodomy, he has advocated and participated in sit-ins and other forms of organized harassment planned by new groups such as ACT-UP and Queer Nation directed at specific members of the city council. Ultimately he is a pragmatist. "If society becomes intransigent, you escalate the battle as necessary. You plan a strategy using 'small guns' before 'big guns' in a calculated fashion."

His ultimate goal has always been assimilation—to accord gays and lesbians the same rights and privileges enjoyed by all citizens. This has led to criticism from more radical elements in the gay movement that he has been co-opted by a system they feel is fundamentally oppressive not just to gays and lesbians but also to all minority groups. But Kameny feels he is helping to alter society, thereby giving gays and lesbians the choice of whether or not they want to participate in that society, a choice they should make for themselves. According to Kameny the gay movement's ability to "get things done" rests on not becoming "isolated in ivory towers of unworkable ideologies." Dr. Kameny's ability to combine the enthusiasm of an activist with the pragmatism of a bureaucrat has lent a powerful force to that movement.

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**Franklin E. Dr. Kameny: America's First Gay Activist**

**By David K. Johnson**

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