

*A CONVERSATION WITH THE FATHER OF GAY ACTIVIST
MILITANCY*

FRANKLIN KAMENY

Interview by Jack Nichols



Nichols and Kameny 1975

Franklin E. Kameny, PH.D. is the undisputed father of gay activist militancy. For over thirty-seven years he has stood in Washington D.C. at major forefronts of gay and lesbian liberation--a proud and unyielding presence, carefully initiating strategies that have produced monumental changes in the course of our movement's history. Graduated in the mid-1950's as a doctor of astronomy from Harvard University, and hired shortly afterwards by the United States government, Kameny was then fired by federal bureaucrats who suspected he was gay. He was also stripped of the security clearance he needed to practice the profession for which he'd so long prepared. For months, through the late 1950's, while he plotted what would become his response to this injustice, he lived in abject poverty, but emerged neither depressed nor broken but with a fervent determination to effect far-reaching changes, not only with respect to government and military policies, but in American culture itself. It was during this period--in 1960-- that our paths crossed. I quickly saw that the federal bureaucracy's treatment of Kameny as just another gay victim would, to its own dismay, create in him our movement's most indefatigable force, a powerful intellect devoting his life to dismantling anti-homosexual policies. They were memorable times (1961-1967) when we worked side by side in The Mattachine Society of Washington, heady times when Frank Kameny became my significant mentor as well as an inspirational comrade-in-arms. He continues to live in the nation's capital while I have since settled in other locales. Discovering how this great pioneer's viewpoints have evolved during the 28 intervening years motivates me now as I put the following questions to him:

Badpuppy: You were the first in history to do a number of things: the first gay man to protest anti-gay government firings at the Supreme Court level, the first openly gay man to run for congressional office, the first to initiate coordinated responses to the anti-gay policies of the U.S. Government and of the Pentagon, the first to lead an organization that actually originated the strategy of militant direct action as the proper response to anti-gay persecution. You've never been particularly introspective and you speak of certain accomplishments not as if they've been yours alone, but almost always as if they've been group accomplishments. Are you enjoying this new status of yours, actually being a walking historic personage? Does it bring you pleasure?

Kameny: Yes it does. Its fascinating to have become an historical figure while I'm still alive. At the moment, for example, I have--in friendly competition--The Library of Congress, the Washington Historical Association and the Washingtonian's Collection of the D.C. Libraries seeking to have me leave in my will to them all of my papers and memorabilia, and its a kind of pleasant sort of thing.

Badpuppy: Your unprecedented early 60's focus on strategies about how to deal with anti-gay prejudices, demanded that gay and lesbian spokespersons step over the heads of affected gay masses and of prejudiced non-gay citizens. We few activists of that time, you insisted, must speak out as self-appointed experts on homosexuality, marching directly into the domains of institutional and professional authorities, demolishing their false presumptions. This was truly revolutionary. The few previous gay organizations, formed in the 1950's, had taken exactly the opposite approach. Would you say a few words about the reasons you devised such a strategy?

Kameny: First, we were the best authorities on ourselves. We were not self-appointed authorities on homosexuality. We were authorities. We didn't have to be appointed by ourselves or anybody else. As gay people we are the authorities on ourselves. You would hardly expect blacks to allow whites or Jews to allow Christians to tell the world about racial matters or Judaism. These other people had moved in and proceeded with no insight and no knowledge to try to tell the world about us and they spoke erroneously, and they spoke harmfully. So we had to simply move in and take over our proper domain and we did.

Badpuppy: The old slogan "Gay Is Good" was something you originated, and of which you are very proud. In this current era when self-esteem waxes and wanes among youths and other individuals, explain why "Gay Is Good" remains important.

Kameny: For the same reasons it was initially coined. There continues a devastating tide of negativism against gay people and against homosexuality. In those days--this slogan was coined in 1968--and prior to that you never ever heard anything positive at all and something needed to be done at that time to at least begin to offset that, and that remains particularly true now with the rising ascendancy of the radical right and the nutty fundamentalists-- I use these two words inseparably. With a massive psychological assault upon us it has once again become crucially important that we emphasize with a certain degree of fine tuning appropriate to the present, we have to emphasize within the framework of what "good" means.... and that morally, which is the facet they (the nutty fundamentalists) make an issue of, homosexuality or homosexual conduct is not only not immoral, or sinful, or wrong, or undesirable but is affirmatively moral, and virtuous, and right, and desirable, and fully as much as all of those as is heterosexuality. Not more, but not one whit less. For those who choose to take a religious approach to life, my homosexuality is a God-given blessing, given to me directly by God to be enjoyed to its fullest, indulgently, exuberantly and joyously which I have, I do, and I shall.

Badpuppy: You and I were very much in tune in those early days over what we called the "sickness question."

Kameny: We still are.

Badpuppy: Explain briefly what this was about, why it was so necessary for us to address it, and describe your post-1967 activism aimed at the psychiatric profession.

Kameny: Well, it was one of several modes of demonization of gays and of homosexuality. We were sick. We were criminals. We were immoral, and so on, and those (charges) had to be tackled systematically one by one. Coming from the background of a scientist, I looked at the theory not really knowing initially where I was going to come out, I could well have ended up agreeing with the theory in which case strategy would have been needed to be formulated around that. Instead I found that it was shoddy, shabby, sleazy, shipshod science in which the moral, cultural, and social value judgments were camouflaged in the language of science without any of the substance of science. If the psychiatric profession wanted to make fools of themselves doing that, well that was all right as long as they didn't do harm to us, but they were doing horrendous harm to us, and so that had to be reversed. Along with

by Mattachine of Washington in 1965, that homosexuality was not a sickness or an illness or a disturbance.... things languished for a number of years but then picked up around 1970 and moved ahead to the denouement in 1973, confirmed in 1974 when the American Psychiatric Association removed us from the ranks of the mentally ill, administering a mass cure.

Badpuppy: You and Barbara Gittings once invaded a psychiatric convention.

Kameny: Those were among the precursors to that in '71 and '72. Its interesting to note that there is now an active very visible officially recognized gay caucus within the American Psychiatric Association and that Barbara Gittings and I were given an award last May at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association for our contributions to psychiatry. I have a plaque hanging on my wall. That represented a closure of the whole issue.

Badpuppy: That's great! Lets skip the decades now. If force became necessary to self-defense, a youthful Queer Nation member said he might, keeping open options, endorse it. You were arrested a couple of years ago in a Queer Nation protest. Under what circumstances, if any, would you agree with this young man about force?

Kameny: One of last two arrests occurred at the offices of one of our council members who was the immovable stumbling block in getting through our sodomy repeal law, which incidentally I wrote here in Washington. Ultimately we were successful in that as a result of an effort which I initiated on August 8, 1963, and which lasted 30 years, 1 month, 5 days, and approximately 11 hours.

Badpuppy: I'm sure you celebrated.

Kameny: Oh yes, and lets see, I was also arrested in a demonstration in 1987 on the plaza of the Supreme Court to protest the Bowers vs. Hardwick decision. My feeling is that while negotiations, and demonstrations and other forms of political action should always be tried first, if they prove to be unavailing, then you have to move ahead. The use of any tactics whatever barring only physical injury to people (and that does not bar psychological injury to people by denouncing them publicly and picketing them and waking them up at 3 o'clock in the morning with bullhorns) ah, barring only physical injury to people and damage to property. Other than that I think any tactics whatever are fully in order when they are needed. You don't adopt them cavalierly and they should be carefully stategized. But they are in order when needed. When you are dealing with an intransigent enemy, you have to use the tactics that are appropriate. If your enemy is going to fight you in the gutters, as they do on many of these issues, you get nowhere by fighting them from the high ground. You have to get into the gutter with them, unfortunately. And a lot of people don't always realize that.

Badpuppy: In the mid-80's some thought that the fears revolving around AIDS would greatly retard the progress being made by our gay and lesbian civil rights movement. Some even questioned any ongoing civil rights focus as meaningful strategy, asking, "How will we be able to enjoy our rights if we're all dead?" How would you reply to this?

Kameny: Several things. First, pragmatically, while in many ways certainly AIDS can't be looked upon as any kind of a blessing, obviously, it has brought together segments of the community in a variety of ways. Unfortunately, its also diverted a huge amount of effort which otherwise would have been devoted to the fight for civil liberties and, of course, its deprived us of enormous numbers of very effective people. However, at my age, I'm going to be 70 in May, I can increasingly take a long-range historical kind of view, both in looking back on things but also in looking upon a predicted future and from that viewpoint, as a scientist, I have absolute faith in the ultimate efficacy of medical research and therefore, while its taking much longer than all of us would have liked, I foresee ultimate victory over AIDS. Keep in mind that AIDS at present is a scourge very similar to what syphilis was a

the same eventually when hopefully while I'm still alive --very possibly not--but certainly while a lot of younger people here are alive, that we'll look back on it and it will be a nasty vile glitch or blip in history and that we will move ahead and the fundamental civil liberties concerns which have always been there--which are still there now in just as full force as ever and will be there then--will be there to be addressed, and will need to be addressed. But there has to be continuity in addressing them.

Badpuppy: In 1974 Gore Vidal wrote that Republicans and Democrats are Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. Given Bill Clinton's accommodationist ploys, do you see truth in Vidal's statement?

Kameny: No I don't. And I think recent times are showing him ever more wrong in that particular statement. I admire Gore Vidal a great deal. He and I have met and have talked and he's very effective and adept with many cogent things to say, but in this particular respect, no. Its quite clear that the Republicans in allying themselves with the most retroactive and repressive aspects of society...the Democrats certainly have not been angels, and certainly individual Democrats have been awful, but the Democrats taken collectively have been infinitely better for us than the Republicans. And those differences are being shown up in ever more stark contrast since the November elections.

Badpuppy: You received a major national capital ACLU award, the Edgerton Award, for having been personally responsible for turning the ACLU into a vehicle protective of gay civil rights. The ACLU's Executive Director just warned that "the reactionary Congress now in power could effectively erase decades of gains for personal freedom and individual rights in America....that not one of our cherished constitutional freedoms or rights can be considered secure." How do you see the present reactionary political climate affecting gay civil rights?

Kameny: While his comments are well taken, some of them may be perhaps, a little bit of rhetorical hype. On the other hand, I do look forward with a considerable amount of fear and foreboding at what the present Congress, many of whom are a bunch of young fanatic zealots who haven't been tempered by reality yet, are going to do. I think the next six months should show where they are going. There certainly are a number of them who are real radical rightists who have been biding their time until the so-called hundred days of this dreadful Contract With America get out of the way and then they're ready to move in on what they call the "social issues" and we are one of those issues. So we will see. I suspect that as with the Contract, when they really get going and begin to be visible in all of their vileness and their venom, there will be a significant degree of counterreaction. Unfortunately I suspect that some unpleasant things will get through. But nevertheless, I want to broaden my perspective on that--what I've been saying for the last year or two-- that with the rising tide of the far right, that is that one of the reasons why they are getting so strident and so shrill is because although we have lost a number a individual issues and fights and will continue to (and such losses are always intensely painful when they occur) if you look at the broad scale course of events it is absolutely clear that the tide is with us, and they know that and they see that and they see that they are losing the war in the broad sense and that is why they are so nasty and so vicious and why they will get worse. There will be other battles. In the late Sixties and early Seventies they'd never gotten their act together and we didn't lose anything ultimately, but that of course was too good to remain true indefinitely. We will continue to lose fights here and there but the long-range war is going our way and will continue to as long as we continue fighting and don't throw in the towel.

Badpuppy: Good! During two of the great marches on Washington Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow political coalition took, for a time, center stage. You once emphasized our need to focus on gay civil rights alone. Has the time arrived yet for gay groups to emphasize more coalition networking, engaging in concerted action along with other social causes, those opposed by reactionaries?

Kameny: Certainly we should never brush aside any possibilities for cooperation, coalitions, bridge-building and so on,. Nevertheless, with respect to any cause, particularly causes that involve identifiable and identified groups of people, Black, Jews, Hispanics, whatever the group may be, and

whatever the issues may be and whoever the people involved may be, ultimately you have to keep in mind that if you do not keep your own cause and your own people first and foremost, nobody else will. We are fighting for gay rights. We are not fighting some broad diffuse battle for rights for everybody. If you fight for everything, you fight for nothing very effectively. Therefore you have to fight your own battles. You give aid and effort to others where it seems appropriate where you get any in return--not one-sidedly--it has to be a two-way role. But you must never forget your own battle. It has to stay in the forefront.

Badpuppy: There are those who think two of our current national organizations, the Human Rights Campaign Fund or the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, are too timid or that their leaders are too self-absorbed. Are they good strategists or simply gay bureaucrats who react often too late to circumstance?

Kameny: I have always had a great deal of respect for both of them. They have different self-designated roles. The HRCF in general, I think, is doing (I mean obviously the only way to avoid criticism of your role is to do nothing--and then you open yourself to real criticism) but they're doing in general a very good job. The NGLTF is going through some serious internal problems which I hope are temporary. They've had a series of personnel fiascos in recent years and they've gone off the deep end on some issues and matters. For the moment they've lost, in my personal subjective view, a lot of their effectiveness. They have a long and illustrious history, enough so that they can ride on that for some time to come and I have every hope that that will carry them through to the other side of their present problems and then I see them moving ahead very effectively once again.

Badpuppy: One significant strategy you devised in the early 60's, was a reply to those who ask the cause of homosexuality. You pointedly revised this annoying question, by demanding they ask instead what causes heterosexuality and what causes sexual orientation? Do you think our civil rights claims are, in any way, enhanced by recent claims by Simon LeVay and other biological determinists that homosexuality is inborn?

Kameny: I don't consider the question a relevant one in the most fundamental philosophical sense. As I pointed out at the NGLTF Creating Change Conference four years ago at which I was a keynote speaker, our leadership hasn't always done as well as it might with its rhetoric. And with respect to LeVay, he has formulated it adversely to us and it has been picked up adversely to us. What he said was is that the anterior hypothalamus in gay men was smaller than that in non-gay men thereby implying a deficiency or a defect on the part of gay men. What it really amounts to is that non-gay men have a hypertrophic overgrown excessively sized anterior hypothalamus and that what we should really be doing is devise methods to cut out their excess so that their rampaging heterosexuality can be brought to term. We always have to take a gay-positive approach and people don't. I have never put a great deal of importance in the origins question. My feeling is that however I come to be homosexual, and I don't really particularly care any more than the average heterosexual does, and I'll come to that in a different way in a moment, however I got to be homosexual it was a stroke of good luck, but whatever the causes, I got much the better of the two options, homosexuality and heterosexuality and I rejoice in that stroke of good luck and I don't particularly care how it happened.

Badpuppy: With what strategy do you recommend in response to Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," policy?

Kameny: I've been formulating a kind of proposal what I term--to take an old civil rights term in a different context--"massive resistance." For the present the community has been responding with nice, polite, legal cases, which are fine, I don't fault those in the least. They certainly should be pursued and they must be pursued. But I feel that we have to do far more and we haven't. Lets make the opposition as uncomfortable as possible in every possible way. And these involve such things as demonstrations, making hearing rooms and letting the hearing officers who issue adverse decisions know that they are

traitors and be named publicly as the traitors that they are. A whole bunch of other things: every possible method, legal or illegal should be used, barring only (and I'm repeating myself before) barring only physical injury to persons or damage to property.

Badpuppy: One of my favorite early 60's quotes from you was this: "I, for one, am not prepared to play a passive role in such controversy, letting others dispose of me as they see fit. I intend to play an active role in the determination of my own fate." When I was aged only 22, privileged to work happily at your side, such words as these had a profound effect on my life. Taking your fiery brand of self-affirmation into account, what would you say today to the next generation of militants, specifically about how and where they might begin living out these self-affirming active roles?

Kameny: Well, of course for a lot of them, that has become, as a result of the efforts of you and me and many other people in the 60's and into the 70's--has become so automatic and not to need to be set out as an instruction any more. And, however, we still have a need for such things as coming out days, things like that, but in those days we were simply creating the climate for a great deal of what has now come to pass in terms of a changed attitude within the gay community itself. There's still a great deal of resistance on the part of individual gays taken person by person to coming out and making their gayness known publicly and as everywhere--as I learned at the very beginning when I was getting into things and as leaders in all movements have learned, the great majority of the populace that one is trying to help are always going remain uninvolved, politically unwise. That those who do things will end up being a small core and core central activist cadre.

Badpuppy: I remember once you telling me back in 1963, you said, "If we only had 20 people in this whole country who had brains we could do this." (Laughs)

Kameny: (Laughs) All right, I wouldn't put it that badly, but all right. But the large body of people, unfortunately, is going to remain passive, but then on the other hand they can be fired up on the basis of individual events. For example in the 1994 march where we had--whatever you choose to take as the ultimate estimate--a half million people, you certainly got an outpouring. But when the hard work continues into much duller and less exciting things like going to legislators and that sort of thing, in any context, you get much much smaller groups. People simply have to be fired up. The successes of the past have to be pulled together and made clear to them so that they are aware it is not all just sound and fury that signifies nothing. Its sound and very often fury which can accomplish a great deal and has. That must be always pointed out to them.

Badpuppy: Describe three of the most memorable or fulfilling moments in your gay activist's life and explain why and how they affected you.

Kameny: First, as you well know, after a very long fight waged me probably anyone more than anyone else outside the government--for 18 years, in fact-- I got the Civil Service Commission to reverse its former ban on gays in the federal service---which people have forgotten these days was quite as rigid as the present ban on gays in the military and just as ferociously enforced. But at that point the pattern, the mindset of gay federal employees remaining in the closet was so deep set and so pervasive that they remained so, for almost exactly by coincidence another 18 years. And then one of most gratifying things has been to see in approximately the last four years a surge, an appearance on the scene of large groups of very vigorous, very open, very active, very un-closeted gay federal employees under the heading of organizations called GLOBE --Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual Employees-- and there's a global GLOBE for the whole federal executive branch and then there are GLOBE's in most of the individual departments. There's a Labor Department GLOBE, and a Justice Department GLOBE and an FBI GLOBE, and so on and to see that coming out is sort of a final vindication of the whole process, the conclusion of the whole process, and I find it enormously rewarding and fulfilling.

Badpuppy: Great!

Kameny: The second, I've already alluded to, and that was the whole fight against the American Psychiatric Association. Back when we were fighting that I remember there was a humorously called GAY P. A. (The Gay Psychiatric Association) groups of gay psychiatrists who met way away from everything at the Wai Ki Ki meeting in 1973 in a gay bar several blocks from the hotel in which the conference was taking place, and were very covert and now the Gay Caucus within the American Psychiatric Association is a fully officially recognized Caucus and the receipt by Barbara Gittings and me of an award from them formally representing the APA for our contributions to psychiatry represents the complete turn-around on that issue as well and a closure of things. In both of these two instances the issue has finally been fully, satisfyingly closed, and in a very nice way.

Badpuppy: That's super.

Kameny: The third one was, of course, the fight which I commenced --and you were around at the time--you were probably there, I suspect, on August 8, 1963 when we testified before the Dowdy committee. That was the initiation of the battle to repeal the D.C. sodomy law.....and on September 11, 1993 the D.C. sodomy law was repealed in law by a repealer statute in the language which I personally wrote at the request of the council member who introduced it.

Badpuppy: Wonderful. Those are stellar memories which I'm sure must be very fulfilling. Well, that wraps this up very nicely. I've very much enjoyed doing this interview.

Kameny: I've enjoyed it too.

© 1998 BEI; All Rights Reserved.
For reprint permission give credit to website:
gaytoday.badpuppy.com
e-mail gaytoday@badpuppy.com