Gay Rights Pioneer Franklin Kameny's Legacy Is Worth Preserving

When Franklin E. Kameny began his public career nearly 50 years ago, what little there was of a gay rights movement consisted primarily of frightened, deferential people who hid behind pseudonyms. Many accepted that they were sick, sinful and criminal.

Acceptance was not Frank Kameny's response when he was fired from his job with the Army Map Service as an alleged security risk. This World War II combat veteran could not walk away from the injustice. His 1951 petition to the Supreme Court described "a persecution and discrimination not one whit more warranted or justified than those against ... other minority groups."

The Supreme Court declined to hear the case, but Kameny was rewarded for his efforts with the birthright of liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He set out to fight a second war for his country, this one on the home front.

Kameny, now 81, launched Washington's gay rights movement in the early 1960s with no backing other than his own brains and lung power. He declared his homosexuality a God-given blessing. He provided legal assistance to gay servicemen and women. He insisted that gay people speak for themselves and resist being pathologized by psychiatrists and entrapped by police. To each battle he brought the sharp, critical eye of a Harvard-trained scientist.


Given the wall of resistance Kameny met in the early years, it is remarkable that he was able to bring others into the fight and ultimately to prevail in so many areas. Homosexuality is no longer regarded as a pathology. Civil servants cannot be fired for being gay. Security clearances cannot be denied merely on the basis of sexual orientation. Invasive laws against consensual sex acts have been ruled unconstitutional.

Kameny's last goal is to end the ban on gays serving in the military.

This Friday, we are marking the donation of Kameny's papers to the Library of Congress. His self-respect and intellectual confidence shine from the pages of those decades-old letters, congressional testimony, clippings of White House and Pentagon protests, and transcripts of security clearance hearings. His firm voice and philosophical grounding in America's founding principles remain as trenchant and timely as ever. Intelligence, determination, tenacity, resourcefulness, courage, love of country. Franklin Kameny was the perfect gay storm. He had the right combination of gifts to play a key role in advancing the American journey.

Today, the same federal government that denied Kameny's humanity five decades ago is embracing his legacy and preserving it for future scholars and historians. Well, not quite the same government. The greater enfranchisement now enjoyed by gay citizens is part of his legacy.

In the 1990s, Kameny eagerly embraced e-mail and the Internet as tools of activism. In the online world he encountered people still hiding behind pseudonyms, an echo of the fearful days of the 1950s. As he did back then — and as we see in his papers that now will be preserved forever — Frank Kameny continues to sign his own name.

— Michael Huffington

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The writer, a former U.S. representative from California, is a donor to the Kameny Papers Project.