

## Webstory I: “Gay is Good”

### **ACT 1 – BECOMING VISIBLE - THE PICKETS**

**Narration:** The 1960s was a decade of political and cultural unrest. Anti-Vietnam war campaigns were brewing on college campuses. Freedom-Rider buses were left burning alongside America’s highways. And marches for racial equality drew more than 250 thousand demonstrators to the nation’s Capitol.

Amid the chaos on the streets of Washington, another movement was forming. Frank Kameny and a small group of well-dressed men and women led the first peaceful *gay-rights* demonstration. It would change the course of history for lesbian, afternoon . . . back in 1965.

***Frank:*** *There were about 10 of us. We simply assembled at the southwest corner of Lafayette Park, directly across the street from the entrance to the White House, and there was a policeman on duty across the street, he stopped traffic; assigned us our area - our ellipse - and we picketed for, my recollection is that it was two hours.*

*We had three demonstrations in front of the White House that year; on April 17<sup>th</sup>, about May 28<sup>th</sup>, and sometime in the middle of October.*

**Narration:** Kameny organized that protest with Jack Nichols. But the White-House demonstration wasn’t their first organizational effort.

Four years earlier, Kameny and Nichols formed *The Mattachine Society of Washington DC*, the Capital’s first gay-advocacy organization.

They shared a thirst for activism. And they also had the capacity to brave the risks of being openly gay.

***Frank:*** *For many people, visibility – coming out in that sense – was emotionally or psychologically traumatic. It never was for me*

*We were there, and my feeling was, we were in front of the White House, which was after all “The White House,” the center of the Executive Branch, and we were simply there to express our feelings of the time.*

**Narration:** With the protest at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, members of *The Mattachine Society* had stepped out of the closet, injecting themselves into the middle of the national civil rights movement. Kameny says they didn’t stop with just the White House.

**Frank:** . . . then in the course of that summer, we picketed the Civil Service Commission, the State Department, the Pentagon, two more demonstrations at the White House, and started a series of annual Fourth-of-July demonstrations at Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

**Narration:** Kameny and Nichols were disciplined organizers. But they wanted to reach beyond their picket lines; so *The Mattachine Society* launched a media campaign that put their equality message directly into the hands of the public.

**Frank:** *We had three issuances for each demonstration. We would send out a news release in advance saying we were demonstrating and we had a leaflet to be handed out at the demonstration. Then for general circulation, as we saw fit, one after the demonstration indicating how many people participated, listing what each sign said, and so on, giving a full post-demonstration rundown.*

**Narration:** Kameny wasn't satisfied with just handing out campaign booklets. He also wanted to make sure his message got "into" The White House, so he included a letter . . . to President Johnson.

**Frank:** [Cue 114] *Dear Mr. President - a group of homosexual citizens and those supporting their cause is picketing the White House today in a lawful, dignified protest in the best American tradition against the treatment being meted out to 15 million - that was our - yeah, that was our standard figure - homosexual American citizens by their government; treatment which consistently makes of them second-class citizens.*

**Narration:** The reply to Kameny's appeals came from Vice President Hubert Humphrey. The Vice President informed Kameny that The Civil Rights Act of 1964 protected people on the basis "of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, [but] did not apply to the "problem" of homosexuals." Kameny explains the Vice President's use of the word "problem."

**Frank:** *Keep in mind there were still sodomy laws universally, so that nominally at least, we were criminals.*

The very phrase "Gay Rights" . . . well, the word "gay," first of all, didn't come into popular usage for decades; it didn't appear until 70, or 71, or 72 . . . after Stonewall.

*But the whole concept of gay rights didn't really exist at that point at all. The whole notion was alien to people in general, and so his answer was consistent with the general tenor of the responses that we were getting in those days.*

**Narration:** In those days, the smoldering Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union had etched anti-communist ideology into the social fabric. FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, had been seeking out communist sympathizers in what is known as The Red Scare. But the government launched another scare campaign that declared war on homosexuals.

## **ACT 2 – THE LAVENDER SCARE**

**Narration:** During the early 1950s, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed executive order 10450, a measure that denied gays and lesbians in the armed services and federal government security clearances.

In Congress, Senator Joseph McCarthy directed police and government personnel to systematically purge homosexuals from the halls of government. The Lavender Scare was in full force . . . and Frank Kameny would feel the sting of what had become a witch hunt for homosexuals.

**Narration:** In the late 1950s, Frank Kameny was working as an astronomer for the U. S. Army Map Service. He had only been on the job for a few months when The Civil Service Commission paid him a visit.

**Frank:** *There were two investigators . . . they called me in; they said “We have information which leads us to believe you are homosexual. Do you have any comment?” I said, “What’s the information?” They said, “We can’t tell you.”*

*I said, “Well, I can’t comment in any case. It’s irrelevant to any government business.*

**Narration:** Following the interrogation, The Civil Service Commission fired Kameny. But, he didn’t leave quietly.

Instead of walking away defeated, he filed the first-ever gay-rights legal brief against the United States government.

**Frank:** *I appealed to the Civil Service Commission all the way up to the director, and above them in the Executive Branch, all the way up to the President, to the House and Senate Civil Service committees, and then eventually, through the ACLU . . . took it to court.*

**Narration:** Kameny lost his petition, and The Supreme Court denied his case, but in the wake of those losses, a gay-rights pioneer was born. With the pickets in 1965 well under way, Kameny could now set his sights on other institutions that fueled antigay beliefs.

### **ACT 3 - FIGHTING THE APA**

One group getting in the way was the American Psychiatric Association, or the APA;

Angered by what he believed was the APA's misdiagnosis of homosexuals, Kameny dug into research

**Frank:** *I was appalled at what I found. Shabby, shoddy, sleazy, slipshod, pseudo- science, moral and sociological value judgments cloaked in camouflage in the language of science without any of the substance of science; poor sampling techniques. It was just simply a mess.*

**Narration:** But it was a mess that gave Kameny the tools he needed. Energized by the APA's lack of proof, Kameny joined other gay rights advocates to challenge the APA. In his usual style, the first thing he did was issue a statement:

**Frank:** *"In the lack of valid evidence to the contrary" - and that was the crucial clause – "homosexuality cannot be considered a sickness, illness or disturbance, or disorder, but must be considered a preference or orientation, or propensity not different in kind with heterosexuality, and fully on par with the text," that's virtually a verbatim quote.*

**Narration:** As a result of the pressure Kameny and others were putting on the APA, homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of mental disorders.

**Frank:** *I was present, by invitation, at the APA headquarters here in Washington on December 15<sup>th</sup> 1973 when they took their vote, curing us en-mass. Three of them issued papers at that time, which I read later, and right up until the very end, they were still not presenting the valid evidence to support their claim that homosexuality was pathological, and they still haven't.*

### **ACT 4 – GAY IS GOOD**

**Narration:** At the age of 85, Frank Kameny reflects on the grass-roots movement he started in front of the White House, in 1965.

**Frank:** *We've moved ahead to a level of success, not complete success, there are issues still not resolved, cultural attitudes that we have a way to go on. Nevertheless, we have achieved a degree of progress, which would have been unthinkable and inconceivable when I got going in things, very roughly, a half century ago.*

**Narration:** The level of progress that Kameny achieved led to the repeal of the DADT policy, where gays and lesbians now serve openly in the armed forces.

Same-sex marriage is currently legal in 36 States, and hate crime legislation was signed into law by President Obama, in 2009. But Kameny says something more unthinkable took place that same year.

**Frank:** *Back when I got into things, who would've have thought when we were picketing in front of the White House in 1965, that I would be an honored guest at a reception in the White House, and on first-name terms with the President in 20 hundred and nine.*

**Narration:** While Kameny is humble about his contributions to the gay rights movement, he does want three short words included in the history books.

**Frank:** *Keep in mind, the one thing I want to be remembered for; if nothing else, was that in 1968, I coined the slogan "Gay Is Good!"*

*That means in relevant part that homosexuality, including homosexual conduct; you always have to specify that – is not only NOT immoral, sinful, wrong or undesirable, but is affirmatively moral, virtuous, right and desirable.*

### The Legacy of a Gay Rights Pioneer

The Kameny Papers, a collection of more than 70-thousand legal documents, letters, and photos are housed in the Library of Congress

The picket signs from the 1960s protests are on exhibit in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History Museum

Kameny's home in the Cathedral Heights neighborhood of DC is now a Historical Landmark

And, 17th Street, in Washington, D.C., has been renamed Frank Kameny Way NW

Frank Kameny passed away on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011

October 11<sup>th</sup> is National Coming Out Day: a day to celebrate coming out and to raise awareness of the LGBTQ+ community and civil rights movement.

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