

May 22, 1998 speech on JIM KEPNER MEMORIAL
by Walter L. Williams

I am here as testimony of the type of person who benefitted greatly from the work of Jim Kepner. When I first arrived in Los Angeles in the late 1970s, as a young assistant professor who was beginning anthropological research on the social acceptance of same-sex eroticism in Non-Western cultures, Jim Kepner was unfailingly helpful and supportive. As he did with so many other researchers, whether they were established scholars, journalists, lawyers, or students, activists, artists, or even closeted teenagers just trying to find information to help them deal with their own feelings, Jim gave equal attention to all who came into the International Gay and Lesbian Archives. He helped me so much that when I published my book *THE SPIRIT AND THE FLESH*, I dedicated the book to him.

Day after day, week after week, and year after year, Jim Kepner never gave up, but continued to build his library collection, while providing services without charge for the sheer joy of helping to preserve our history for those who so desperately needed education and information, and to preserve it for future generations.

Jim also attracted many others to help in the work. Some of them are no longer with us, but the contributions of people like Donna Smith, Gary Steele, June Mazer, and Bunny MacCollough will not be forgotten. In my two decades of involvement, I have been amazed and inspired by the many hours put in by the dedicated volunteers of ONE Institute International Gay and Lesbian Archives. Anyone can see the loyalty and devotion that Jim inspired in others, most immediately by the magnificent events this

weekend. What better model of devotion and friendship could be offered, than the hard work done to organize this event, especially by Jim's close friends John OBrien, Ernie Potvin, Bill Kaiser, and ONE Institute president Flo Fleischman. I think we ought to acknowledge and thank them, and the other volunteers, who have helped to make this event such a success.

[applause]

As I look back from where we are tonight, to the humble beginnings of the homophile movement in the early 1950s, I am amazed at what that first generation of activists and writers and thinkers accomplished. Imagine, if you will, what it was like in 1956, when Jim Kepner, Dorr Legg, and USC professor Merritt Thompson formed ONE Institute. Not only were they DECADES ahead of their time, in recognizing the importance of education and research for our community, but they founded a field of Gay Studies that is now recognized as a cutting edge area of scholarship.

Their educational beginnings at ONE Institute, combined with the important work on ONE MAGAZINE by Dale Jennings, Ann Carll Reid, Don Slater, Stella Russell, Jim Kepner, and others, as well as writers and activists in the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s, led to a flowering of social change, political activism, and intellectual revolution, that by the 1960s and 1970s spawned one of the great social movements of the 20th century.

In reaction to this progress, in the 1970s leading Right Wing Fundamentalists recognized the importance of Think Tanks in establishing long-range strategies and goals for their movement, and the studies conducted by those Think Tanks underlay the dramatic political impact of

their anti-gay agenda. In contrast, our community has not come forward to the extent necessary to build a vibrant Think Tank. Nevertheless, over the years both ONE Institute and the International Gay and Lesbian Archives continued to make contributions on shoe-string budgets. A core of dedicated volunteers has continued to collect documents and library resources, publish books and bibliographies, and hold an ongoing monthly lecture series where many of our most important thinkers and writers have spoken.

ONE Institute Press has recently made a new beginning by publishing on the Internet. In my role as editor of ONE's INTERNATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN REVIEW, I am proud that we are now reaching people on every continent through the World Wide Web. In affiliation with the University of Southern California, we are pleased to be moving ONE Institute into the forefront of these pathbreaking new developments.

Our vision for the future of ONE Institute is not simply to hold the library of the world's largest collection of gay and lesbian materials, but it is also to build a vibrant research and educational center that will serve as a worldwide resource for our community. Activists from different nations may learn about effective strategies that have proved useful in various countries, in ONE's website "Overcoming Heterosexism." No matter how isolated, if closeted teenagers in Alabama or Wyoming, Argentina or Zimbabwe, can manage to get to the Internet, they can read about the many books being published on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered subjects in the INTERNATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN REVIEW. Our inspiration is simply to carry forth and expand the vision of Jim Kepner and others, to get this information out to the widest possible audience.

In my role as director of the ONE Institute Center for Advanced Studies, our goal is to sponsor researchers to come to ONE to do their work and write their studies. This effort has been furthered greatly by longtime San Francisco activist Dr. Hal Call. With a generous donation of \$50,000, Dr. Call set up the Hal Call Mattachine Scholarship Fund, which has already helped several graduate students write their dissertations on ways to reduce homophobia, and has brought many scholars here from throughout the world.

For example, China's leading AIDS activist Wan Yan Hai came here for a year, doing research on how best to persuade the Chinese Psychiatric Association to drop homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. Professor Holly Devor was at ONE Institute for four months, completing her pathbreaking book on female-to-male transsexuals. Professor James Sears from the University of South Carolina did research for his award-winning books on gay and lesbian life in the South. Dr. Sylvia Rhue completed her wonderful documentary film "All God's Children," challenging homophobia in the African-American community. And Dr. Igor Kon of the Russian Academy of Sciences has been a resident scholar while writing his most recent book on same-sex love, to be published soon in Moscow.

With the assistance of the University of Southern California, and with visionaries like Hal Call, we are truly honored for ONE Institute to be having such a wide impact on the research of prominent scholars from around the world. But all this costs money. Our goal now is to raise more money to add to the Hal Call Scholarship Fund, in order to assist additional researchers, and to match the money provided by the University of Southern

California, in completing the renovations of the magnificent archives building donated for the International Gay and Lesbian Archives by USC.

After that, our goal is to get another building nearby, which can serve as a residential center for researchers who are using the Archives, to write more important books and articles that will benefit our community in the future. Inspired by the many accomplishments of ONE Institute, I've listed it as the major beneficiary in my will. I ask you to join our major donors like Hal Call and Donna Smith and Arnold Schwab, in providing the financial resources to support this crucial organization. Let your heart point you to commit to the largest sum you can afford. As the oldest on-going Gay organization in the Western hemisphere, ONE certainly has an unparalleled track record showing it can survive, grow, and attract new generations of leadership.

Building on the vision of ONE Institute founders Jim Kepner and Dorr Legg, we are here tonight not only to celebrate the past fifty years of our movement, but to ask you to help us make ONE Institute into a preeminent Think Tank research and educational center for the 21st century.

We ask you now, not to memorialize Jim Kepner in some sad sorrow of loss, but in your own personal dedication to get involved in the great institution that Jim Kepner helped found and to which he devoted his life. If you cannot afford to make a donation or leave ONE Institute in your will, then join the dedicated band of ONE volunteers. Jim Kepner's vision cannot be accomplished by a few.

We welcome your involvement, we need your support. Do it in memory of our honored pioneers, but also do it in support of our generations of lesbian and gay children yet unborn. As our executive director John OBrien says, we need to save our history, in order to build our future. With your involvement, ONE Institute can accomplish a lot, for a bright future in the 21st century.