

Source: Walter L. Williams published letter to the editor, *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, in response to an article about gay rights pioneer Frank Kameny, by Eric Cervini.

Thanks for the marvelous interview of Eric Cervini in your September-October 2020 issue. I was introduced to Frank Kameny by Barbara Gittings, who as his loyal ally deserves her own biography. When I saw some young activists at a Creating Change conference dismiss him as a cantankerous old man I was not pleased. Frank was cantankerous, as were my main mentors Dorr Legg, Jim Kepner, Hal Call, and Harry Hay. If they had not been of such headstrong personality types they would never have been able to accomplish what they did. Each of them faced incredible odds, but they built a movement that has revolutionized the world.

Once you got past their rough exterior, they were incredibly supportive to a young activist scholar like me. Frank and I really bonded when he attended a speech I gave about my book *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*. He, of course, asked challenging questions. In the 1990s, when I was president of ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, I tried to persuade him to donate his papers to our large library at USC. But, since his work was so focused on Washington, D.C., it is appropriate that they are now in the Library of Congress.

It is good that Cervini recognizes the importance of gay activism before Stonewall, but he should not suggest that Gay Pride began only with Kameny. Quoting just a few examples from my book *Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States: A Documentary History* (2003): In 1947 in Los Angeles, Edythe Eyde (writing under the name Lisa Ben), published an article "Here To Stay" in her newsletter titled *Vice Versa—America's Gayest Magazine*, predicting, "There will be a time in the future when gay folk will be accepted as part of regular society." (p.64). In 1950, when Harry Hay founded the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles, he wrote that its purpose was to work for "the full class citizenship participation of [sexual] Minorities everywhere." (Ibid, p.72).

Neither is Cervini correct to label the early Homophile movement “really white.” In 1952, a Los Angeles social club of black and white gay and lesbian couples, called Knights of the Clock, decided to publish a magazine. In 1953 they received their incorporation as a California nonprofit. It is important to say their names: the directors included an African American man named Merton Bird and his white lover W. Dorr Legg, a Latinx named Antonio Reyes and his white lover Don Slater, lesbian illustrator Joan Corbin, and Jewish activists Martin Block and Irma “Corky” Wolf. In the first issue of *ONE Magazine* (January 1953) Mattachine activist Dale Jennings reported on his successful court defense against a police entrapment charge, saying, “Yet I am not abjectly grateful.... Were all homosexuals and bisexuals to unite militantly, unjust laws and corruption would crumble in short order, and we as a nation could go on to meet the really important problems which face us.” (Ibid., p.75)

I moved to Los Angeles in 1979, and I was fortunate to know and work with many of these pioneers. Even then, in their old age, they were exemplars of militant Gay Pride. The greatest example is after the Los Angeles Postmaster confiscated all copies of the October 1953 *ONE Magazine* being sent through the mail to paid subscribers, claiming it was “obscene.” Instead of cowering in fear of imprisonment, ONE sued the Postmaster in federal court. Though they lost at every level, they did not give up. ONE kept appealing. Finally in 1958 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the magazine came under the guarantee of the First Amendment freedom of the press. This was the first legal gay rights victory from the Supreme Court. All our publications are a result of this pathbreaking decision.

In announcing this victory, Dorr Legg wrote ONE August 1958 cover article with the bold title, “I am glad I am homosexual.” He began this article with a militant defense of “Flaming queens. This group, in whatever terms, expresses pride in its homosexuality, finding nothing either sinful or shameful in it. They feel that homosexual men and women should be in every way as free to practice their sexual preferences as other segments of the population, that they should enjoy the same legal and social

privileges as others... that instead of their adjusting to popular mores, the mores should be adjusted to their own wishes. This rugged individualism [challenges]... the unhealthy manifestations of a society so sick, a culture so unsure of itself that it shrinks in horror from some of the greatest and basically elemental forces of man and nature, while striving feverishly at an impossible repression. ... Should we not rather strive to lead our blind fellows out of this nasty-minded neuroticism?.... I am glad to be homosexual, proud of it. Let no one think we don't mean business, or intend to enforce our rights. "

(Ibid. pp.89-90)

Nor, I must add, is Cervini correct to say Frank Kameny was the first to approach the ACLU. Dorr Legg and Dr. Vern Bullough described to me how in 1963 they personally convinced the leaders of the Southern California chapter to take legal cases of homosexual discrimination to the ACLU national council. Hal Call, Del Martin and Phylis Lyon did the same with the Bay Area chapter. It was proud pioneers of this sort, who along with Frank Kameny, Barbara Gittings and others in D.C., to whom we literally owe our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor. Only later did New York take a leadership role, and we must honor them all. As a Californian, however, I am proud that the movement that originated here in the 1950s was militant, proud, and multi-ethnic from its very beginning. None of those pioneers should be slighted. Say their names.