

# FRANK KAMENY

## LGBT Civil Rights Pioneer (1925-2011)



Institutionalized anti-gay bigotry during the McCarthy-Era drove astronomer Frank Kameny from his job at the U.S. Army Map Service and into the pantheon of modern LGBT activism. He single-handedly took on the U.S. government – using his own name and face in an era when most gay people could not risk being photographed – to petition the Supreme Court in 1961 in a futile attempt to overturn his job dismissal. Effectively unemployable in his chosen field, he struggled in poverty while an aggressive, proactive, politically-driven crusade – fueled by his uncompromising belief that “Gay is Good” – took shape in his mind. An apostate of the early Homophile Movement, Kameny rejected characterizing homosexuality as a border-line mental illness in order to win sympathy, if not approval, from straight people. Arguing that “gays must not be a mere passive battlefield across which conflicting ‘authorities’ fight their intellectual battles” – and that they should play an active role in determining their own fate – he co-founded an independent chapter of the Mattachine Society in Washington DC to focus on changing laws and challenging institutions whose policies forced people to remain closeted. Along with Barbara Gittings, he led the successful effort to remove homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association’s list of mental disorders in 1973. A veteran of World War II, Kameny deliberately orchestrated Vietnam War hero Sgt. Leonard Matlovich’s public admission of homosexuality in order to bring the issue of gay people serving openly in the military into the national consciousness. 35 years later he was seated in the front row when President Barack Obama signed the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” into law – ending the battle he had helped to start. Kameny’s tactical instincts – though heretical in his time – foreshadowed political victories which are taken for granted today. In 2009 he received a formal apology from the U.S. government for the original job dismissal that catalyzed his resolve to transform the way gay people were treated in society. His numerous accomplishments have made him one of the most influential LGBT activists in history. He passed away at the age of 86 on October 11, 2011 – “National Coming-Out Day.”

### Lesson Plan

#### LEVEL 1: CONTRIBUTIONS APPROACH

1. Activate prior experience: Have you heard of the phrase, “Gay is Good”? What was Frank Kameny trying to convey in coining this term?
2. Read the biographical information found [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank\\_Kameny](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Kameny)
3. Group Discussion: Describe how Kameny became an LGBT activist.

#### LEVEL 2: ADDITIVE APPROACH

1. Viewing history and media coverage, there has been a redaction of LGBT individuals for us to study. How did Kameny illustrate his views against Tom Brokaw’s book, *Boom! Voices of the Sixties*. Read the following link: <http://www.washingtonblade.com/2011/10/20/kamenys-storybook-ending/> and <http://www.kamenypapers.org/boomletter.htm>.
2. How did Frank Kameny change the views of the U.S. government in terms of accepting homosexuality rather than being discriminated in terms of employment? Read the biography at [http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Frank\\_Kameny.html](http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Frank_Kameny.html)
3. Website Investigation: Investigate how Kameny related to one other activist’s view on Social Justice through using The Legacy Project Website at [http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Social\\_Justice.html](http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Social_Justice.html)

#### LEVEL 3: TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH

1. Describe the key events in Kameny’s life that become the basis of his zeal for social justice and gay activism. Review the many phases of his life in “The Kameny Papers” located at <http://www.kamenypapers.org/index.htm>
2. How have The Kameny Papers received an honorable display at the Smithsonian Museum, and how have they become officially transformed into “totems of American History”? View the YouTube Video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JY5kOx8Ylko> and the article at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/07/AR2007090702806.html>

#### LEVEL 4: SOCIAL ACTION APPROACH

1. In what ways did the Mattachine Society change the laws and institutions to accept homosexuality? View this background at <http://www.rainbowhistory.org/html/msw.htm>
2. Being a veteran of World War II, a Harvard Professor and an activist, how did Frank Kameny raise the consciousness level for gay rights and leave a legacy? What famous activist today encourages you to take action through an organization (such as the Mattachine Society, the Human Rights Campaign, or the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force) to make a difference in the way homosexuals are viewed in society?