



Apuzzo, Virginia (b. 1941)

by Linda Rapp

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American activist Virginia Apuzzo has dedicated her life to gay and lesbian issues, including civil rights, health care, and the concerns of aging members of the glbtq community. While gay and lesbian causes have been the focus of her effort, she has worked for the dignity of all people, addressing varied issues such as racism, workers' rights, and consumer protection.

Apuzzo comes from a traditional, Italian, Catholic, working-class family. She was born in the Bronx, New York on June 26, 1941.

An excellent student, Apuzzo went to the State University of New York at New Paltz after her graduation from a Catholic high school, receiving a bachelor's degree in history and education in 1963. She later returned to college, earning a master's degree in Urban Education at Fordham University in 1973.

After completing her undergraduate education, Apuzzo went into teaching and became the Chair of the Social Studies Department in the Marlboro, New York Central School District. At the age of twenty-six, however, she chose to take her life in a different direction and entered a convent to become a nun in the Sisters of Charity.

Apuzzo regarded life as a nun as an "opportunity to study and work productively" but saw "religious life as temporary." Aware since her early teens that she was a lesbian, Apuzzo "didn't know whether it would take one year or twenty years to explore the morality of [her] homosexual identity."

During her years as a nun Apuzzo taught at a Catholic high school and at the College of Mount St. Vincent in Riverdale, New York.

She calls her life as a nun "painful but productive." The experience gave her "a commitment to work for people who are oppressed."

Apuzzo left the convent after three years, came out publicly, and began taking an active role in political organizations, while continuing her career teaching urban education at Brooklyn College. She earned tenure as a lecturer at Brooklyn College and held that position until 1986.

She became involved with the National Gay Task Force (later renamed the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force), working to have a gay and lesbian plank included in the Democratic Party's 1976 platform. Although this attempt was not successful, the Task Force continued its efforts and saw such a plank, co-authored by Apuzzo, adopted in 1980.

From 1980 to 1985, Apuzzo directed the Task Force's Fund for Human Dignity. In 1982 she became executive director of the Task Force, a post that she held for three years.

At the same time Apuzzo was working vigorously in the fight against AIDS. Her efforts included testifying

before Congress to press for more federal money for AIDS research and education.

Impressed by Apuzzo's record, New York Governor Mario Cuomo invited her to join his administration. She served in various posts, including executive director of the New York State Consumer Protection Board, in which capacity she headed investigations into the cost of pharmaceuticals and into products that were marketed as cures for AIDS. She was also vice-chair of the New York AIDS Advisory Council, executive deputy commissioner of the New York Division of Housing and Community Renewal, and president of the New York Civil Service Commission.

Apuzzo also served in the federal government. In 1996 President Clinton appointed her associate deputy Secretary of Labor, and the next year she became a senior White House aide, as assistant to the President for administration and management.

Apuzzo left that post in 1999 to rejoin the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force as the first holder of the Virginia Apuzzo Chair for Leadership in Public Policy at the organization's Policy Institute.

In recent years Apuzzo has turned her attention to various glbtq issues. She has been especially interested in "the right to define our own families" and the concerns of older glbtq people.

Apuzzo has received numerous awards and honors for her work. Among them are the first Human Rights Campaign Fund Award (1982), special citations from Gay Men's Health Crisis (1985) and the New York Civil Liberties Union (1986), the New York State Center for Women in Government Award (1985), the Victory Fund Award (1994), and an award from the Hetrick-Martin Institute (1995) for outstanding contribution to lesbian and gay youth.

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