



O'Leary, Jean (1948-2005)

by Linda Rapp

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Jean O'Leary devoted her life to activism for gay and lesbian rights. Through her work with social and political organizations she consistently sought to make glbtq people visible and to have their concerns addressed.

Early Life

O'Leary came from a devout Catholic family. She was born in the state of New York in 1948 but grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, where she attended Catholic schools. She was a rambunctious tomboy and a sufficiently good drummer in a teen band that she was invited to join a professional group. The music scene, with the rigors of life on the road and a pervasive drug culture, did not appeal to her. Instead she chose to enter the convent of the Sisters of the Holy Humility of Mary, a teaching and nursing order, after graduating from high school in 1966.

O'Leary had realized when she was in the third grade that she was attracted to women, but as a youngster she did not reveal her feelings. During her teenage years she dated boys. At the same time, however, she developed crushes on two of the teaching nuns at Magnificat High School. After reading books on philosophy and religion that the admired sisters had lent her and going on a religious retreat, O'Leary decided that she too had a calling to be a nun.

O'Leary enjoyed living in the community of women at the convent. She also began exploring her sexuality and had her first love affair.

Since postulants were warned against forming "Particular Friendships," O'Leary feared that she would be dismissed from the order because of her lesbian relationships. Instead, when she found the courage to speak to senior nuns and to a psychiatrist priest about her feelings, they showed little interest in her revelations.

After five years as a nun O'Leary decided in 1971 to leave in order to work in the wider world. She had already earned a bachelor's degree at Cleveland State University and now moved to New York to do graduate studies in organizational management at Yeshiva University.

O'Leary shared an apartment in New York with a gay male friend from Cleveland State who introduced her to the gay rights movement. She soon became a member of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA).

Activism

Although O'Leary was excited by the possibility of working in a gay rights organization, she was dismayed to find that women had little voice in the GAA. Frustrated that lesbians were kept out of leadership positions and that their concerns received scant attention, O'Leary persuaded other women in the GAA to break away and form their own association, Lesbian Feminist Liberation (LFL) in 1973.

One of the first clashes between the LFL and the wider gay rights movement was over the inclusion of transvestite entertainers at the 1973 gay pride parade in New York. Although drag queens had been at the center of the Stonewall uprising, LFL took the position that men dressing as women for profit demeaned women. The dispute resulted in a contentious confrontation at the post-parade rally.

O'Leary later came to regard the episode embarrassing, but at the time the LFL was frustrated by the lack of visibility of lesbians and concerned that the issue of transvestism could impede the general progress of the movement.

Bruce Voeller, who was president of the GAA when O'Leary separated from it, himself left the organization only months later and founded the National Gay Task Force (NGTF), which was renamed the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in 1986. The NGTF strove to be effective by having a structure with a full-time staff to work on a plethora of gay rights issues from employment discrimination to the portrayal of glbtq people in films and television shows.

O'Leary reunited with Voeller in 1975. This time their working relationship was more harmonious. In 1976 Voeller successfully recommended that O'Leary be named co-executive director with him, a positive step at a time when there was still considerable tension between gay men and lesbians within the movement.

The issue of visibility of lesbians--and also of gay men--continued to be important to O'Leary, who worked with Midge Costanza and Virginia Apuzzo to get gay rights language into the Democratic Party platform at the 1976 convention. The motion was tabled, but when the Democratic candidate, Jimmy Carter, won the election, he took Costanza to the White House as a presidential assistant, and O'Leary saw--and seized--an opportunity.

Soon after Carter's election O'Leary asked Costanza to set up a White House meeting at which gay rights leaders could discuss matters of concern. O'Leary and Voeller, together with twelve others, including Frank Kameny, Charlotte Bunch, and Troy Perry, used the March 1977 forum to raise a variety of topics such as health care, gays in the military, and discriminatory laws and policies.

After the historic White House gathering, Costanza arranged for O'Leary and Voeller to meet with senior officials from federal departments and agencies to continue the discussion. While the meetings did not result in immediate or dramatic progress, they did serve to increase awareness of gay rights issues and establish them as an integral element of public policy.

O'Leary's efforts at the NGTF took many forms. Often together with Voeller, she traveled extensively in support of gay civil rights legislation and the repeal of sodomy laws. They put considerable effort into community organizing to build momentum for change. The NGTF was also active in the successful campaign to have the American Psychiatric Association remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

After five years with the NGTF, O'Leary left to become executive director of the National Gay Rights Advocates (NGRA) in 1981. A nonprofit public-interest group, the NGRA was dedicated to defending the civil liberties of gay men and lesbians. Its particular mission was to take on cases that would set legal precedents to protect gay and lesbian rights and to ensure that AIDS patients were protected from discrimination. O'Leary remained with the NGRA until 1989.

O'Leary joined with Rob Eichberg, the founder of The Experience, a program designed to develop self-esteem in gay men and lesbians, to establish National Coming Out Day. The initial observance was on October 11, 1988, the one-year anniversary of the second march on Washington. The event has developed into the National Coming Out Project of the Human Rights Campaign.

At the same time that O'Leary began working with the NGRA, she also ventured into the private sector,

becoming an investment realtor in California.

Throughout her career O'Leary was active in Democratic Party politics. In 1976, she was the only openly lesbian delegate to the national convention. Over the years, she worked consistently to have glbtq issues addressed in the party platform and to increase the number of glbtq delegates.

In 1998 she served as co-chair of the Democratic National Committee's Gay and Lesbian Caucus and a member of the DNC Executive Committee. Together with fellow Gay and Lesbian Caucus member Jeff Soref and California Assemblywoman Carole Migden, O'Leary put forward an amendment to party rules requiring the inclusion of gay men and lesbians in all state delegations. The measure was unanimously adopted by the Rules and Bylaws Committee.

O'Leary resided in Los Angeles with her partner, Lisa Phelps, and their two children.

O'Leary died on June 4, 2005 from complications of lung cancer.

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