



## Voeller, Bruce (1934-1994)

by Linda Rapp

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American activist and scientist Bruce Voeller was a leader in both the gay rights movement and the fight against AIDS.

Bruce Raymond Voeller was born in Minneapolis on May 12, 1934. His ambition to be a scientist took him to Reed College in Oregon, from which he graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1956. He then won a prestigious fellowship at Rockefeller University in New York, where he earned a doctorate in developmental biology, biochemistry, and developmental genetics five years later.

Voeller continued his career at Rockefeller, first as a research associate, then an assistant professor. He was promoted to associate professor in 1966, becoming the youngest person in the institution's history to hold that rank.

While at Rockefeller, Voeller published numerous scholarly articles and four books, including *Basic Biology* (1970, co-authored by Alfred M. Elliott) and *Three Centuries of Botany in North America* (1967, co-authored by Paul F. Cranefield). In addition he edited *The Chromosome Theory of Inheritance* (1968).

At the age of 29, Voeller, then married and the father of three children, acknowledged his homosexuality. Following his divorce, Voeller had to fight all the way to the United States Supreme Court to gain child visitation rights.

The outcome of the case was a landmark decision for gay and lesbian parents, and the legal battle was a life-changing experience for Voeller, who gave up his successful academic career to devote his efforts to the struggle for gay rights.

Voeller was among the founders of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) and became its third president. Eventually, however, he found himself at odds with many of the members. Instead of using street activism and "zaps"--public actions designed to attract media attention--Voeller wanted to bring the GAA into the mainstream of political discourse. Finding little support for his ideas, he quit the organization in 1973.

Immediately thereafter he founded the National Gay Task Force (NGTF), which in 1986 changed its name to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Finances were a constant problem in the early days, but Voeller remained true to his vision of building the NGTF into an organization that would address the broad spectrum of concerns of the glbtq community, from discriminatory laws and the clearly inappropriate designation of homosexuality as a mental disorder to negative portrayals of gay men and lesbians in films and television shows.

During the 1976 presidential campaign Voeller and Jean O'Leary, who had become his co-executive director at the NGTF the previous year, attempted to get a gay rights plank included in the Democratic Party's platform. Although that effort was not successful, it led to an alliance between them and Midge Costanza, who became a presidential assistant after Jimmy Carter won the election.

With Costanza's help, Voeller and O'Leary arranged a White House meeting to discuss gay rights issues. A panel comprised of Voeller, O'Leary, and twelve other prominent gay men and lesbians used the March 1977 forum to raise concerns about oppressive and discriminatory laws and policies. In the months following the historic meeting at the White House, the NGTF directors were able to pursue the discussion with senior officials from the Departments of Justice and Housing and Urban Development, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and others.

Voeller and O'Leary worked to build the National Gay Task Force into a truly national organization. They traveled around the country to help in elections in which gay and lesbian rights were at issue, using experience gained at one to benefit the next. They also did a great amount of community organizing.

Voeller left the NGTF in 1978. He and his life partner, Richard Lucik, moved to California, where Voeller co-founded the Mariposa Education and Research Foundation. The organization was dedicated to the study of sexuality--homosexuality in particular--and to the dissemination of information.

One of Mariposa's first projects was the commissioning of the sculpture "Gay Liberation" by George Segal to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion. Although the sculpture was completed in 1980, it was not installed until much later. Financed by the Mildred Andrews Fund, the sculpture created great controversy. Residents of the neighborhood around New York's Christopher Street, many of them elderly Italian Catholics, objected to the gay and lesbian theme of the piece, and the gay community complained that a heterosexual artist had been given the commission--although, as Voeller explained, only after a number of gay and lesbian sculptors had declined the project, mainly out of fear for their careers.

The life-size bronze figures of "Gay Liberation," a standing gay male couple and a lesbian couple seated on a park bench, were not installed in Sheridan Park near the original site of the Stonewall Inn until 1992. Another copy of the work, originally intended for Los Angeles, found a home in the sculpture garden of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California.

In the early 1980s, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, Voeller returned to his scientific roots, doing studies on the effectiveness of different kinds of condoms and spermicides in preventing sexually transmitted diseases. He was a consultant to the Consumers Union, which published his findings with regard to condoms in its magazine *Consumer Reports*.

Voeller was in the forefront of the fight against AIDS. It was he who suggested the name Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome instead of GRID, "Gay-Related Immune Deficiency," which he considered both stigmatizing and inaccurate.

In addition to publishing many articles on HIV and AIDS and co-editing *AIDS and Sex: An Integrated Biomedical and Behavioral Approach* (1991, with June M. Reinisch and Michael Gottlieb) for the Kinsey Institute Series, Voeller testified at congressional hearings on AIDS and lent his expertise to numerous federal, state, and local organizations working to fight AIDS.

Voeller lost his own battle with the disease on February 13, 1994. He died at his Topanga, California, home surrounded by his family--his life partner Richard Lucik, his sons Jon and Christopher Voeller, his daughter Suzanne Sundheim, and his sister Nancy Petron.

In 1988 Voeller had contributed the Mariposa archives, a valuable collection of historical documents on the gay and lesbian rights movement, to Cornell University, where they are now part of the Human Sexuality Collection. Following Voeller's death, Lucik undertook Mariposa's final project, commissioning artist Don Bachardy to make portraits of twelve gay and lesbian rights leaders. The subjects included Voeller, Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin, Frank Kameny, Barbara Gittings, Troy Perry, and Jean O'Leary. Lucik presented the portrait series to the Human Sexuality Collection in 1995.

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## **About the Author**

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