Franklin Edward Kameny (1925–2011, Astronomer)
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Abstract: Dr. Frank Kameny is best known today as one of the most important figures of the gay rights movement in the US, but he was also an astronomer. In fact, it was his firing from his position as astronomer for the US Army Map Service on the grounds of homosexuality that sparked his lifelong career of activism. Here, I explore some aspects of his short but interesting astronomical career and the role of the AAS in his life.

Kameny’s Legacy

Dr. Frank Kameny was an astronomer until age 31, when an injustice turned him into a lifelong activist. He may be the most famous astronomer that most astronomers have never heard of.

After serving in WWII, Frank Kameny returned to finish his physics degree at Queen’s College and pursued his PhD in astronomy under Cecelia Payne-Gaposchkin at Harvard, studying yellow semiregular variables such as RV Tau (see box below). These giant stars are thought to be in the last stages of their evolution, just before the planetary nebula phase. His thesis remains unpublished in any peer-reviewed journal (see box, far right), though the light curves are available through the AAVSO.

After graduation, Kameny took a job with the US Army Map Service in July 1957. Late that year he was fired for being homosexual (see box, bottom right) and the following year he was barred from federal employment on those grounds.

Kameny responded by filing the first formal federal civil rights claim on the basis of sexual orientation, and took his appeal up to the Supreme Court in 1961, which denied his petition. Thereafter, Dr. Kameny responded by filing the first formal federal civil rights claim on the basis of sexual orientation, and took his appeal up to the Supreme Court in 1961, which denied his petition. Thereafter, Dr. Kameny responded by filing the first formal federal civil rights claim on the basis of sexual orientation, and took his appeal up to the Supreme Court in 1961, which denied his petition.

Dr. Kameny was the first openly gay candidate for Congress (and only the second openly gay candidate any for public office in the US). In 1973 he successfully campaigned to have the American Psychiatric Association remove homosexuality from its Manual of Mental Disorders (this was an essential hurdle to convincing the courts that LGBT people could not be discriminated against on the ground of mental illness). In 1993 he drafted the bill repealing Washington DC “ sodomy laws” (which actually forbade a wide variety of private sexual activity, including pre-marital sex). He relentlessly fought for LGBT Americans to be allowed security clearances, and for an end to any ban on LGBT Americans in the military.

Kameny died on Oct. 11, 2011, just days before the AAS Executive Council voted to acknowledge his contributions, including winning the right for LGBT astronomers to pursue the calling that he unjustly denied.

Acknowledgements from Dr. Kameny’s thesis (Harvard, 1956)

It is always a difficult task to give formal expression to the appreciation and indebtedness which one feels toward so many people at the conclusion of a work of this sort, nor is it possible to mention all of those to whom such expression is justly due. However, there are a number whose contributions in one way or another contributed toward the successful completion of this study are sufficiently outstanding to warrant their being listed here. I wish, therefore, to thank:

Dr. C. P. Gaposchkin, my thesis adviser, who suggested to me the topic of this study and who guided my work throughout.
Dr. B. J. Jok, to whom, as a friend, as an advisor in a variety of ways, and as a teacher, I shall always owe a tremendous debt of gratitude and whose invaluable guidance, counsel and support have helped me innumerate while a graduate student.

Dr. E. L. Lindblad, of the Harvard Observatory for Conant that “no major science has come out of the sixty-one inch Wyeth telescope”.

Gingerich: ... it was a whole other ballgame when CCDs came in, and suddenly the efficiency of the sixty-inch telescope was completely changed around. You have to find out a lot about that from Dave Latham.

DeVorkin: Dave Latham and Dick McCrosky.

Gingerich: See, what was going on here during the summer when I was here, Harlan Smith, who later became director at Texas, and Frank Kameny, who's totally vanished from the astronomy scene, had a summer project to aluminize the sixty-one inch. They worked really hard. It was a heroic amateur effort. [Laughter] They proved that it could be done, and essentially saved the sixty-one inch so that it would be, in the future, available but not right away. Because, there weren't that many — I mean, look, there are no theses coming out of it.

DeVorkin: Well, Menzel and others did admit in a position paper that he wrote on the Status of the Observatory for Coman that “no major science has come out of the sixty-inch inch Wyeth reflector.” He made a big point about it.

Gingerich: And, that was true, but only at that point. Subsequently a great deal has come out of it.


Gingerich and Kameny were officemates at Harvard. David Latham later used the Oak Ridge 61" to make the first secure detection of what today would be considered an exoplanet, HD 114762b.

Role of the AAS in Dr. Kameny’s life

From Gay is Good, How Frank Kameny changed the face of America, Metro Weekly Oct. 5, 2006

MW: Coming back from the war to the States, when did you start to develop a gay identity?

KAMENY: I was discharged and I went back to college that September. I graduated mid-year, January 1948, and went to Harvard for my graduate work in astronomy. My Master's and Ph.D. are in astronomy from Harvard. And I dated heterosexually almost all throughout.

Then the American Astronomical Society had a meeting in Boulder in 1953 [where] I met the director of the observatory of the University of Arizona in Tucson, and I made arrangements with him to go down there. On my 29th birthday, May 21, 1954, I received a seduction from a young man of 50 whose family had had more experience than I had. I spent sort of what I've always called "a golden summer" with him. That's when I first heard the word "gay." I had never heard it before. There was a gay bar in town and I had been there once or twice, but it was, and I was. It was my first actual introduction, if you want to use that word, to the gay community — my coming out....

MW: Let's go back to your being fired from the Army Map Service. You were arrested at one point?

KAMENY: Let's get the whole sequence. There was a meeting of the American Astronomical Society in San Francisco [in 1956], which I was invited to. At that point, I was very, very new to the whole gay scene. I didn't know what to watch out for....

[Dr. Kameny was arrested in a sting on a vague charge for alleged homosexual activity, described in court documents only as "215 MPC"][4]. An initial "guilty" verdict was later changed to "not guilty, charge dismissed"

Nonetheless, Dr. Kameny disclosed the arrest when applying for his job with the US Army Map Service. His "failure" to explain its context and to use the proper code was deemed "lack of understanding" and as a portion of his dismissal. The actual reason was made explicit informedly of homosexuals were ineligible for federal employment.

MW: Do you imagine that if you had been born heterosexual you would still be demanding that the world change itself to accommodate you?

KAMENY: I don't think it would have been necessary. If I'd been born heterosexual, I would have gotten married and had a family and at this point been a retired, very successful astronomer and that would have been that.