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A Celebration of Jim Kepner's Life

Franklin E. Kameny

Given at an event titled "A Celebration of Jim Kepner's Life and the Past 50 Years of the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement," held at the Samuel Goldwyn Theater of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills, California, by Dr. Kameny, the founder of the Mattachine Society of Washington, DC, on May 22, 1998. Kepner died on November 14, 1997.

While it is hardly my wont to resort to anything religious under any circumstances, it is not inappropriate to do so just this once. In the New Testament, one of the reasons given for setting out the history narrated there was the passing from the scene of the first-hand witnesses to the events which had occurred.

That is singularly relevant to this truly remarkable gathering of the slowly dwindling numbers of those of us who remain from the creation of one of the most uniquely successful efforts at profound social change which has ever occurred—at least in recent generations.

And successful it has been! Beyond the wildest dreams of those of us who were there three, four and five decades ago—and more. Not only beyond our wildest dreams, but beyond even the ability to dream those dreams back then. We started with nothing, and look what we have wrought!

Who would have imagined upwards of a million gay people marching in Washington and filling the Mall? Who would have imagined not merely the fading of anti-gay discrimination, but laws affirmatively prohibiting such discrimination? Who would have imagined personal appearances by the President and Vice-President of the United States at major gay events, and congratulatory statements by the President supportive of gay pride festivals? In fact, who then would have imagined gay pride, much less public celebrations of it? In an era when the government was our enemy and was out to get us, who would have imagined organizations of gay federal employees supported by government agencies, departments and departmental Secretaries—even the FBI? And who would have imagined that THE front-

burner social issue of the day, taken seriously by friend and foe alike, would be same-sex marriage?

That listing was just a haphazardly-assembled illustrative sampling of the kind of progress which we have made over the past half-century—progress for which much of the credit must go to the people who are here this evening, and those who have left us.

Of course we haven't won all the battles yet. We still have the military. One third of the states still have anti-sodomy laws—but then they all did until 1962. We haven't actually achieved same-sex marriage yet, but who would even have imagined domestic partnership laws and policies back then? There are still very deep reservoirs not merely of prejudice, but of overt virulent hatred. There are organized powerful structures of what I call "the nutty fundamentalists," who have declared war on us, and are waging it vigorously. They didn't have their act together even twenty years ago.

But as even the nutty fundamentalists realize, they are losing their war. The tide is with us. We are winning because without a doubt, we are right and they are wrong. We are moral and they are immoral. We are American and they are un-American and anti-American. All of us have always known that, of course. It has been our driving motivation. Our success has been in significantly persuading the American public that that is so. And there we have pulled off a coup of the most incredible proportions, for which all of us can rightly congratulate ourselves.

Sadly, as we all know, one of the old stalwarts, one of the indispensable foot soldiers, is no longer with us. Jim Kepner had a longer history in this effort than almost anyone here, if not everyone here. While I did not get to know him as well as I might have—we were perpetually 3,000 miles apart and operated in parallel but somewhat different universes—we were always on friendly terms. I last saw him unexpectedly in 1993 in Washington, when by sheer chance, we marched near each other. Fortunately, he lived long enough to have seen and have helped to chronicle and preserve the record of the successes which he helped so much to achieve.

While all the battles are far from won, there is one major difference between the current situation, and that which faced us in past decades. We were then almost alone—a small handful of people, without troops and without allies. Nowadays, the troops are there in vast numbers, and allies are emerging from every quarter up to and including the very highest levels of government.

In 1968, I coined the slogan "Gay is Good." We have always known that; acceptance of it represents the indispensable bottom-line rationale for everything that we have done over the past half-century. We here have made it much better. And we pass the torch to those who will make it perfect. I am confident they will. And soon.