

Leonard Graff



Leonard Graff attended Cooley Law School at Western Michigan University in Lansing, Michigan. He graduated in 1975.

As an undergraduate student at Michigan State University, Leonard was very active in promoting gay rights, on campus, in the political arena, and on the streets. His activism in the early 1970s is best described in his own words – taken from a message he sent to a Michigan LGBTQ organization in 2017.

“My friends and I were very active in the nascent gay rights movement of the early ‘70s. We lobbied successfully in East Lansing, for the nation’s first law to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation; we created the first state wide network of gay organizations; we brought an action against MSU to compel it to promote Gay Pride Month on campus; and, we helped organize the first gay pride parade in Detroit. I’m pretty sure we were, at the time, the largest student organization on the MSU campus.

“We fought for our right to be free from discrimination and for the dignity to be ourselves—proud gay, lesbian and bi people.”

Leonard, who was raised in Detroit, Michigan, did not fully acknowledge he was gay until his late teens, just before entering his freshman year at Michigan State University. Once on campus, it took him only a few days to become involved in gay rights. The only thing negative he experienced about being openly gay in college was at another university. As he and his lover were walking hand in hand on the campus at the University of Michigan, they were stoned.

In the late 1970s, Leonard became a member of the National Committee for Sexual Civil Liberties, a group of lawyers and scholars from a variety of disciplines such as history, sociology, psychology, and theology. Through legislation and litigation, the committee sought to repeal laws criminalizing consenting adult sexual behavior. Other 1970s trailblazers were members of the committee, including Thomas F. Coleman, Walter Barnett, Arthur C. Warner, David A.J. Richards, William F. Reynard, Gerald Gerash, and William H. Gardner.

In his private law practice, Leonard worked on several gay rights cases, including one in 1978 where represented the Gay Activists Alliance of D.C. against the transit authority for refusing to accept gay advertising. A 1981 case involved a student group denied recognition by Georgetown University.

In 1982, Leonard moved to San Francisco where he became legal director of National Gay Rights Advocates – the West Coast version of Lambda Legal Defense on the East Coast. He was admitted to the bar in California the following year.

Under Leonard's leadership as legal director, National Gay Rights Advocates managed or participated in a wide variety of court cases involving LGBT rights. These are but a few examples::

- a lawsuit against the Immigration and Naturalization Services for denying entry to the United States to visitors from other countries who openly acknowledged being gay or lesbian;
- securing a money judgment against Senator John Briggs, author of the infamous anti-gay teacher initiative in California in favor of a gay teacher;
- the case of a gay sailor wrongfully discharged from the Navy;
- a challenge to an anti-gay teacher law in Oklahoma;
- a lawsuit arguing that unmarried domestic partners should be entitled to unemployment benefits to care for an ill partner the same as heterosexual married spouses are;
- a palimony case involving a same-sex couple who had separated;
- challenges to the sodomy laws in Texas and Georgia;
- reinstatement of a school guidance counselor discharged for being lesbian.

Leonard gave a lecture in 1984 to the Stanford Gay and Lesbian Students Association. The lecture was recorded and is available [online](#).

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