

William B. Kelley



William Kelley was a gay rights activist, community organizer, and lawyer who is often regarded as one of the most important figures of the gay rights movement from the mid-1960s into the 1990s.

Kelley was born in 1942 in Missouri. Kelley knew he was gay in high school and would spend hours reading books in the “Rare Books” section to learn about his sexuality. Kelley’s interest in civil rights issues was deeply influenced by the discriminatory atmosphere of his hometown. He described it as:

“legally segregated and practically segregated . . . The consciousness of rights was grounded because it was the McCarthy era. I was reading books about free speech, [about] not accepting the religiosity of the day, and about racial justice. It was a combination of those three types of readings that began to make me rights-conscious. In fact, I was an ACLU member when I was in high school.”

Kelley moved to Chicago in 1959, where he attended the University of Chicago. It was there Kelley first became involved in gay activism in 1964 after learning about police raids on Chicago gay bars which resulted in local newspapers publishing the names and addresses of those arrested. This moment inspired him to come out while in college.

Since 1965, he pioneered numerous projects and gay rights organizations. From 1965 to 1970, Kelley was active in Mattachine Midwest — a chapter of the Mattachine Society, an early gay rights group —where he wrote and edited its newsletter. In 1966, he helped organize the first national gay and lesbian conference— the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations. Then in 1970, he helped form HOPE (Homosexuals Organized for Political Education – an organization to do political-questionnaires for political candidates. Kelley went on to join the Chicago Gay Alliance where he lobbied Democrats, City Council and the Illinois Fair Employment Practices Commission. He chaired the Cook County Commission on Human Relations for its first 10 years.

In the 1970s, Kelley co-founded the “Chicago Gay Crusader” (Chicago’s first lesbian and gay newspaper), and Illinois Gays for Legislative Action, and co-chaired the Illinois Gay Rights Task Force. In 1978, Mattachine Midwest awarded Kelley the Pearl M. Hart Award for his service to the gay and lesbian community.

After some years of working as a legal assistant, and after many years of advocacy with lesbian and gay legal rights, he realized his personal dream of becoming a lawyer after graduating from Chicago-Kent Law School in 1987.

In 1991, Kelley was inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame. He served as a law clerk for the Illinois Court of Appeals, was on the board of directors of the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois. He helped found and co-chaired the National Lesbian and Gay Law Association and was a member of the Lesbian and Gay Bar Association of Chicago, Asians and Friends Chicago, the Cook County State's Attorney's Task Force on Gay and Lesbian Issues, the City of Chicago's Advisory Council on Gay and Lesbian Issues, and the National Committee for Sexual Civil Liberties.

When asked for advice for younger activists, Kelley said the following:

Patience ... which is always hard for young people to accept. Also, they should learn from history; I always did. When I was a child, I related better to older people; I was interested in what had happened before. History is such a useful tool for activism; you learn what to expect in terms of opposition and opportunity. Lastly, don't write off older people. They still can be very helpful, not only in terms of intellectual resources but in terms of ideas.

Kelley worked as an administrative judge until he passed away in 2015 at the age of 72. He was survived by his life partner, Chen K. Ooi.

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