

Donald C. Knutson



Don Knutson was a San Francisco attorney and scholar who taught and wrote on the subject of gay rights. He was also a co-founder of the National Gay Rights Advocates.

Knutson was born in St. Paul, Minnesota. He was a graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School where he was first in his class and editor of the law review. He served as an officer in the military before he moved to California where he became a law clerk to California Supreme Court Justice Roger Traynor.

Knutson later was a professor of law at the USC Law School where he served as the first faculty advisor to the Gay Student Union. While at USC, he taught the nation's first law school class on homosexuality and the law.

In 1977, Gay Rights Advocates was founded by UC Hastings law students in conjunction with a private law firm headed by Knutson. The idea was that paid cases from the firm would fund the public interest work of Gay Rights Advocates. Knutson was the organization's first legal director.

In 1978, Gay Rights Advocates enlisted the help of 10 law students from various parts of the nation to conduct research and develop educational materials on gay rights issues. Knutson was the perfect mentor for them, having been a law professor for several years. That year he was a panelist at a National Symposium on Gay Rights sponsored by the Gay Law Students Association at Hastings Law School.

Knutson wrote *Homosexuality and the Law*, a book published by Haworth Press in 1980. That year he was one of the founding members of Bay Area Lawyers for Individual Freedom, San Francisco's LGBT bar association.

Knutson announced that he was leaving in August 1981. The Sentinel newspaper ran a front-page story about his resignation, right under the lead article about the federal government setting up a task force to investigate this mysterious "gay cancer" that was beginning to look like an epidemic. That article, of course, was referring to what would come to be known as AIDS.

The Sentinel story described Knutson's time at Gay Rights Advocates, his thoughts on the gay rights movement, and his plans for the future.

“During Knutson’s tenure as a full time director of the organization, Gay Rights Advocates established a national reputation for its legal work on gay-related cases, successfully challenging discriminatory practices in court, meeting with White House officials to negotiate resolutions of discriminatory policies, and testifying before special Congressional and Presidential panels.

“‘I’m really proud of the fact that GRA has become the preeminent public interest law firm in the country on gay rights and that we have a record which I will be able to be proud of for the rest of my life,’ Knutson said.

“Reflecting on his nearly seven years as a full-time advocate of gay legal rights, beginning with San Francisco’s Pride Foundation, Knutson said, ‘I am no longer politically naive, as I was when I came in.’

“‘[T]here is absolutely no doubt that this has been the most exciting, rewarding time of my life. The past seven years I’ve had the luxury of using my professional skills in a way that gave me something other than a paycheck, an experience that many people never have, and that I certainly never had before. I think that it’s terribly exciting to see, to experience actually being a part of effecting change, and with immodesty perhaps, I feel that GRA and I have played a role in effecting real change. Sometimes in very small ways, sometimes in very important ways,’ Knutson said.”

After Knutson retired from Gay Rights Advocates, the organization conducted a national search for a new legal director. In 1981, that position was filled by attorney Leonard Graff. It was at this time that the organization changed its name to National Gay Rights Advocates. Its staff and cooperating attorneys represented clients in a variety of major legal cases to advance LGBT rights until the organization dissolved in 1985.

Knutson died in 1990 at the age of 59 due to complications from AIDS.

References

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