

Steven Thomas Kelber



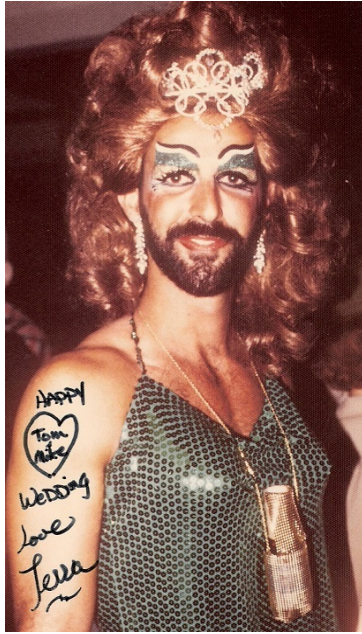
Steve Kelber graduated from UCLA Law School in 1976. After two years of practicing law as a solo attorney, he and attorney Thomas F. Coleman formed a partnership. Tom had been solo since 1974, focusing on criminal defense and civil rights advocacy. What Steve brought to the firm was his interest in civil litigation and probate law. The Coleman-Kelber partnership enabled the firm to provide a wider range of legal services to the gay and lesbian community in Los Angeles. The law office was located on the ground floor at 1800 N. Highland Avenue, right in the heart of Hollywood.

Coleman and Kelber successfully [sued](#) a Municipal Court judge in 1977 for imposing a condition of probation on a defendant that he “not associate with known homosexuals.”

The firm represented Don Barry Pryor in the California Supreme Court resulting in a landmark ruling in 1979 declaring Section 647(a) of the Penal Code unconstitutional – a law prohibiting soliciting or engaging in lewd or dissolute conduct. As a result of that decision, prosecutions for consensual homosexual conduct dropped by 90% in California. The firm also filed an amicus curia brief in the landmark case of Gay Law Students Association v. Pacific Telephone – a decision that provided gays and lesbians legal protection against employment discrimination by public and private employers.

Steve had no hesitancy to fight discrimination or rough treatment of gay customers by business establishments. The Advocate newspaper recalled one such incident in 1980.

“Three gay activists have won an out of court settlement for an allegedly antigay action by the Century Plaza Hotel. Last May, the three entered the hotel's cocktail lounge for a drink following a demonstration against the CBS documentary ‘Gay Power, Gay Politics.’ The manager told them the hotel did not want ‘their kind’ on the premises and insisted they leave. One of the demonstrators, attorney Steven Kelber, asked the hotel for an apology and a statement of nondiscrimination. When the demands were not met, Kelber filed suit under the Unruh Civil Rights Act, which guarantees equal access to public accommodations. In the recent settlement two plaintiffs, James Lindgren and Donna Davidson, were each paid \$250 in damages and Kelber was compensated for court costs.”



When Steve was invited to the wedding of his law partner Tom to Michael A. Vasquez in 1981, Steve asked if he could come dressed as his alter ego “Terra.” Once in a while, Steve liked to dress in drag. Tom asked him not to. So Steve came dressed in a tight muscle shirt and form-fitting blue jeans. Inside the wedding card that Steve gave to Tom and Michael – who were married on a ship at sea – was a photo of Terra with a message that said: “Terra was so upset she could not attend your cruise. Happy Day and Best Wishes.”

In 1982, Steve and ACLU attorney Susan McGievey secured an appellate ruling in California prohibiting landlords from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation against tenants. The case – [Hubert v. Williams](#) – involved a paraplegic man who hired a lesbian service provider. The landlord claimed that the law did not prohibit sexual orientation discrimination. With excellent briefing by Steve and Susan, the appeals court had no problem rejecting the landlord’s assertion.

“[W]e hold that under the Unruh Act, landlords may not refuse to rent an apartment to a homosexual solely because of that person's sexual preference. . . . [H]omosexuals, as a class, are protected from arbitrary discrimination. . . . Because homosexuals are protected from arbitrary discrimination in rental housing by the Unruh Act, the right to associate with members of the protected class is likewise protected under the act.”

In 1986, Steve [represented](#) a man who was refused an opportunity to serve as a “big brother” with the Big Brothers Association. The application was rejected because, in response to questioning, the man indicated that he was bisexual.

Steve [died](#) of complications from AIDS in 1986 at the age of 34. Tom recalls what Steve once said about dying young. “He loved to live a fast-pace life with lots of partying. He said that he would rather have fun and die young than play it safe and live to an old age.”

In his honor, the ACLU of Southern California created the Steven T. Kelber Courageous Advocate Award. It was given to Tom Coleman in 1990 for his advocacy on behalf of the rights of lesbians and gay men.

While in law school, Steve served as a summer law clerk to the chief justice of the High Court of Micronesia.

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