



in memoriam

**Jean O'Leary**  
1948-2005

Politicians and activists, family members, colleagues, and friends mourned the death of Jean O'Leary last month. O'Leary, a former nun, facilitated the first White House meeting with gay and lesbian rights advocates in 1977, got recognition for and chaired the Democratic National Committee's LGBT Caucus, co-founded National Coming Out Day in 1988, and was a pioneering co-director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, among other achievements. O'Leary died of lung cancer at the home of her partner of 12 years, Lisa Phelps. She was 57.

In a statement issued by the NGLTF, Matt Foreman listed some of the many tasks and concerns she took on: "She advocated for gay rights in immigration and naturalization law, campaigned to repeal anti-sodomy statutes, and advocated with the Federal Communications Commission and the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. In all, her efforts helped make gay rights a national issue in the late 1970s. Her commitments to feminism and anti-racism live on as core values of the Task Force."

O'Leary was born in Kingston, New York, educated in Catholic schools in Cleveland, Ohio, and at age 18 entered the convent of the Sisters of the Holy Humility of Mary. She left after five years to pursue a graduate degree at Yeshiva University, where she became active in gay and les-

bian political groups, eventually co-chairing with Bruce Voeller the group that became the NGLTF.

Human Rights Campaign Director Joe Solmonese praised O'Leary for her work on National Coming Out Day. "As an early advocate and pioneer for equality Jean O'Leary was a true hero. By co-founding National Coming Out Day, she recognized the enormous power that visibility could have in the fight for equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. We are deeply saddened by her loss."

Democratic Party officials also paid tribute to O'Leary's pragmatic and pioneering role in the establishment of an lgbt caucus in the party. DNC Chairman Howard Dean said, "Jean O'Leary was an outstanding leader and a pioneer of gay activism in the Democratic Party. As chair of the lgbt caucus and a member of the DNC executive committee she was an outspoken advocate of equal rights for all Americans. Jean will be sorely missed, but her spirit, her work, and her legacy will long be remembered."

Current DNC LGBT Caucus Chair Jeff Soref likewise honored O'Leary's political legacy. "Jean broke new ground for lgbt people in the Democratic Party. She was a patient, supportive and determined leader, as well as a personal friend and mentor. With Jean's leadership, a powerful

LGBT Caucus emerged at the DNC. She succeeded in having the Caucus officially recognized and gaining a seat on the DNC Executive Committee. She helped achieve more equal representation for LGBT people at all levels of party affairs, including the presidential nominating convention, where our numbers more than doubled. Because of Jean's pioneering work, today LGBT people have prominent roles in the national party and in states across the country. She leaves an historic legacy."

In 1983, O'Leary founded Women's Night, the first large star-studded gala fundraising event for lesbians. Early honorees included lesbian and feminist icons such as Gloria Steinem, Jane Fonda, Bella Abzug, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, author Lillian Faderman and writer/director Donna Dietch (*Desert Hearts*), according to the Women's Night website.

In 1992 Women's Night became an event of the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center. In 2004, the center paid a special tribute to O'Leary (see [www.womensnight.com/honorees\\_2004.htm](http://www.womensnight.com/honorees_2004.htm)). ▼

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