

## Speak out

She graduated from Cleveland State University with a degree in psychology in 1970, left the convent and became the drummer for a girl band, The Satin Dolls. Soon thereafter, she packed up her drums and moved to New York to pursue doctoral studies in organizational development at Yeshiva University. She became enmeshed in the burgeoning gay and lesbian rights movement, attending the political meetings and social events at the Firehouse, joining the Gay Activists Alliance and driving once a week to Albany to lobby state legislators on gay issues.

In 1972, frustrated with the sexism of the male-dominated alliance, she founded Lesbian Feminist Liberation, taking most of the women from the alliance with her and establishing one of the first organized lesbian voices within the women's movement. Two years later, O'Leary and Bruce Voeller, then executive director of the National Gay Task Force, negotiated an agreement for co-gender management of the national gay movement.

Feminist leader Gloria Steinem, who worked often with O'Leary, issued this statement: "Jean O'Leary was a link of kindness and humanity and inclusive politics who helped the women's movement to recognize the universal cost of homophobia, and the gay movement to see that marginalizing the voices of lesbians would only diminish its power. I know she will be with us as long as we remember what she taught us, but I and thousands of others will always miss her spirit."

In her role at the task force, and through her close friendship with presidential adviser Midge Costanza, O'Leary organized 1977's historic first-ever meeting of gay rights advocates at the White House. She also became the first openly gay person appointed to a presidential commission when Jimmy Carter tapped her for the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year. In that role, she negotiated the inclusion of gay and lesbian rights on the agenda of the 1979 International Women's Year conference held in Houston.

Costanza, who was with O'Leary at the time of her death, said: "I will always remember Jean's first call to me at the White House requesting a meeting with the president. With the courage and tenacity so typical of Jean, she demanded that I hold a meeting in the White House to discuss federal government policies that specifically discriminated against gays and lesbians. Her arguments were persuasive, and I scheduled the meeting for March 26, 1977. Because of this historic gathering of gay and lesbian leaders in the White House, a national discussion was held to review and begin to correct the anti-gay policies by federal government agencies. Many changes were made, and many doors were opened as a result of Jean's perseverance."

O'Leary was also active in Democratic Party politics, including her election in 1976 as the first-ever openly lesbian delegate to a national political convention. She served on the Democratic National Committee for 12 years, including eight on that group's Executive Committee, the first openly gay or lesbian person to serve in that capacity. In 2004, U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein appointed O'Leary as an at-large member of the California Democratic State Committee.

O'Leary spent most of the 1980s building a San Francisco group, Gay Rights Advocates, into one of the largest national gay and lesbian activist organizations, National Gay Rights Advocates. As head of NGRA, she pursued "impact litigation" and won important victories protecting gay people from discrimination in employment, housing and other areas. In 1985 NGRA became one of the first advocacy organi-



**Tireless activist Jean O'Leary worked across constituencies to reach feminists, queer activists, AIDS activists and Democratic leaders.**

zations to focus on the legal and civil liberties ramifications of the AIDS epidemic.

"Jean's activism spanned so many movements: the women's movement, gay and lesbian rights, AIDS activism as well as Democratic Party politics," said Sean Strub, founder of POZ magazine. "Her early AIDS activism through NGRA, particularly in expediting access to new treatments, saved many lives. Her passing is a loss for all people who are ill, disadvantaged or suffering and all people who treasure justice."

Bob Hattoy, a Democratic Party and AIDS activist who spoke at the 1992 Democratic National Convention, added: "Jean taught gay men about feminism, she taught lesbians about AIDS, she taught feminists about gay and lesbian issues, and she taught Democrats about everything. She personified the use of power with grace and purpose."

In 1987, *The Los Angeles Times* referred to O'Leary's group as "aggressive defenders of the rights of AIDS patients" and noted litigation against the several federal agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration, that NGRA initiated to expedite and broaden the access of people with HIV to promising new treatments.

In founding National Coming Out Day with psychologist Rob Eichberg in 1987, O'Leary noted that "coming out is critically important to our community and to our movement. Our invisibility is the essence of our oppression. And until we eliminate that invisibility, people are going to be able to perpetuate the lies and myths about gay people."

In recent years, O'Leary and her business partner, Palm Springs City Councilor Ginny Foat, ran a consulting firm specializing in voter contact and candidate consulting.

In addition to Phelps and their daughter, Victoria, she is survived by their son, David De Maria; his life partner, James Springer; and their son, Aiden DeMaria. She is also survived by her brothers, Jim and Ken; sister, Diane Urig; and nieces and nephews.

Phelps said: "I am proud to have been with Jean during the last 12 years of her life, and I am proud of Jean's political accomplishments. She set an example of community involvement for our 15-year-old daughter, Victoria, and instilled in her the importance of political activism."

A memorial service will be held at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center.

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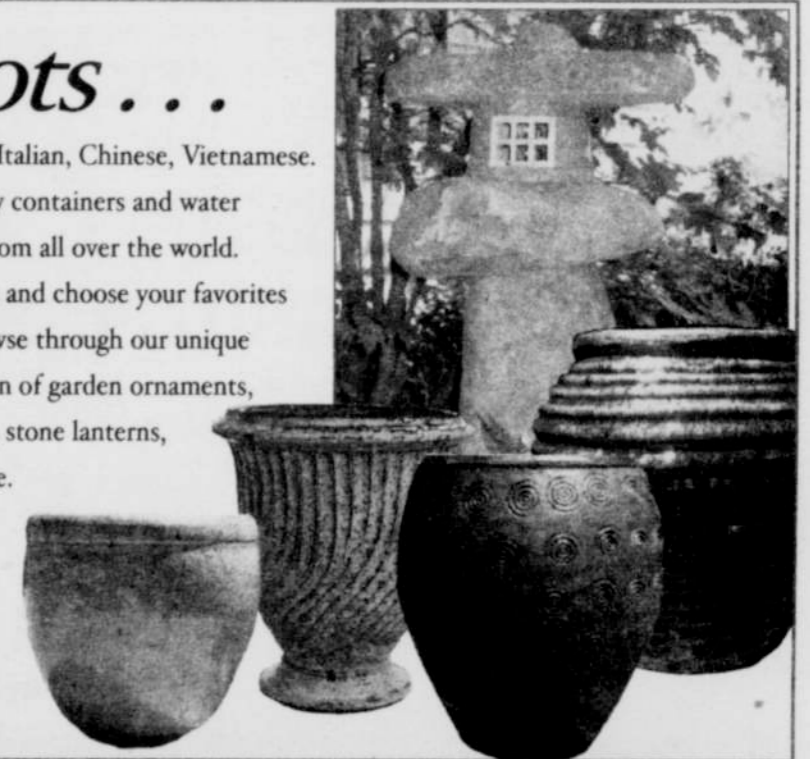


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