

He Told Before “Don’t Ask”

Time magazine’s infamous “homosexual” finally gets his due -- after making gay rights his life's work.

By Regina Marler

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Raised in a conservative Catholic family during the Eisenhower era, Leonard Matlovich had never even dared to touch a man before he was 30. When the Air Force technical sergeant and decorated war hero learned about gay rights pioneer Frank Kameny, he found his number and called Kameny to speak about his “gay friend” in the armed forces and ask what it would take to successfully challenge the military’s antigay policies.



The ideal candidate for the job would have to be squeaky-clean, Kameny told the young man. Not someone in disgrace, but someone respected. Matlovich -- when he got up the nerve to confess that he was the “friend” -- proved to be the perfect choice.

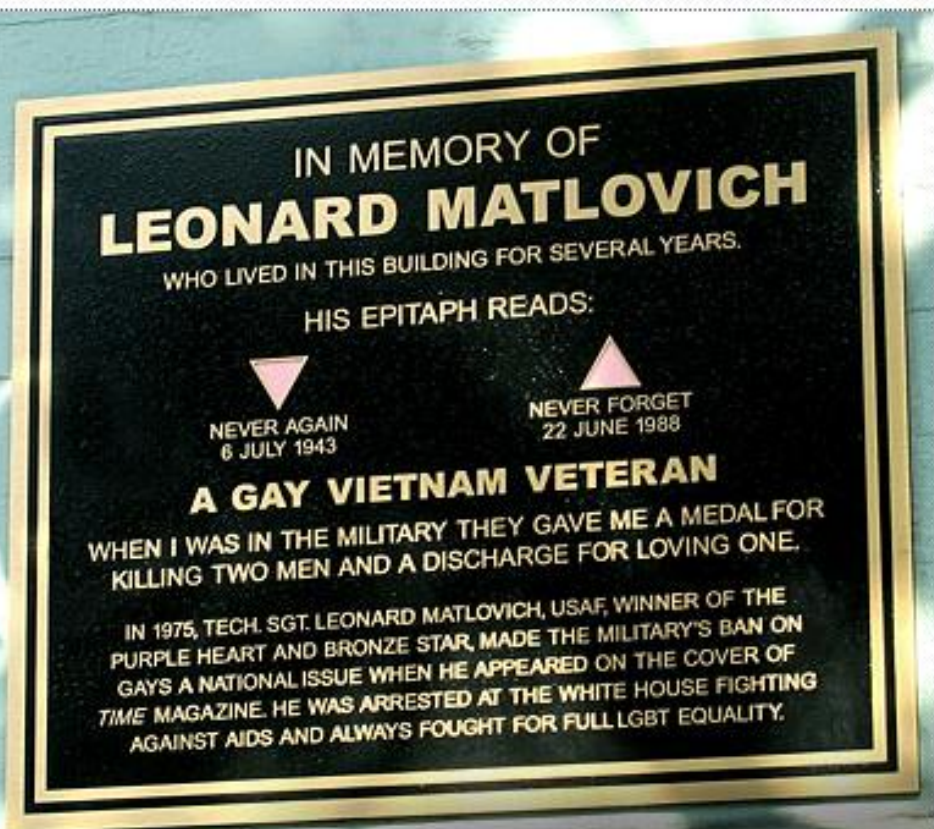
When he outed himself to his military supervisors in March of 1975 he was given a general, or less honorable, discharge. He appealed to the secretary of the Air Force, who upheld the discharge but changed it to an honorable one.

Gay rights became Leonard Matlovich’s life work.

"He had the passion of the convert," friend and former roommate Michael Bedwell recalls. Matlovich was convinced Americans' minds could be transformed to accept gay service people; he had made a transformation of his own, from Southern-born racist to military race relations instructor, a position he held in the Air Force. Both his enthusiasm and his masculinity caught the media's attention, inspiring a groundbreaking *Time*

Bedwell has now honored his friend by commissioning and installing a plaque on their former home at what's often called "the gayest four corners in America:" 18th and Castro streets in San Francisco. The memorial has the full support of the apartment building's elderly straight owner, who spoke about Matlovich at its dedication in November. A ceremony with California assemblyman Mark Leno took place at City Hall, while chants from a Proposition 8 protest could be heard from outside, and Mayor Gavin Newsom declared November 15 Leonard Matlovich Memorial Day.

That same month over 100 retired generals and admirals called for the government to end "don't ask, don't tell," and Barack Obama, who has pledged to repeal the ban on openly gay soldiers, was elected president. Twenty years after his death from AIDS, Matlovich's dream of a fully integrated military is closer than ever to reality.



Name: JC

Date posted: 2009-03-04 11:35 AM

Hometown: Phoenix, AZ

Comment:

I entered the Air Force in 1975 and was not sure I was doing the right thing as I knew I had feelings for other men. I never acted on those feelings until 79. The reason I even dared enter the Air Force was because of that cover and story. I was smart enough to know when I finally did act on my feelings to keep things hidden. I met a few others who also were gay and in the military. I happen to share a barracks with others in the Air Force but also Navy and Marines. I discovered at least 4 others that were gay. I found out by going to a gay bar located about 40 miles from the base. I managed to stay in and retire in 1993 and am grateful that I have the retirement check as I was laid off last June from my job and have been unable to find work. I would love to see a new movie based on his life. He really was a hero.

Name: KKnapp

Date posted: 2009-03-04 10:20 AM

Hometown: San Francisco, CA

Comment:

I met Leonard Matlovitch in 1982 he was running a pizza place that he owned in the Russian River area. He was one of the nicest most unassuming people I have ever met. I didn't make the connection to the Time magazine cover until much later. I had seen the Time Magazine cover in the Junior High and it was the first national mention of homosexuals I had seen. Followed shortly by the odious Anita Bryant Newsweek cover a few months later. It's a unthinkable that we lost him and so many others to the AIDS epidemic.