

# The DCFR Pride Run's Gay Corner History Remembered



By Brian Beary

More than a thousand of you completed the third annual DC Front Runners Pride Run 5K at [Historic Congressional Cemetery](#) on Friday June 12. What some of you may not have realized is that the place you started and finished is steeped in LGBT history, surrounded by graves of pioneering gay activists who chose to be buried there to be close to their friends, comrades or heroes.

The unplanned founding father of the cemetery's 'gay corner' was Leonard Matlovich, a U.S. Air Force veteran and recipient of the Bronze Star and Purple Heart, interred in 1988. Matlovich was a pivotal figure for the gay rights movement, having purposely come out in 1975 to start a campaign to end the ban on gay people serving in the military. A decades long struggle that ultimately bore fruit in 2011 when gay men and women were finally allowed to serve openly.

A few days before this year's Pride Run, I asked Matlovich's close friend Michael Bedwell how he would have felt about our 5K event. "He would have loved it," Bedwell said. "There is a special resonance to having an athletic gay event because sport is one of the last areas where the majority of people are still publicly closeted." Of Matlovich's sporting interests, Bedwell said: "He was not a runner. His primary exercise was swimming. He swam at the YMCA. He also liked to dance at Lost & Found and Pier 9," two

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On Friday, June 12, 2015, more than a thousand runners and walkers participated in the 3rd annual DC Front Runners Pride Run 5K at Historical Congressional Cemetery in Southeast Washington, D.C.

popular gay discos in D.C., now defunct. Washington’s Gertrude Stein Democratic Club grew out of a fundraiser at Pier 9 in October 1975 for Matlovich’s campaign. “He absolutely loved Washington. He loved its history from the time he was child. He liked the architecture too,” Bedwell said.

Matlovich and Bedwell lived together from 1977–1978, a couple of blocks from the cemetery at 1426 G Street. “We were never lovers. Our friendship grew out of our shared activism,” he said. Matlovich’s fight against the military ban had been the idea of Washington-based pioneer Frank Kameny (1925–2011), a fellow veteran, having served in the U.S. Army in World War II. Kameny, a brilliant astronomer,

was fired from his government job for being gay, which launched him on a lifelong campaign for gay rights during which he coined the phrase ‘Gay Is Good.’ Kameny

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— Michael Bedwell

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will soon be memorialized at the cemetery near Matlovich with a veteran’s headstone, according to Paul Williams, the Cemetery’s President.

Bedwell recalled cooking a Thanksgiving dinner in 1977 at their G Street home, where his and Matlovich’s guests were Kameny and Dave Kopay, the first retired professional American football player to come out. Another friend was Philadelphia-based gay rights pioneer Barbara Gittings (1932–2007), whose memorial bench is a few yards from Matlovich. Gittings’ lover of 46 years and fellow activist, Kay Tobin Lahusen, now residing at an assisted living facility in Philadelphia, will be interred there alongside her. Their tombstone’s epitaph reads: ‘Partners in life, Married in our hearts.’

Nancy Russell, a Texas-based retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel, is meanwhile leading a campaign to build a National LGBT Veterans



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From 1977–1978, Leonard Matlovich lived with friend and fellow activist Michael Bedwell at 1426 G Street, SE, a few blocks from Congressional Cemetery.



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Attendees of the DCFR Pride Run gather at the headstone of Leonard Matlovich, gay activist, veteran, recipient of the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star. (From left: Nancy Russell, Matt Welshans, Tyler True, Alex Wilson and Brian Beary)

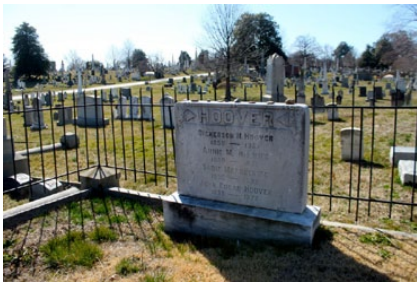


PHOTO: MICHAEL BEDWELL

**Michael Bedwell with Leonard Matlovich in their Castro apartment in San Francisco, August 1979.**

Memorial at the cemetery (see [www.nlgbtvm.org](http://www.nlgbtvm.org) to learn more and contribute). We were delighted to have Nancy join us at this year's DCFR Pride Run (see photo).

I asked Bedwell if he could confirm a story I heard that Matlovich deliberately selected a spot in the cemetery very close to the graves



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**The grave marker for the family plot of J. Edgar Hoover, first Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.**



Congressional Cemetery, established in 1807, is located at 1801 E Street, SE, Washington, DC. It is open to the public every day from dawn to dusk and provides public tours each Saturday April through November at 11:00 am. Learn more about the historic Congressional Cemetery, visit [www.congressionalcemetery.org](http://www.congressionalcemetery.org)



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**Gay rights pioneer Barbara Gittings and Leonard Matlovich**

of the cofounder and longtime Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, and Hoover's longtime companion and Associate Director Clyde Tolson. Hoover himself was rumored to have been gay and Tolson his lover. "Absolutely. Leonard chose that location on purpose: a combination of his sense of humor and activism," Bedwell responded. "Any kind of injustice was repellent to Leonard. The FBI harassed very many gay groups," he said.

Matlovich discovered the cemetery on walks around the neighborhood while living on G Street. "Leonard liked the cemetery very much, although it was quite run down then. That was when he decided he wanted to be buried there." It was a vacation with Bedwell in

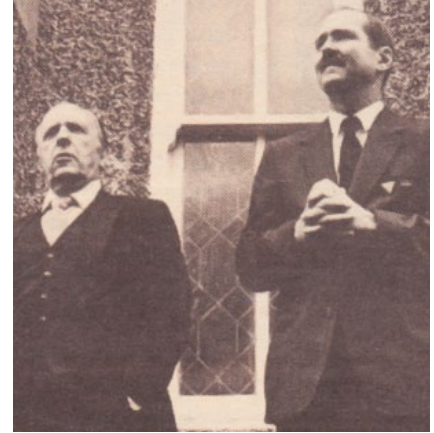


PHOTO: THE WASHINGTON BLADE

**Gay rights pioneer Frank Kameny (left) with his protégé Leonard Matlovich, October 1987.**

Europe in 1984 that gave Matlovich the idea of creating a special memorial for the gay community. His inspiration was a visit to Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, where gay Irish playwright Oscar Wilde and lesbian writer Gertrude Stein and her photographer lover Alice B Toklas are buried.

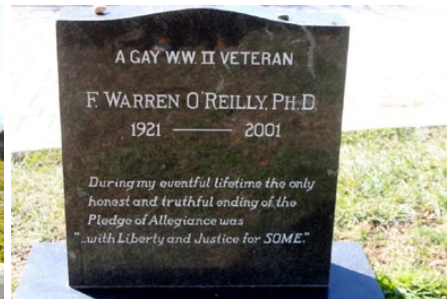
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*It was during a vacation with Bedwell in Paris in 1984 that Matlovich got the idea of creating a special memorial for the gay community in the U.S.*

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Upon returning from Europe, Matlovich purchased two plots at Congressional Cemetery for \$400 each. "He imagined he would find a lover someday and that they would sleep side by side," Bedwell explained. Sadly, that was not to be as Matlovich was diagnosed with HIV in 1986 and died of AIDS two years later. Matlovich lived some of his final years in San Francisco, sharing an apartment with

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A growing number of self-identified lesbian and gay community members have elected to be buried in historic Historic Congressional Cemetery and assert their pride on their gravestones.



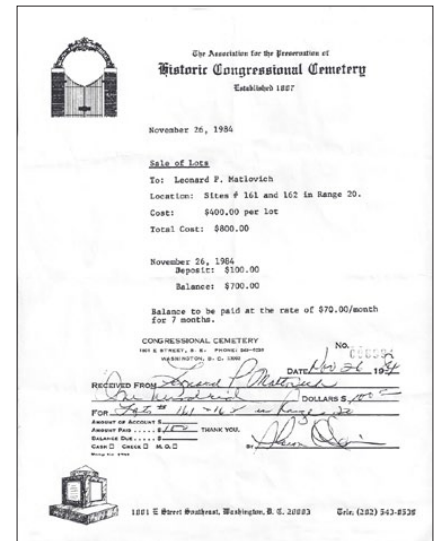
PHOTO: THE WASHINGTON BLADE

Leonard Matlovich poses in Historic Congressional Cemetery at the tombstone meant to be a memorial to all gay veterans. The inscription includes the epitaph: *When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one.*

Bedwell in the Castro, the city's main gay neighborhood. Bedwell stayed on in that apartment after Matlovich died until moving back to Bloomington, Indiana (he is an Indiana native) last year. Now retired, Bedwell created the website [www.leonardmatlovich.com](http://www.leonardmatlovich.com) and works as a volunteer tour-guide at the Kinsey Institute, whose groundbreaking studies on human sexuality in the late 1940s and 1950s helped shape how we view sexuality today. In October, Bedwell will lead an observance at Indiana University, sponsored by the IU GLBT Student Support Services Office, commemorating the 40th

anniversary of Matlovich's outing himself to the Air Force.

While many people today request to be cremated and their ashes scattered to the wind, in an op ed penned for *The Advocate* gay



SOURCE: MICHAEL BEDWELL

An invoice dated November 26, 1984, from Matlovich's purchase of two lots in Congressional Cemetery.

magazine the year before he died, Matlovich explained why he thought places of memorialization were important. "With the wind goes an important part of our history," he said. "As a person with AIDS, I have thought about this a great deal. I believe we must be the same activists in our deaths that we were in our lives."

We hope you enjoyed this year's event and will come back in 2016 for our fourth [DC Front Runners Pride Run](#).

Graphic Design: Seth Kalish

