

**Gay and lesbian leaders who attended historic White House meeting
on March 26, 1977, recount that milestone during press conference
commemorating 30th anniversary**

Pokey Anderson: “I expected virtually nothing from this meeting at the White House 30 years ago. I did not expect to be really heard or welcomed, but we were both heard and welcomed. What we got was a very engaged, interactive meeting that went on for three hours, with promises for follow-up meetings with various agencies. We also got major media coverage.

“We spoke from the heart, and several presenters moved everyone in the room. We also came prepared with details on policies that discriminated against gay men and lesbians in a number of specific areas. Cooki Lutkefedder of the Democratic National Committee said that she’d attended many such White House sessions and had found this to be the ‘most professional’ presentation she’d seen during the Carter administration.

“There was a point made during the meeting that Franklin Kameny had marched *outside* the White House 12 years earlier. Here we were in 1977, and Frank was *inside* the gates now. Midge welcomed him [paraphrasing]: ‘Frank, I’m really glad to meet you finally. I’m just sorry that it has taken so long to come into a house that belongs to you as much as it belongs to anyone in this country.’ Elaine Noble said that some of us had been marching outside the White House gates so long, we wondered if there was an inside.

“Midge Costanza was very welcoming and relaxed, and cracked a few jokes to relax us, saying [paraphrasing]: ‘I’m going to warn those of you who are women: if you meet with the Defense Department, please wear a bullet-proof bra!’ After the meeting, I told local activists that ‘they’re not just going to hand us our rights on a platter,’ but that the door was open for dialogue and that the Carter administration representatives seemed truly interested in discussing how policies could be changed for the better.”

Midge Costanza, then-adviser to President Jimmy Carter: “30 years ago, I received a phone call from Jean O’Leary and Bruce Voeller, the co-executive directors of the National Gay Task Force. What they said was, ‘It is time. It is time that a government we helped choose and a government we help pay for no longer discriminate against us. We want to talk and we want to talk in the White House.’ And I agreed. Certainly the constitution demanded that everyone be represented under those laws, and that would include gays and lesbians.”

“I made the comment that I wished the citizens of this nation could have joined me in that room to listen to the examples of oppression that I heard today. Perhaps the issue of homosexuality would be better understood and perhaps more widely accepted if they could have heard what I did.”

“Anita Bryant back then wanted my resignation, as did many of the right-wing groups. More mail was generated from that meeting than from any other issue during Jimmy Carter’s administration...”

“Jimmy Carter said, ‘I want you to be the window to the nation,’ and I can assure you I took that very seriously. Lots of people came to me to talk about different issues. This one just happened to take place during that Saturday when he went to Camp David, but under no circumstances did I keep it from him... I didn’t get approval for any meetings I held.”

Marilyn Haft, assistant to Midge Costanza in Office of Public Liaison, Carter White House: “I have to say for all the years that I was there, I never saw a more organized, hardworking group of people and a more organized meeting than was that meeting. Everyone was incredibly prepared. It was — before and after that I had never seen anything like it, and Bruce and Jean and I primarily, and some with Midge, we went over every single area and every single agency, and the preparation was amazing and gave us ammunition afterwards for Midge and for me to talk about this.”

Charlotte Bunch: “What I remember most about the meeting was the sense of optimism and excitement that we all felt about presenting these issues formally to the White House. With Midge, it felt like we were really being heard and that our perspectives mattered. I felt that progress on these issues was inevitable that day.”

William Kelley: “I remember a short lead time and hurriedly surveying organizations around the country by phone and mail to gather their experiences with applying for income tax exemption. At the meeting, I remember feeling that we were actually being taken seriously — not only by Midge Costanza but also by such people as Ann Lewis who had been brought in from the DNC and other offices — instead of being given the kind of pro forma hearing I was used to elsewhere (and I remember missing a tour of the Oval Office because I hadn’t heard I should arrive early for it!).”

Bishop Troy Perry: “What I remember most about the White House meeting is that we were actually inside the White House while Anita Bryant and right-wing politicians were fighting to take away our rights. We were actually meeting with the staff of the president of the United States. I remember thinking, ‘Thank God we’re inside while that group is outside.’ I also remember how incredibly gracious Midge Costanza and the White House staff were to us.”

“When I spoke, I told them that I had a report. It was there but I wanted to talk from my heart. I wanted them — the people in the Carter administration — to know what it was like to be told that you’re not loved.”

George Raya: “For weeks prior to the conference, we all worked very hard to prepare for the meeting with White House staff. Each of us was assigned a federal agency; mine was the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Our assignment was to prepare a white paper that made recommendations to the federal government to better serve gays and lesbians. At the time, hepatitis was rampant within the gay male community, so I recommended additional funding. On a personal note, one of the biggest thrills in my life was getting into a taxi that morning and telling the driver, ‘To the west gate of the White House, please.’”

Charlotte Spitzer: “I was a founder of the Parents & Friends of Gays in Los Angeles (now PFLAG) and was recommended for the meeting by the Rev. Troy Perry, the founder of the Metropolitan Community Church. I remember being very excited to be in the White House and to be meeting in the Roosevelt Room, directly across from the

Oval Office. We talked about the situation for gays and lesbians and while we've come a long way, we still have a long way to go. A very long way to go."

Thoughts on progress made:

Charlie Brydon: "Generally speaking, we've made enormous progress. But about gays serving in the military, I'm not optimistic until members of Congress take it seriously. Retired generals talking about it is a huge step forward and a constructive way of discussing it."

Charlotte Bunch: "I imagined we would be further along today on the issues we presented that day, including on LGBT immigration rights which I presented and which have not progressed much since then. But it is also true that I did not imagine some of the forms that progress has taken in terms of changes in families and personal attitudes. Perhaps most of all I did not expect the kind of organized political use of our movement by the conservatives that we have seen since."

William Kelley: "I did think some things such as military and immigration reform or passage of a federal anti-discrimination law would have happened by now, but I didn't think others such as marriage law reform would make as much progress by now as they have. I never expected quick success, so I'd say the overall pace has been about in line with what I expected then — even though I did at least hope for more, and sooner."

Elaine Noble: "We are further along in terms of public awareness and we benefit from a trickle-down effect to the grassroots level. People say hello to their lesbian and gay neighbors and accept us as part of communities. It is politically very important that Congressman Barney Frank now chairs one of the most powerful committees in the U.S. Congress. And it is very important that openly lesbian and gay people are named to governmental commissions at the local and state levels. We would not now be left out of those bodies."

"But, as every progressive movement has been affected by the right-wing envelopment of the federal government, we have been affected, too. This has been very disappointing. But they can't clamp down if the horse is out of the barn, and our horse is definitely out of the barn. Change begins in neighborhoods, at the local level. I never thought that a meeting at the White House would bring about change, because that begins in our own backyards."

Bishop Troy Perry: "In 1977 after the meeting, I thought in 10 years we would win all of our fights with the government and would be accepted as full citizens in our country. While it has been 30 years since that meeting, I believe we have come incredibly far compared to other minority groups who have had to struggle for several hundred years. I view the future with a lot of optimism. I am grateful that the U.S. Supreme Court has struck down the sodomy laws. I am thankful that today we have openly gay and lesbian politicians serving in Congress and in state legislatures, and to see how the laws of so many states have changed the laws regarding our issues. I know that we have come such a far distance in such a short time. In that regard, compared to other minorities, it has exceeded my expectations."

“It made all the difference in the world to open doors so that the religious part of my community could talk to leaders of other denominations.... it opened up all kinds of doors.”

George Raya: “A message that we pulled together in 1977 [by bringing the issue of hepatitis to the White House] eventually helped pull together a national network to respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis.”