

# John E. Fryer:

## MASKED ALUMNUS

Affecting cultural change is a herculean task, but it can be done. It cannot happen, though, until someone speaks truth to those in power. For those who stand against the status quo a great deal of risk is involved, and the truth spoken must be presented eloquently, undeniably, and with conviction.

In 1972, at the American Psychiatric Association's annual meeting in Dallas, John E. Fryer, M.D. (Transylvania University class of 1957) took a risk and

spoke such truth eloquently, undeniably, and with conviction to his fellow psychiatrists. The testimony he delivered challenged conventions and moved a culture toward alleviating prejudices and discrimination directed at members of the gay and lesbian community. *The Advocate*, the oldest and largest gay rights publication, described Fryer's speech as "one of the most influential events in gay and lesbian history."

Fryer was one of the very few people who could have pulled this off. Born in Winchester, Ky., in 1938, he was hard to overlook because of his precociousness (he graduated from high school at age 15) and his physical presence (he was large, loud, unapologetic, and involved). In his four years studying pre-medicine at Transylvania he was a visible presence on campus. He was a gifted musician and an active contributor to the student newspaper. He entered medical school at Vanderbilt University in 1957 at age 19 and earned his M.D. in 1962 at 24.

It's interesting that Fryer chose to enter the field of psychiatry since it was one that would have rejected him had those in charge really known him. Fryer was homosexual, something that was considered by nearly everyone in the profession to be a pathology. So deep was this conviction that even psychiatrists who were themselves gay (and there were others) considered homosexuality an illness. Because of this, gays and lesbians were barred from many vocations, psychiatry in particular. After all, how could the mentally ill possibly treat those who were mentally ill? Fryer had lost a residency and a job early in his career when supervisors suspected he was gay. Flying under the radar is difficult for a large, loud, unapologetic, and involved man.

After the Stonewall riots in 1969, where members of the gay community violently protested police raids of a gay bar in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, gay rights activists



## UNMASKED PREJUDICES

*Above: Fryer's testimony, which he delivered in disguise at the 1972 meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, was a major factor in removing homosexuality from the accepted list of mental disorders. Barbara Gittings (left) and Frank Kameny led the symposium and persuaded Fryer to appear.*

*Below, left: Fryer was an active contributor to the Rambler, Transylvania's student newspaper.*

began to protest other mechanisms of their oppression. Among their primary targets were mental health professionals. They rejected the assertion that a central part of their identity was pathological. Any distress they experienced over their sexuality came from a hostile culture rather than from anything wrong with them. Activists broke up the APA's annual meetings in 1970 and 1971. After the 1971 protests, meeting organizers agreed to a formal dialog with representatives of the activist homosexual community to discuss their concerns. The conversation was to take place in a symposium at the 1972 meeting in Dallas.

Barbara Gittings and Frank Kameny, the activists who would lead this symposium, wanted to have on their panel a psychiatrist who was also gay. While identifying gay psychiatrists was difficult for psychiatrists themselves (gay psychiatrists worked very hard to keep their sexual orientation hidden from their non-gay colleagues), the task was easier for Gittings and Kameny. They knew that each APA meeting also secretly hosted a meeting of gay psychiatrists who were out to each other but not to their straight bosses and peers, a group that jokingly called itself the GayPA. Through their connections with the GayPA, Gittings and Kameny identified Fryer as the best candidate for the task. Fryer agreed to participate, but only if he could appear in disguise. Fryer knew that speaking truth to those in power carried risk—in this case, the risk of ending his career in mental health and academia,

## We Stink!

# Out of the Frying Pan

By John E. Fryer

This campus stinks! Haven't you ever noticed it? For you late risers who don't try to beat the worm up, meander by the boiler plant about 7 or 7:15 some morning. There could never be quite another aroma like that. Twenty-five years from now, when you return to Fourth Street as an alumnus, that smell will probably still be there—a vestige of Old Transylvania.

Or if you're in doubt when you return, wander over to the Science Building in the afternoon. Walk in the front door, and if you can make it, stroll down to the Chemistry lab. You will come away with the strong conviction that the only thing a Transylvania graduate in Chemistry could get is a B.S.—Bearer of Smells.

### Next to Impossible Department:

Fitting electives into your schedule.

Getting started now on a term paper not due until the end of the quarter.

Finding any administrative office open before 8:30 in the morning or 1:30 in the afternoon.

Getting a reserve book for your class the night before a report is due on the book.



and he wanted to take steps to minimize this risk.

So at the 1972 annual meeting of the APA in Dallas, at a symposium titled "Lifestyles of non-patient homosexuals," Fryer was introduced to his colleagues as Dr. H. Anonymous, and appeared on stage wearing a fright wig, a Nixon mask, and an oversized tuxedo. Speaking through a microphone that distorted his voice, he began by saying: "I am a homosexual. I am a psychiatrist." Most who know of his speech know about the pseudonym, the disguise, and the opening lines. But it was the truth of the rest of what he said that changed minds that day and began the herculean task of cultural change.

**F**ryer described how being gay and a psychiatrist caught him in a crossfire. He listed the ways that the "diagnosis" of homosexuality harmed psychiatrists who were gay. Participation in the field required hiding their identity from those in power. They couldn't be seen with friends or their "real homosexual family" for fear of discovery. They had to work, privately and inevitably unsuccessfully, to overcome the affliction imposed upon them by their professional community, constantly wrestling with feelings of failure that straight colleagues did not experience. This made the practice of helping others all the more difficult. Fryer also described the ways that the "diagnosis" of homosexuality harmed homosexuals who were psychiatrists. They had to hide their vocation from gay friends and family lest they be seen as part of the very organization that legitimized their oppression.

He concluded with a call to action for members of the GayPA. He asked that they address, at every turn, derogatory statements colleagues made about "faggots" and "queers" by suggesting that they themselves may have issues to work through. He asked that, when homosexuals come in for treatment, they be assured they were okay, and, instead of treatment, that they be

By 1978, the GayPA gained official representation in the APA as the Association for Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists. Fryer, who at the time of his speech was an adjunct faculty member at Temple University, went on to earn full professorships in psychiatry and in family and community medicine. He allowed Dr. Anonymous to remain anonymous until 1985 when he recounted his experience at the 1972 APA meeting in the AGLP bulletin. He

described his appearance as "something that had to be done... I had been thrown out of a residency because I was gay. I lost a job because I was gay... It had to be said, but I couldn't do it as me... I was not yet full time on the (Temple) faculty. I am now tenured, and tenured by a chairman who knows I'm gay. That's how things have changed."

Fryer was recognized by the AGLP with its Distinguished Service Award in 2002. Following his death from lung disease at age 65 in 2003, the AGLP endowed an award in his name. Its first recipients were Barbara Gittings and Frank Kameny. Fryer's papers, including correspondence with Kameny and Spitzer, as well as the original handwritten text of his 1972 speech, are at the Pennsylvania Historical Society. **II**



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*Clockwise from top left: Fryer was pictured in the 1957 Crimson yearbook in a formal portrait, as a member the Transylvania choir, and with a fellow choir member on a bus trip.*

taught skills for navigating a hostile culture. Finally, he implored his fellow GayPA members to take risks and get involved. Fryer said that he and his homosexual colleagues were taking an "even bigger risk by not living fully our humanity, with all the lessons it has to teach all the other humans around us. This is the greatest loss, our humanity, and that loss leads all those around us to lose that little bit of their humanity as well."

Robert L. Spitzer was at Fryer's speech. Spitzer was head of the task force responsible for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the APA's official catalog of all known mental disorders, in which homosexuality was officially codified as a mental illness. Spitzer and his team effectively removed homosexuality from its listings by 1973.