

LGBTJews in the **Federal City**

Exhibition Galleries (3,100 sq. ft.)
May 16, 2025-December 2025



Be a part of history, as a brand-new exhibition at the Lillian and Albert Small Capital Jewish Museum opens in time to welcome World Pride to Washington, DC, in May 2025. *LGBTJews in the Federal City* dives into history, culture, and activism in DC, from the congregations to the clubs to the Capitol. DC history, Jewish history, and queer history are intertwined and enhance our understanding of the fullness of American life. In this moment, the relevance of this subject is unequivocal. This exhibition presents a “Jewish way” to understand this history.

Meet Jewish community members from different eras and explore a turbulent century of celebration, activism, and change in the capital. The exhibition uses historical and contemporary photography, artifacts, and oral histories to explore this history through Jewish values, fostering ongoing study, conversation, and enhanced cultural understanding.

The Exhibition

The Museum’s first major temporary show is ambitious. This show, along with activities in the Community Action Lab and associated programming for youth and adults is about participation and taking action—important themes throughout the Museum.

Through bright, friendly color choices and photography, the exhibition celebrates both struggle and joy in the experience of gay DC. This is above all an exhibition about continuity, resilience, and human connection. The exhibition provides the opportunity to think about the question: how have Jewish museums and communal organizations been silent about LGBTQ+ stories? The exhibition honors the energy of inquiry, comfort with a bit of mystery, and a recognition of the issues of invisibility and erasure.



Synagogue records will remind visitors that even when synagogues seemed silent on various issues or failed to provide safe spaces for LGBTQ+ members, their Boards and staff were speaking about these issues behind the scenes. The Museum will delve into those files and tell these stories out loud for the first time, as well as document changes in congregations over time, as some moved through a trajectory from tolerance to welcoming LGBTQ+ members.

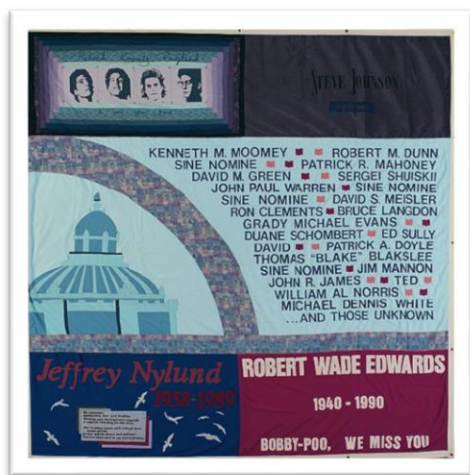
Significant strides have been made in LGBTQ+ political and social equality in 21st century Jewish community life. Artifacts and photographs illuminate the creation and growth of lay-led and institutional social groups. For example, the exhibit shines a spotlight on GLOE (Gay and Lesbian Outreach and Engagement), the first full-time LGBTQ+ engagement program at a Jewish Community Center. NJB+ (formerly Nice Jewish Boys), Nice Jewish Girls, and the Captial Qvellers are lay-led, self-funded Jewish social groups for LGBTQ+ young professionals across Greater Washington. Eshel offers support and guidance to Orthodox parents of LGBTQ+ children. These organizations help introduce DC's thriving LGBTQ Jewish community today.

Washington, DC is not only home to Congress but also the White House, the Supreme Court, the National Institutes of Health, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and St. Elizabeths, the federal mental health hospital (from the 1850s-1980s). What happens in the federal city affects the lives of all Americans. The exhibition covers legislative milestones and protests at centers of power.



Jewish Washingtonians have transformed national policy (for better and

for worse), from Frank Kameny (1925-2011) protesting anti-gay discrimination outside the White House to Benjamin Karpman (1886-1962) forcibly incarcerating gay men as mental health patients at St. Elizabeths. DC is a locus for the issues of gay life to be front and center on a national stage: the vigil for gay victims of the Holocaust at the opening events for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (1993), and the AIDS Quilt, first displayed on the Mall in 1987. A section of the quilt will be on display for the exhibition.



Oral Histories

The Museum is collaborating with the Rainbow History Project to conduct several dozen oral histories with LGBTQ+ Jewish Washingtonians. In the galleries, visitors have the chance to listen to people tell their own stories in the oral history area. Personal stories will also be spread throughout the galleries. These important oral histories will be available to researchers beyond the exhibition.

Bet Mishpachah Collection



As a research windfall for the exhibition, the Museum recently acquired the archives of Bet Mishpachah, the first LGBTQ-friendly congregation in DC. The congregation was founded in 1975 in Washington, DC, one of only a handful of such synagogues in the entire country at that time. DC's large federal workforce was a base for membership.

Founders of Bet Mishpachah remember feeling alienated by the established Jewish congregations in DC. The congregation was not welcomed into the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), an important umbrella organization, for almost a decade after its founding. The

exhibition will explore both acceptance and rejection of LGBTQ+ Jewish people from the larger Jewish community as well as leadership by out and proud individuals in Jewish communal life.

What makes the exhibition *Jewish*?

With an in-depth look at prayer and other liturgy, the exhibition dives into Jewish practice. Examination of gendered language and non-binary liturgical Hebrew in worship encourage visitors to think about their own reactions to the tensions between traditional faith and radical change.

Visitors look at the way that prayers have been rewritten to say different things about humanity, judgement, God, and about other Jewish themes. The exhibition encourages reflection on what these changes mean and how they can be internalized, accepted, or questioned, individually and collectively.



Overall, the exhibit design and presentation embrace several Jewish values. The first is the value of tikkun olam, which will figure into the discussion of participation in social justice movements such as those to open the military and the federal civil service to gay and lesbian soldiers, scientists, and other positions. During the height of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, the Jewish value of bikur cholim, visiting the sick, and pikuach nefesh, the preservation of life, were often invoked to remind the Jewish community to care and to be responsible for those in need. Reiterating these values in a larger historical context is important because they address the elephant in the sickroom and another key Jewish value, teshuvah: that many Jewish community members remained silent and unhelpful, reluctant to be reminded of their own responsibility and must now face up to where it has fallen short in its promise to care for all members.

Exhibition Goals



This exhibition throws open the doors of the Capital Jewish Museum and makes clear that the Museum welcomes stories that have not previously been told in such spaces. Planners estimate that 20,000 visitors will come to see the exhibition during its run at the Capital Jewish Museum.

“Ask Yourself” prompts throughout the galleries are one way that visitors will understand that they have a role to play as the exhibition unfolds. In this way, visitors become part of the story and can share some reflections with the Museum at the end of the exhibition.

This landmark exhibition will continue well beyond the galleries. Periodic facilitated programs in the Community Action Lab enhance opportunities for discussion. Adult and youth programs focus on expanding on stories from the exhibit, discussing timely topics and celebrating queer narratives and communities. Programs will range from panel conversations to hands-on maker programs and festive gatherings. Partnerships with other local

organizations specializing in serving the LGBTQ+ community will increase outreach and deeply engage audiences.

For More Information: Please contact Malki Karkowsky, mkarkowsky@capitaljewishmuseum.org, 301.325.8025

Image Captions:

Page 1- “Hire a Lesbian Rabbi” Photograph by Lloyd Wolf, gift of the photographer. Capital Jewish Museum Collection.

Page 2- Bet Mishpachah Banner, Fabric banner created by members of Bet Mishpachah in the 1980s. The banner was used for Pride and other communal events across Washington. Gift of Bet Mishpachah, Capital Jewish Museum Collection.

Page 3- Assorted buttons, Capital Jewish Museum Collection

Page 4- Rendering of LGBTJews in the Federal City by The Design Minds, 2024.

“Security Risks” protest sign made by Frank Kameny, Smithsonian Collection.

Page 5- NAMES Project AIDS Quilt featuring members of Library of Congress staff.

Page 6- Sash, Mr. Nice Jewish Boys pageant, 2019. Gift of Larry Komrower, Capital Jewish Museum Collection.