

Remembering loved ones

Compassionate gay rights activist, secularist and Dietrich devotee

Terry Sanderson, 75

It wasn't until Terry Sanderson's parents read in a local newspaper of their son's campaigning for a council function room for single-sex dances that they realised he was gay. It was the late 1970s in Maltby, a mining town in South Yorkshire, and although Terry's parents were supportive, his sexuality "wasn't talked about", he said.

"I hated the contempt and cruelty that was shown to anyone 'found out' to be gay and I became determined to do my bit to change things," he wrote at the start of a courageous lifelong campaign to change the public perception of homosexuality.

One of his first moves in the wake of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 was to set up in 1974 a mail-order publishing business, *Essentially Gay*, from his bedroom, importing literature and self-help guides from the US. Although of innocent content, the books were frequently impounded at



Terry Sanderson wrote *Mediawatch*

Customs and Excise. In 1984 books worth £1,600 were seized. It led Terry to close the business down.

A year earlier he had written a piece for *Gay Times* about the media's negative coverage of gay people particularly during the height of the HIV/Aids pandemic, and was asked to

turn it into a monthly column. Called *Mediawatch*, he compiled it for 25 years, reading every newspaper every day and steadfastly complaining to — and running fierce battles with — the media regulators.

At the same time Terry was working alongside the agony aunt Claire Rayner on her column in *Woman's Own*, and they became friends. When in 1986 he wrote *How to be a Happy Homosexual*, Rayner wrote the foreword, describing it as "jam-packed with commonsense advice ... should leave its readers feeling more relaxed about themselves and their lives".

The book was originally commissioned by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, but Terry ended up publishing it himself under The Other Way Press.

He went on to write other self-help books, including *A Stranger in the Family: How to Cope if Your Child is Gay*, but *Happy Homosexual* remained his bestselling title. It was published in other languages and ran to several editions and there was barely a

month when he wasn't thanked by readers for helping to transform their lives.

Terry Sanderson was born in 1946, the youngest of three boys, to Fred, a coal miner for 50 years, and Margaret (née Goodgrove). It was a childhood beset by money worries — Terry recalled the humiliation when one of his shoes fell apart during a school play — but family life was happy.

He left Maltby Secondary Modern at 15 and, tapping into his instinct for helping others, became a social worker. Working with adults with learning difficulties, he started in the 1970s at the Beechcroft unit at Rotherham hospital, moved in the mid-1980s to Friern Hospital, north London, and finally to Ealing, west London. He retired at 57 in 2004.

In 1981 he met Keith Porteous Wood, a finance director and they entered a civil partnership in 2006. Keith was also the executive director of the National Secular Society, and Terry, already a member, became more actively involved in it, founding a weekly newsletter, *NSS Newslines*.

His experiences in gay activism had convinced him that much opposition to homosexuality was based on religious doctrine and his instinct was to try to limit the ability of religious organisations to impose their beliefs on others. From 2006 to 2017 he was NSS president, and oversaw a shift in the organisation's focus from atheism to secularism.

In 2008 the NSS played a role in the abolition of the blasphemy laws in England and Wales, and in 2010 Terry helped to organise a 20,000-strong protest against Pope Benedict's state visit, a march that stretched from Hyde Park Corner to Piccadilly Circus in London.

Away from campaigning, Terry was a devotee of Marlene Dietrich and collected memorabilia. He loved the films of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s and each year put on a benefit screening at The Cinema Museum in Kennington. Humorous, courageous and considerate to the end, Terry signed off his last entry on Facebook with: "Goodbye — and try to be kind to each other."