



James K. Dressel - MI State Representative (1979-1984) (LGBT Mentor) - Rep. James K. Dressel (R-Holland) was a third-term Ottawa County Republican when I transferred as a junior from **Adrian College** to **Michigan State University** in January 1983. Rep. Dressel caught my attention later that year when, on October 6, 1983, he introduced HB 5000 – a bill to amend the state’s **Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act (ELCRA)** to include sexual orientation as a basic civil right. Rep. Dressel’s move was considered to be “a stunning and electrifying step that galvanized the entire state.” Considering district demographics and politics, Rep. Dressel would have well anticipated the consequences of his introducing the bill. The bravery and courage of Rep. Dressel’s actions made him an instant mentor and role model to me.

Mr. Dressel was an Air Force veteran, a decorated Vietnam War veteran, and served in the Air National Guard when he was elected in 1978 to the House. He was one of a trio of western Michigan Republicans elected that year who had an aura about them that they would be top leaders (the others being Paul Henry and Paul Hillegonds). Mr. Dressel has been described as a practical conservative focused on realistic solutions that encompassed his points of view, who was liked by all sides for his open and direct, but still easy-going manner. Barely two weeks before he turned 40, Mr. Dressel introduced HB 5000 and the world of Lansing politics was turned around.

Curiously, beyond the controversy it stirred, one question many House members asked Mr. Dressel was: “Why now?” Term limits had changed the entire context of the House, so the question today seems odd. But in the 1980’s a member had to serve four terms to be eligible for a pension. Everyone knew the move could cost Mr. Dressel his seat, and he was in just his third term. Waiting one more term would have assured him a pension at least. But he said it was the right thing to do.

Mr. Dressel, who was a bachelor, also refused to say if he was gay or not. Time-after-time in being asked the question, he refused to confirm or deny to the media whether he was gay himself, citing the principle he was trying to demonstrate: that it shouldn't matter.

The high point came on December 1, 1983, when the House Judiciary Committee reported the bill to the full House on an 8-5 party line vote. Now U.S. Rep. Tim Walberg (R-Tipton), who served on the committee, said in a debate the gay “lifestyle is immoral, condemned by God Himself.” Despite being rejected by his GOP colleagues, Mr. Dressel remained hopeful that as many as one-third the GOP caucus would vote for the bill.

A week later, the bill was referred back to committee. Then chair Rep. Perry Bullard (D-Ann Arbor) said the House was focusing on reapportionment and the income tax. He promised that the committee would come back to HB 5000 in 1984, but it never did.

Twice easily re-elected, Mr. Dressel was crushed in his 1984 Republican primary bid for re-election. He was sanguine, telling a reporter he knew it would happen, but that he was right to do what he had done.

After departing from the Michigan legislature, Mr. Dressel went on later to become President of the **Michigan Organization for Human Rights (MOHR)** - Michigan's statewide lesbian, gay,

bisexual and transgender civil rights organization of the time. Once at MOHR, Mr. Dressel turned his energies towards LGBT civil rights efforts, and he worked tirelessly in the time he had left to make a difference. It was quite remarkable to me that I would later become friends with my mentor.

In the summer of 1991, while off on extended medical leave from work at a **Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC)** correctional facility, I was contacted by a different facility and offered a promotion. *What? A promotion when I couldn't even begin to work for another three months? What an honor!* Following shoulder surgery in September 1991 and unable to drive, Mr. Dressel was finally successful in snagging me to become involved in MOHR. Also neighbors, Mr. Dressel would pick me up, drive us to the MOHR office where we would spend long days, and drive me back home. We went on to work very closely together, and I became Secretary of the MOHR Board a short while thereafter.

Upon returning to work at a new correctional facility in December 1991, I realized right away that I had been unexpectedly outed before I had even arrived. I had never particularly hid nor discussed my sexual orientation at work. What followed was a lengthy period of workplace harassment, which was simultaneously both a horrible and liberating experience. A dangerous place under any circumstance, working inside of a correctional facility was especially frightening when I had no idea whom I could trust or on whom I could depend for support or backup. It is no overstatement to say that I dreaded going to work every day. The truth, however, was that there were absolutely no workplace protections for employees from discrimination based upon sexual orientation at that time. *(Such protection would not come for State of Michigan Civil Servants until December 23, 2003, when **EXECUTIVE DIRECTIVE No. 2003-24** was signed by then-Governor Jennifer Granholm.)* It was quite ironic that all of this was occurring at the very same time that Mr. Dressel and I were working our hardest as LGBT civil rights advocates.

In February 1992, I was unexpectedly and suddenly transferred up north to work at a new correctional facility opening in Manistee. Mr. Dressel had begun falling quite ill by that time, and I had no choice about the transfer. Staying as closely in touch as possible, and visiting as often as I could, I was among a small group of people who saw Mr. Dressel during his last weeks. Mr. Dressel passed away a short while later on March 27, 1992.

While Mr. Dressel's introduction of HB 5000 made our state's efforts for an inclusive ELCRA bipartisan thirty-one years ago (1983-2014), Michigan still lacks these protections for LGBT persons today. I want to always acknowledge the influence this very special person had on me. As a state representative, Rep. Dressel took a stand for what was right, resolutely accepted the consequences, and went on to work even harder at advancing change. He inspired the path and direction of at least one young college junior for the rest of his life.

The foregoing includes excerpts from *Remembering A Pioneering Moment In Gay Rights In The Legislature*, written by John Lindstrom and published in Gongwer on March, 7 2013.