

MsQueer

Del Martin - A Pioneer in Lesbian Rights Dies at 87

August 29, 2008

Del Martin died Wednesday.

Del Martin, life partner of Phyllis Lyon for 55 years, co-wrote the book *Lesbian/Woman* in 1972. For me, at age 22, this book was the proverbial life preserver tossed to me in turbulent seas. Although I knew I was a Lesbian much earlier in my life, being *comfortable* with that fact was another story.

When I found *Lesbian/Woman* and began reading it, I laughed, I cried, but most importantly, I gained a new perspective of myself as a Lesbian: I was OKAY! I was not an abomination, nor crazy, nor perverted. I simply loved women.

I devoured that book from cover to cover. I can still see that bright purple paperback cover, dog-eared from repeated use, that I wrapped in a brown grocery bag cover to hide from my parents. Years later, I managed to acquire a special 25th anniversary hardbound edition. It's something I treasure.

Del Martin's "outness" gave me courage. She inspired me with compassion and intellect. By the example of her own very public relationship with her Lesbian partner, Phyllis Lyon, she inspired us all to know that we did indeed deserve all the happiness, fulfillment, and rewards of a healthy relationship, *just like anybody else!*

She got to marry her beloved two months ago courtesy of California's new Law approving gay marriage.

As a pillar of Lesbian activism, she will be sorely missed. My heart goes out to Phyllis and all of Del's close friends and family.

We celebrate her accomplishments in her time with us. We celebrate the freedoms we enjoy today because of staunch Lesbian and Gay Rights advocates such as herself.

In Loving Memory,

MsQueer

NEWS AND TRIBUTES FOLLOW:

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force mourns death of pioneering community hero Del Martin

WASHINGTON — The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force mourns the death of Del Martin, 87, who died today in San Francisco, Calif. Martin married Phyllis Lyon, her partner of 55 years, on June 16, 2008. In 1955, the couple joined six other lesbians in founding the Daughters of Bilitis in

San Francisco, the first lesbian rights organization in the nation. In 1997 and 2004, the Task Force honored Martin and Lyon for their decades of community service.

**Statement by Rea Carey, Executive Director
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**

“The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community has suffered a devastating loss today with the passing of Del Martin, who was one of our movement’s most courageous and extraordinary figures. We extend our deepest sympathies to Del’s family and, especially, to her life partner and, most recently, legally wedded spouse, Phyllis Lyon.

“Del Martin, with Phyllis Lyon always at her side in a remarkable relationship that spanned more than five decades, dreamed a world in which sexual orientation and gender identity and expression would be accorded full dignity and respect. They spoke the unspeakable, wrote the unthinkable, and lived their lives as few before them ever had: open and proud lesbians in 1950s America.

“Del and Phyllis were inspiration in action, living openly and proudly as a loving couple long before many others felt safe to stand with them. Their love for each other gave them strength and sustained them; that same love, courage and grace have left an indelible mark on our movement, and in each of our hearts.

“Del and Phyllis have personally been an inspiration to me since I came out when I was 16 years old. In my office, a picture of the two of them looks over me as I work to carry on their work and their vision for living our lives in truth. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force will honor Del’s life by using our uncompromising voice and fighting for justice and equality — a voice made louder and stronger by her 87 years of life. Thank you, Del, for showing so many of us the way.”

More about Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon

Founding the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon launched the world’s first organization dedicated to improving the lives of lesbians. When they published *The Ladder* in 1956, the first magazine by, for and about lesbians, the couple created the means for lesbians to know themselves and each other and to break out of the stultifying isolation that marked many lesbian lives, inviting thousands of women to join a nascent but growing lesbian community.

Throughout their decades of activism, Martin and Lyon made the vital connections among communities and movements, engaging in social justice advocacy projects that included anti-war, civil rights, anti-poverty, HIV/AIDS, and women’s health and empowerment. In 1964, they participated in the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, the first organizing in this country to forge a wider space and a welcoming place for LGBT people in faith communities.

In 1972, the couple published their groundbreaking book, *Lesbian/Woman*, named by *Publisher’s Weekly* in 1992 as one of the 20 most influential women’s books of the past 20 years. *Lesbian/Woman* spoke to a new and hungry generation of women, eager to answer their clarion call to sexual liberation and freedom. Martin was an early leader in the battered women’s movement, again breaking new ground with the publication of *Battered Wives* in 1976, a book that inspired grassroots organizing to end domestic violence and the establishment of shelters for battered women.

Lyon-Martin Health Services, founded in 1979 in San Francisco and named in honor of Martin and Lyon, is the only free-standing community clinic in California with a specific emphasis on lesbian/bisexual women and transgender health care, delivering quality health care services regardless of ability to pay.

In 1995, they were appointed to the White House Conference on Aging; they continued to advocate on behalf of older lesbians through Old Lesbians Organizing for Change.

The valuable lives and good works of Martin and Lyon are the subject of the 2003 award-winning documentary, *No Secrets Anymore: The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon*, by filmmaker Joan E. Biren.

Martin and Lyon made history again, becoming the first same-sex couple to be married in the state of California on June 16, 2008.

In 1997, at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's 10th annual Creating Change Conference in San Diego, Calif., Martin and Lyon received the Community Service Award for their organizing work and political involvement. At the 2004 conference in St. Louis, Mo., they were honored with the Creating Change Award, which read, "You spoke the unspeakable, you wrote the unthinkable. You lived openly and proudly as a loving couple long before a movement would stand with you."