



## Del Martin, Lesbian Pioneer, Dies at 87

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Del Martin, whose lesbian activism with her spouse Phyllis Lyon extended from co-founding the nation's first lesbian group and newsletter in the 1950s to their successful fight to marry in California this year, died August 27 after an extended period of declining health, at the University of California at San Francisco Hospice. She was 87.

"Ever since I met Del 55 years ago, I could never imagine a day would come when she wouldn't be by my side," said Lyon in a statement. "I am so lucky to have known her, loved her, and been her partner in all things.

"I also never imagined there would be a day that we would actually be able to get married," Lyon added. "I am devastated, but I take some solace in knowing we were able to enjoy the ultimate rite of love and commitment before she passed."

Martin and Lyon met in Seattle in 1950, became life partners in 1952, and moved to San Francisco together in 1953 where they remained. They founded the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) in 1955, the first group for lesbians in the United States. They also founded The Ladder, the first newsletter for lesbians.

They later played key roles in the Council of Religion and Homosexuality, a group formed to gain acceptance for gays and lesbians from churches and synagogues. They also worked to decriminalize sodomy and pass legislation banning discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Martin and Lyon joined the National Organization for Women in 1967 and Martin was the first out lesbian elected to the group's board. They succeeded in getting NOW to pass a resolution affirming lesbian concerns as feminist issues in 1971.

They also became active in San Francisco's Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club in 1972. They joined Old Lesbian Organizing for Change in 1989. By 1995, their pioneering activism was so mainstream that they were appointed to serve as delegates to the White House Conference on Aging.

They were also pioneers in the movement for same-sex marriage. When San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom decided the city had authority to issue marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples in 2004, Martin and Lyon were the first to marry on February 12. That license was voided by the California Supreme Court in August of that year, but they continued the fight.

When the California high court ruled earlier this year that it was a violation of the state Constitution to deny same-sex couples the right to marry, Martin and Lyon were once again the first to wed on June 16, 2008 in a ceremony performed by Newsom - the only same-sex couple married that day.

Newsom announced Martin's death to a caucus of LGBT delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Denver within hours of her passing.

"They defined, from my perspective, what marriage was supposed to be about," Newsom said of

the couple, then added about their second wedding, this June, "Del Martin came to her wedding in a wheelchair... We had a gift of a lifetime - to allow them both to say I do, yet again."

In 1979, the Lyon-Martin Health Service, a San Francisco clinic for lesbians, was named in their honor. It went on to provide healthcare to low-income women with HIV starting in 1993. A documentary about their lives, "The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon," was made in 2003 and shown on Sundance and PBS. That same year, they were featured in the documentary "Last Call at Maud's."

Together, Martin and Lyon wrote "Lesbian/Woman" (1972) and "Lesbian Love and Liberation" (1973). Martin in 1979 authored "Battered Wives" about how domestic violence is caused by misogyny.

Born Dorothy Taliaferro on May 5, 1921 in San Francisco, Del Martin was educated at the University of California at Berkeley and San Francisco State College where she studied journalism, according to Wikipedia. She was married to James Martin for four years and did not change her name after they divorced.

In addition to her spouse Phyllis Lyon, Martin is survived by a daughter, Kendra Mon, and two grandchildren and, according to a release from the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), "a vast, loving, and grateful lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender family."

Joyce Hunter, whose lesbian activism in New York goes back to 1972, said, "They were my heroes and they were also wonderful people when I met them" through her own partner of 26 years, Jan Baer of San Francisco. "Their heart and soul was in the movement. There was no money in it then. I hope that younger lesbians and gays know about them and how they stand on their shoulders."

**Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said, "They spoke the unspeakable, wrote the unthinkable, and lived their lives as few before them ever had - open and proud lesbians in 1950s America." Carey keeps a picture of the women on her desk for inspiration.**

"For all of Del's life, she was an activist and organizer," said Kate Kendall, executive director of NCLR, which won the California marriage case, "before we knew what those terms meant. Her last act of public service was her most personal - marrying the love of her life after 55 years. In the wake of losing her, we recognize with heightened clarity the most poignant and responsible way to honor their legacy is to preserve the right of marriage for same-sex couples," which could be undone by a state constitutional amendment that is on the ballot in California in November.

Contributions in Del Martin's name are requested to be made to NCLR's No on 8 PAC at [nclrights.org/NoOn8](http://nclrights.org/NoOn8).

A memorial service in San Francisco will take place within the next several weeks.