



NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS

## **Dorothy L. (Del) Martin (May 5, 1921 – August 27, 2008)**

Died on Wednesday, August 27, 2008 at UCSF Hospice, San Francisco, California. Survived by spouse Phyllis Lyon, daughter Kendra Mon, son-in-law Eugene Lane, granddaughter Lorraine Mon, grandson Kevin Mon, sister-in-law Patricia Lyon and a vast, loving and grateful lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender family.

An eloquent organizer for civil rights, civil liberties, and human dignity, Del Martin created and helped shape the modern lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and feminist movements. She was a woman of extraordinary courage, persistence, intelligence, humor, and fundamental decency, who refused to be silenced by fear and never stopped fighting for equality. Her last public political act, on June 16, 2008, was to marry Phyllis Lyon, her partner of 55 years. They were the first couple to wed in San Francisco after the California Supreme Court recognized that marriage for same-sex couples is a fundamental right in a case brought by plaintiffs including Martin and Lyon.

Born in San Francisco on May 5, 1921, Dorothy L. Taliaferro, or Del as she would come to be known, was salutatorian of the first graduating class of George Washington High School and went on to study journalism at the University of California at Berkeley. At 19, after transferring to San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University), she married James Martin and two years later gave birth to their daughter Kendra. The marriage ended in divorce.

Del Martin met the love of her life, Phyllis Lyon, in Seattle in 1950 when they worked for the same publication company. They became lovers in 1952 and formalized their partnership on Valentine's Day in 1953 when they moved in together in San Francisco. In 1955, they bought the small home that has been theirs ever since.

In what would prove to be an act that would change history, Martin, Lyon, and six other lesbians co-founded the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) in San Francisco in 1955. DOB, which was named after an obscure book of lesbian love poetry, initially was organized to provide secret mutual support and social activities. It became the first public and political lesbian rights organization in the United States, laying a foundation for the women's and lesbian and gay liberation movements that flowered in the early 1970s and continue today.

Del Martin used her writing and speaking talents to challenge misconceptions about gender and sexuality. "We were fighting the church, the couch, and the courts," she often remembered years later, naming the array of social and cultural forces early activists confronted when homosexuals were treated as immoral, mentally ill, and illegal. As the first President of DOB, she penned stirring calls to arms. "Nothing was ever accomplished by hiding in a dark corner. Why not discard the hermitage for the heritage that awaits any red-blooded American woman who dares to claim it?" She was the second editor (after Phyllis Lyon) of DOB's groundbreaking monthly magazine, *The Ladder*, from 1960 to 1962 and ushered in a new decade of political engagement and media visibility for the nascent gay rights movement. *The Ladder* grew from a mimeographed newsletter in 1956 to an internationally recognized magazine with thousands of subscribers by 1970, and thousands more readers who copied its contents or circulated it among friends and coworkers. Martin's many contributions to *The Ladder* ranged from short stories to editorials to missives: one of the most famous is "If That's All There Is," a searing condemnation of sexism in the gay rights movement written in 1970. Due to Martin's influence, *The Ladder* provided one of the few media outlets confronting misogyny in the decade before the rebirth of women's liberation.

In 1964, Del Martin was part of a group that founded the Council on Religion and the Homosexual in order to lobby city lawmakers more effectively to reduce police harassment and modify the sex laws that criminalized homosexual behavior. In later years, Martin was also a founding member of the Lesbian Mother's Union, the San Francisco Women's Centers, and the Bay Area Women's Coalition, among other organizations.

As an early member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), Del Martin worked to counter homophobia within the women's movement – fear of the so-called "lavender menace." She and Lyon were

the first lesbians to insist on joining with a “couples’ membership rate” and Martin was the first out lesbian on NOW’s Board of Directors. Their efforts helped to insure the inclusion of lesbian rights on NOW’s agenda in the early 1970’s.

*Lesbian/Woman*, the book they co-authored in 1972, is one of Martin and Lyon’s landmark accomplishments. The book described lesbian lives in a positive, knowledgeable way almost unknown at the time. In 1992, *Publishers Weekly* chose it as one of the 20 most influential women’s books of the last 20 years.

For many years, Del Martin was a leader in the campaign to persuade the American Psychiatric Association to declare that homosexuality was not a mental illness. This goal was finally achieved in 1973.

Del Martin’s publication of *Battered Wives* in 1976 was a major catalyst for the movement against domestic violence. Martin became a nationally known advocate for battered women, and was a co-founder of the Coalition for Justice for Battered Women (1975), La Casa de las Madres (a shelter for battered women) founded in 1976, and the California Coalition against Domestic Violence (1977). She lectured at colleges and universities around the country. Martin received her doctorate from the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in 1987.

Martin’s keen political instincts and interests extended her influence into the mainstream Democratic Party. She and Lyon were co-founders, in 1972, of the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club, the first gay political club in the United States. Martin was appointed Chair of the San Francisco Commission on the Status of Women in 1976 and served on the committee until 1979. She worked as a member of many other councils and boards including the San Francisco Commission on the Status of Women. Throughout the years, many politicians recognized their stature as community leaders and sought advice and endorsement from Martin and Lyon.

It is difficult to separate Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon and write about only one of them. Their lives and their work have intertwined and their enduring dedication to social justice has been recognized many times. In 1979, local health care providers established a clinic to give lesbians in the San Francisco Bay area access to nonjudgmental, affordable health care and named it Lyon-Martin Health Services in their honor. In 1990, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Northern California awarded the couple with its highest honor, the Earl Warren Civil Liberties Award. In 1995, Senator Dianne Feinstein named Martin, and Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi named Lyon, as delegates to the White House Conference on Aging, where they made headlines by using their moment at the podium to remind the 125,000 attendees that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people grow old, too, and must be included explicitly in aging policies. The Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality gave Martin and Lyon their Outstanding Public Service Award in 1996. They are among the most beloved figures in the LGBT community and have served as Grand Marshals at Pride marches across the nation and been honored by every major LGBT organization in the country.

Del Martin identified her own legacy in 1984 when she said that her most important contribution was “being able to help make changes in the way lesbians and gay men view themselves and how the larger society views lesbians and gay men.” She had the courage to be true to herself when the world offered only condemnation for lesbians. Martin showed all of us how to have what she called “self-acceptance and a good sense of my own self-worth.” Del Martin never backed down from her insistence on full equality for all people and, even at 87 years old, she kept moving all of us closer to her ideal.

Gifts in lieu of flowers can be made to honor Del’s life and commitment and to defeat the California marriage ban through NCLR’s No On 8 PAC at [www.nclrights.org/NoOn8](http://www.nclrights.org/NoOn8).

A public memorial and tribute celebrating the life of Del Martin will be planned in the next several weeks.