

Cleo Glenn (Bonner) (Dates Unknown)

Phyllis Lyon
Del Martin



Some of the activists in the gay and lesbian movement seem to come from nowhere to take a dominating role and then, after a period of intense activity, disappear. Somehow, they manage to keep much of their private lives from their activist colleagues, and it is only later that we find out they dropped out because they were ill or had died. Some made such a strong impression and were so important that they deserve a brief mention. Cleo Glenn (Bonner) was such a person.

Cleo was a tall, attractive African-American woman with an aristocratic and assured manner. She was in a conflicted interracial relationship, not so much about racism as about her son. Her lover was adamantly opposed to having children cross the threshold of their home. Cleo solved the problem by renting a duplex. That way she could share one unit with her lover and the other with her son. Anyone who could juggle such a home life and hold down a job at Pacific Bell had to be strong and determined.

We first met Cleo in 1960 at a brunch held by a closet group of lesbians whom we were attempting to recruit to the Daughters of Bilitis. Cleo was the only one who responded. She assumed the surname Glenn and took on the job of circulation manager of *The Ladder*, DOB's magazine. She soon became manager (without the title) of DOB's national office, assumed the job of acting national president in November 1963, and in 1964 was elected national president in her own right. In May 1964 she represented DOB at a retreat where lesbians and gay men met with members of the clergy, a meeting which ultimately led to the formation of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual. In June of that same year she delivered the welcoming address at DOB's national convention in New York City.

We had traveled together across country to go to New York and we had registered at a strange hotel in the Village, one recommended by a gay man. We had just entered our room when Cleo phoned us, practically in tears, over the accommodations—unclean paper peeling off the walls, holes in the carpeting—and all three of us marched down to the desk asking if we could get something better at the same price, as the three of us were paying (money was a problem) for our separate rooms. We wound up in the building's penthouse, which included a sitting room and two bedrooms.

The convention went off without a hitch, despite efforts of the FBI to catch up with us as a result of a tip that lesbians were going to meet at the New Yorker Hotel. That plan had fallen through; instead, we met in the Barbizon-Plaza across from Central Park, and *The New York Times*, which had previously refused to take any advertisements for books with "homosexual" in their titles, deigned to cover the public forum. Despite the publicity, the FBI never did find us—or at least they never publicly accosted us.

Cleo continued as president of DOB, but at the 1966 convention in San Francisco, she was nowhere to be seen at the public forum. Although she did not say so, it apparently was one thing to be "out" in New York and another to be "out" in one's home state, only emphasizing the courage it took for many DOB members to be open about their homosexuality. When she stepped down as president, she dropped out of her activist role and we lost contact. She must have been ill, for the next time we heard about her was in a call from her lover who announced that Cleo had died of cancer. She is symbolic of the many lesbians who demonstrated the courage to speak out and be themselves, but she is also emblematic of the difficulties that such action entailed not only in the community at large but in segments of the lesbian community itself.