

Pat Walker (1938-1999)

Del Martin
with assistance from Leslie Warren



Pat Walker was nicknamed Dubby because she was short, but she was ever long on memory. Pat could literally see in the dark and saved on her electric bill by cooking, doing dishes, sewing, and cleaning house in the dark. Most of us had two strikes against us as lesbians and as women. She was discriminated against on four counts—because she was also blind and an African American. None of this stopped her from being an activist and making the world better for women, lesbians, African Americans, and the blind.

She made up for her inability to see by developing her memory and her senses of hearing, touch, smell, and taste. She could tell who was approaching by their steps or voice. She didn't want a Seeing Eye dog. "They get all the credit," she quipped. She spent a year at the Independent Living Center learning how to survive, how to use a cane, and how to use her other senses to "see" her way on downtown traffic-filled streets. Her independence was very important to her.

Pat took over a telephone wake-up call service to support herself. Later she ran a snack bar in a Berkeley public office building. If people tried to rob her, she tackled them. She was known as a tough little lady who shouldn't be messed with.

Pat joined the Daughters of Bilitis in the early 1960s. With her humor, her sensitivity and warmth, her caring and patience with people, and her funny stories, she became very popular. Pat was elected president of the San Francisco chapter and proved to be a strong leader who had no trouble delegating authority. Besides her work with DOB Pat donated some time answering the night help line run by San Francisco's Suicide Prevention Agency.

In 1964 she was one of the representatives of DOB at a retreat in Mill Valley arranged by Reverend Ted McIlvenna of the Glide Foundation. He brought together fifteen lesbian and gay leaders and fifteen clergymen for a consultation on "The Church and the Homosexual." Living together for several days and breaking down stereotypes brought results. Out of that meeting came the establishment of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual in San Francisco, a combination that was to have an indelible impact on society that continues today.

Pat loved to read (by Braille) and listen to music. She was a devoted fan of Joan Baez and was thrilled when she got to meet her in person at a concert. In a poem published in *The Ladder* in July 1962, Dubby wrote:

Burning, blistering sand,
Desolate desert all around me.
I seek the sanctum of an oasis
Where in the cool of sheltering shade
By a pool of life-giving water I may be revived once more.

In her later years, Pat Walker found her beloved "sanctum" in the desert near Lake Elsinore. An aunt had left Pat her home in Los Angeles. Pat sold this property and used the money to purchase five acres in the desert. Although she usually lived alone, she was resourceful and gutsy, stubborn, and funny. When friends warned her about rattlesnakes and tarantulas, she retorted, "I could get killed walking across the street in Los Angeles." It did not matter to her either that she had to walk five miles to get groceries. She had a dog and two cockatiels. She could listen to her records. She could play her musical instruments (sax, piano, flute, piccolo, and guitar) as loud and as long as she wanted without interruption.

During her final years, Pat lived her dream. She died surrounded by friends and family, who prompted the hospice volunteer to observe, "You are all so different. She must have been quite a person." That she was, demonstrating that lesbian activists can come in multiple forms and with multiple handicaps and can make major contributions.