

Phyllis Lyon (1924-)

Del Martin



Phyllis Lyon is not afraid of the L-word, whether it be lesbian or liberal—or even lipstick. In fact, L-words best describe her life. “I am a singular Lyon,” she protests when people persist in adding an “s” to her name. She has the largess, pride, and roar of a lion. She is distinguished by her laughter. She loves light and bare windows. She is loquacious, but she also listens. She is loving, loyal, learned, logical. She loves literature and is an avid reader. She is a lover, a leader, a liaison. She lives up to her ideals. She also likes to live it up. Her concerns are limitless, as are her talents. She hopes to win the lottery so she can support all her causes more lavishly.

I met Phyllis Lyon fifty-two years ago on the job in Seattle. She threw a welcoming party for me as a new addition to the staff of a trade publication. That led to a lasting friendship. We found we had much in common. I am a native of San Francisco and California and Phyllis, although born November 10, 1924, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, spent much of her youth in the San Francisco Bay Area and identifies herself as a Californian. We both grew up during the Great Depression and were greatly influenced by President Franklin Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” and by Eleanor Roosevelt’s compassionate advocacy for social changes. I had seen FDR from a street corner when he came to San Francisco to promote what would be the birth of the United Nations in our city. Phyllis one-upped me. As a reporter for a newspaper in Chico, California, she had been assigned to interview Eleanor Roosevelt on one of the train “whistle-stops” nearby. Phyllis was so awed to be in the presence of her idol that she was speechless. Graciously, Mrs. Roosevelt conducted the interview herself. In our childhood we were both exposed to racism—Phyllis by her mother, a Southern belle, who said Negroes were okay in their place, being subservient; my mother,

also from the South, thought Negroes were okay as long as they kept themselves clean, and my stepfather, a veteran of World War I, deplored Krauts.

We also discovered that we had both gone to the University of California at Berkeley, majored in journalism, and worked on *The Daily Californian*. Our experience with the diverse population on campus and as reporters was contrary to the experiences of our parents. It made a very deep impression on both of us. We both became champions against discrimination. Phyllis, who initially had spoken vehemently against allowing Negroes in her dorm, had early on been forced to examine her racist attitudes and she soon found she could not justify them. A person's skin color had nothing to do with a person's worth. She went home and told her folks, "I believe Negroes are just as good as we are." They had a fit. Phyllis also wrote a scathing editorial for the *Daily Cal* about the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

We both like martinis and often spent cocktail hours after work at Seattle's Press Club. Coincidentally, we both had a sister who was six years younger and who had fallen in love with her college professor, and both married a man with the surname Rowe. Neither of us identified with a religious denomination. According to Phyllis, although her father, William Lyon, had been raised as a strict Presbyterian and her mother, Lorena, was the daughter of a Southern Methodist preacher, her parents never went to church. Nor did they require her and her sister, Patricia, to do so. When Phyllis was in high school she went on a skiing trip with a church youth group. A boy in the group invited her to come with him to the church Bible class. Out of curiosity, she accepted. When the class ended, they were asked, "Do you believe Jesus Christ was the son of God?" Phyllis was pressured to say "yes" with the others, but she could not. Although trained not to question adult authority, she could not lie. She had just wanted to learn about the Bible.

While most of her schoolmates observed a weekend Sabbath, Phyllis and her sister Tricia went bicycle or horseback riding. They started the latter as soon as Tricia was old enough to sit on a horse. In Sacramento, with a stable nearby, Phyllis became a proficient equestrian and collected many ribbons for horsemanship and jumping. As a nonbeliever Phyllis thought she had escaped any power that religion had over her life. Wrong!

In 1961 after Illinois adopted the prestigious American Law Institute's Model Penal Code proviso that sexual activity between consenting adults in private should no longer be a concern of the law, it gave hope to those of us in the Daughter of Bilitis, the organization that we had cofounded (as indicated in the biography of Del),¹ that it would happen in California too. We talked to Phillip Burton and John O'Connell, San Francisco's state assemblymen, about the possibility. They said there was no way for this to come

about without the support of the churches. DOB had established a foot in the door when the San Francisco Council of Churches filled our request for a clergyman by sending Episcopalian priest Fordyce Eastburn to speak at our first National Lesbian Convention in 1960. Attempts with other denominations brought the same negative response of "love the sinner, hate the sin" and "celibacy" party lines. The Mormons and Catholic Churches were the worst.

In 1964 when the Reverend Ted McIlvenna, a Methodist minister at Glide Urban Center, invited us to participate in a retreat/consultation between clergy and homosexuals, Phyllis reluctantly agreed to attend. Little did she know that this retreat would be the genesis of a whole new career and partnership that lasted until she retired in 1987. McIlvenna was the founding president of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, the first organization that dared to use the H-word in its title. It was formed in San Francisco as the "test" city, as suggested by the clergy participants at the retreat. The police harassment and arrests at the New Year's 1965 Costume Ball in San Francisco to raise funds for the fledgling organization prompted seven very angry ministers to hold a press conference the next day in protest of the police actions. The international wire services picked up the story and McIlvenna was deluged with mail from around the world. Phyllis volunteered to help him answer the letters and he hired her as a temporary secretary. The two worked together so well that she began to take on more responsibility and was elevated to a permanent position as his administrative assistant.

After the notoriety of the infamous New Year's ball, a couple of gay men appeared on Jim Dunbar's early morning show on KGO-TV. Later, Phyllis, as DOB's public relations director, was invited to appear. She was eager to have the opportunity but not eager enough to cross the picket lines outside the studio by its employees involved in a labor dispute. In past years she had tried to persuade her fellow workers to join the Newspaper Guild. While in Chico she had lost her battle by one vote. In Seattle the issue was getting the women comparable pay. She lost there by a larger majority because married women whose husbands belonged to unions said their families were already covered and they did not want to pay dues twice.

After the dispute at KGO was settled, Phyllis was again invited to appear. I went with her to the studio. One could expect a little stage fright on her part, but the panic we witnessed at the studio over having a "les-bian" on the air surprised us, since they had already interviewed gay men and the roof had not fallen in. But the attitude seemed to be that lesbians were independent of men, even men haters and contrary to America's "mom and apple pie" tradition.

The interview went fairly well. Phyllis wasn't frightening to the radio audience. There were some negative and positive telephone calls from the listening audience. What Phyllis remembers most was when she returned to Glide. The woman at the switchboard exclaimed: "I'm so glad you're back. The switchboard has been overloaded with calls." Most of them were from married and single heterosexual women who were weary of their husbands and boyfriends and wanted to know how and where to meet a lesbian (presumably to have an experimental sexual encounter). Phyllis explained it did not work that way and offered some general information. She quipped later, "If we'd had a lesbian whorehouse then we'd have made a mint."

During the latter half of the 1960s Phyllis was on a roller-coaster ride. McIlvenna, a catalyst for change, came up with idea upon idea and moved rapidly from project to project. Her job was to help implement them. She was Glide's liaison to the homophile community, coordinating activities of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) and in effect acting as the lesbian/gay switchboard. For clergymen who came to the Glide Urban Center for training in how to cope with the changing urban scene, Phyllis was often the first "homo-sexual" they had ever met.

In 1965 the CRH published *A Brief of Injustices*, an indictment of our society in its treatment of homosexuals; then *Churchmen Speak Out on Homosexual Law Reform* in 1967, and *CRH 1964-1968* in the following year. Then the Daughters of Bilitis, Society for Individual Rights, and the Tavern Guild of San Francisco collaborated with CRH to prepare and publish *The Challenge and Progress of Homosexual Law Reform in 1968* and *Homosexuals and Employment* in 1970. CRH also organized a symposium on the "lifestyle" of the homosexual. Thanks to CRH, lesbians and gays assumed the role of experts in training clergy, attorneys, nurses, therapists, teachers, physicians, social workers—anyone who might counsel homosexuals.

McIlvenna, noting how uptight most ministers, other religious professionals, and most helping professionals of whatever persuasion were about the topic of sex, realized it was impossible to deal with homosexuality without first dealing with human sexuality itself. To be a good pastoral counselor one needed first to overcome personal sexual hang-ups. So he, Phyllis, and Laird Sutton, another Methodist minister, began developing multimedia teaching techniques.

Both Phyllis and I were active in politics and, after we came out, we realized the political potential of the lesbian and gay movement. We began to endorse candidates and held our first candidate's night in the sanctuary of Glide Church in 1965, where we endorsed attorney Robert Gonzales, who wanted to be the first Hispanic on the board of supervisors. The campaign tactics we used, however, were unusual. We feared that our public endorsement might not be helpful and we decided to conduct a "water closet" cam-

paign. We displayed Gonzales' posters behind closed doors in the rest rooms of gay bars. Gonzales came in sixth in an election of the top five candidates and at an election postmortem with his supporters Gonzales gave the gay community credit for 20 percent of his vote. We had arrived as a political force.

Phyllis' greatest triumph in DOB was in her role as public relations director. By 1966 the seven homophile organizations in the city had gained enough clout that the San Francisco chapter, host of the DOB Convention, decided the theme should be "San Francisco and Its Homophile Community—A Merging Social Conscience." Although it was a national convention, members chose to use San Francisco once again as the test city, as had been the case with the Council on Religion and the Homosexual. CRH had opened up channels of communication with newspapers, police, armed services, suicide prevention, politicians, ethnic minority groups, civil rights organizations, and the chamber of commerce. CRH board members had appeared on radio and television programs, both locally and nationally.

In the course of her preparation for the meeting, Phyllis noted that DOB had not been included in the list of conventions the San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau had given to the newspapers and other media. As public relations director she sent a letter to the Bureau charging "discrimination" and demanding "a public statement of apology for this oversight." She also sent copies to the two daily newspapers and the major television and radio networks. She got her wish—and then some.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* came out with a four-column story and a big bold headline, "S.F. Greets Daughters." The on-the-hour news summaries broadcast on radio stations KEWB and KSFO featured DOB. Phyllis was interviewed by KEWB about the convention and on other radio and television stations. On August 20, the day the convention opened, the Convention Bureau sent two young women to help with registration. A bevy of reporters were in the sound booth of the hotel taping speakers and sessions.

The morning panel was devoted to "The Homophile Community and Civic Organizations—How They Relate" and the afternoon explored "The Homophile Community and Governmental Agencies—Can They Relate?" Mayor John Shelley sent a message of welcome and best wishes for a successful meeting, and designated the director of the San Francisco Health Department as his official representative. Also in attendance were representatives of the district attorney's office, the police department, the public defender's office, Center for Special Problems, San Francisco Council of Churches, Suicide Prevention, the Council of Religion and the Homosexual, and the Mexican-American political association. Municipal Judge Joseph Kennedy was the luncheon speaker and part of his speech was broadcast. Dr. Evelyn Hooker, psychologist and researcher at UCLA, moderated a

roundtable discussion featuring all speakers to close the afternoon session. Dorothy von Beroldingen, a member of the San Francisco board of supervisors, was the banquet speaker.

Following the convention Phyllis was interviewed on *Spectrum 74*, a CBS radio call-in show. She also spoke at the Sirtoma Breakfast Club and appeared on various radio programs. Even Herb Caen, legendary *Chronicle* columnist, ran a blurb about the Daughters featuring the banquet where DOB gave out SOB awards (Sons of Bilitis) to men who had helped the lesbian cause.

Critics of Daughters of Bilitis, especially gay males, had belittled DOB for being a separatist organization and tended to treat DOB as a women's auxiliary. Even though lesbians were front and center at the convention, more attention was paid to gay male civil liberties than lesbian civil rights—only emphasizing that lesbians understood and supported their gay brothers who were more apt to face beatings and entrapment than women and to be arrested for public sex and/or perceived effeminate behavior.

A more intense focus on lesbian issues came with the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s. In the later 1960s, Phyllis, as a member of the National Organization for Women, joined in demonstrations which focused on desexing employment want ads in the newspapers, equal employment opportunity for women, equal membership rights for women at the Press Club, and for putting an end to male-only restaurants. She added another dimension to Glide's focus on the changing urban scene: feminism.

In 1966 our family (including our pregnant daughter and our granddaughter) joined the picket line at the gates of the Sacramento State Fair for denying CRH a booth. It brought far more attention to our four-page tabloid, headlined "Every Tenth Person Is a Homosexual," than being in a booth would have. On Armed Forces Day we joined the first national demonstration in major U.S. cities protesting discrimination against gays in the military. The action (in San Francisco in front of the Federal Building) had been initiated by the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations.

In 1968 the National Sex Forum was founded by Glide and the Sexual Attitude Restructuring process (SAR) was introduced. It began as training for clergy, later expanded to helping professionals and their referrals. In the end the Forum accepted anyone who wanted to know more about human sexuality. McIlvenna and Phyllis wrote articles for religious magazines and professional publications to spread the word. They participated in a *Playboy* symposium on homosexuality with psychiatric, legal, and sociological experts and researchers. Phyllis found working with McIlvenna was a continuous adventure. There was never a dull moment. Between her job there and her work with DOB, increasing contact came about with Paul Gebhard and

Wardell Pomeroy of the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research, and the growing profession of sexologists.

The feminist movement of the 1970s sparked a lesbian rebellion against gay male domination and chauvinism in the gay movement. Lesbians came out in droves to claim their identity, their bodies, their lives, their spirits. In the process, the lesbian liberation movement became so diverse that it was unidentifiable by traditional standards. The 1970s was a freeing, exhilarating, inspiring, and empowering decade for lesbians. It was evolutionary and revolutionary. A lesbian/woman culture and a lesbian national counter-culture brought about a renaissance of lesbian music, performing, literary, and visual arts. Contradictions in experience, ideology, and organizing techniques often gave the appearance of irreconcilable differences among lesbians, but the result was an unrelenting advocacy for lesbian visibility and freedom. Phyllis Lyon was right in the middle of it all.

She helped with the lesbian struggle to pass policy resolutions at the 1971 and 1973 NOW national conventions which recognized that oppression of lesbians was a feminist issue and which pledged support for legislation to end discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. NOW's national board, in an effort to deal with both racism and homophobia within its ranks, invited Aileen Hernandez, the African-American former NOW president, and Phyllis Lyon to be the keynote speakers at the 1974 convention. Phyllis recalls that most members had assumed that the "lesbian issue" had been resolved and wondered, what do lesbians want? The answer, she stated, was simple: implementation and personhood. "Lesbianism is not just an aspect of human sexuality or an alternative lifestyle," she pointed out, but rather "a fundamental way of being in the world." She concluded that lesbians want "the language and behavior of every person to bespeak a consciousness about, and affirmation of, lesbian existence. That means *now* in NOW."

In 1972, after the book *Lesbian/Woman* Phyllis and I wrote was released, we went on the road to publicize it, speaking, doing television and radio interviews. Among other things we appeared on the Phil Donahue show as well as a number of college campuses, usually as a duo, but also with researchers and others attempting to dignify sexology as a profession. Back in San Francisco, Phyllis worked with McIlvenna to move the Sex Forum from Glide to its own location, established the International Museum of Erotic Art, giving Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen a home for their art collection. Phyllis also worked with the Sex Forum to produce a series of booklets which together made up what was called the Yes Booklets of Sex. They were "how to" books designed to help the average person understand, accept, and value human sexuality. Our contribution, *Lesbian Love and Liber-*

ation ran photos of real live lesbians and used real names of lesbians who braved suffering through court suits over their jobs or child custody rights.

In 1974 we went to Europe nominally to participate in a SAR seminar in Paris, but we also took the opportunity to go to the first British Women's Conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland. Lesbians, hoping to pass a resolution similar to the one NOW had adopted, had set aside a workshop period before the plenary for simultaneous encounter groups between lesbian and nonlesbian women. Although we had attended with some trepidation about what might happen, our fears were groundless. The lesbian resolution passed unanimously.

We met with Sappho members in London, and visited with Holland's lesbian and gay organizations, which predated the American ones. The highlight of our Paris presentation was when we mentioned that lesbians in England were engaging in artificial insemination in order to get pregnant. A man jumped up, identified himself as the director of a French sperm bank, and exclaimed, "No lesbian is going to get any of my sperm!"

On our return to San Francisco, Mayor George Moscone appointed Phyllis to the Human Rights Commission, and she chaired the Commission's Lesbian and Gay Advisory Committee for ten years, and the Commission itself in 1982-1983. In 1976, the Erotic Art Museum closed its doors. Shortly thereafter McIlvenna founded The Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality as a graduate school to offer doctoral degrees in sexology. Phyllis served as registrar, trustee, professor, and dean of lesbian and gay studies until 1987.

In 1978, Phyllis broke new ground when she and Pat Norman, a black lesbian activist and a community health worker, decided that employees in the mental health field needed in-service sensitivity training on "gay, lesbian, and bisexual lifestyles." After some pressure the city's Community Health Services contracted with the National Sex Forum to offer such training and mandated that its 400 employees attend.

Phyllis' political skills were called upon again in that same year when State Senator John Briggs put an initiative on the ballot to ban homosexuals, or anyone who publicly supported homosexual rights, from teaching in California schools. Phyllis chaired San Franciscans Against Proposition 6, part of a statewide campaign which defeated the resolution by a whopping 75 percent to 25 percent vote.

In the 1980s and 1990s "Wonder Woman" Lyon continued to serve on numerous and diverse committees and boards of community, government, political, and charitable causes, although she admits she might have slowed down a bit. She keeps saying that we both need to learn to say no. But when the telephone rings and a new problem is posed, Phyllis the activist is always raring to go. Her latest issue might be called self-serving—ageism and

advocacy for an invisible constituency. Our generation of lesbians and gay men are still mostly in the closet, making lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender elders a most underserved population. Through prodding by Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, of which Phyllis is an active member, national LGBT legal and health organizations are beginning to address this oversight.

Phyllis Lyon has won respect and love from many quarters and has received many honors. The one she is most proud of is the 1996 Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality Public Service Award "in recognition and appreciation for her pioneering work in the lesbian movement which forced the world to pay attention to lesbian and gay activists."

And that's the truth.

In 1999 during the campaign against Proposition 22, a California initiative denying LGBT couples the right to marry, we decided to take advantage of the new domestic partners ceremony at City Hall. Beforehand, we saw it as a political statement. Afterward, we knew it was really a declaration of love.

NOTE

1. Phyllis Lyon was DOB's first secretary, the first editor of its magazine *The Ladder*, peer counselor, and host at social and fundraising events.

REFERENCES

Most of the information in this chapter is based upon my long association with Phyllis Lyon.

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