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Phyllis and Del: Honoring our Legends for Women's History Month

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The day before Valentine's Day this year, I attended a benefit for Lyon Martin Health Services [1] with my partner at Million Fishes Collective [2] in San Francisco. We thought, what a better way to celebrate love than to be surrounded with our LGBTQ community and to be in service to a cause that makes sure all of our LGBTQ family has access to culturally competent healthcare.

Shortly after we arrived at the benefit, Phyllis Lyon arrived, whom the clinic was partially named after. It was also named after her late partner, Del Martin. The entire atmosphere of the room changed, as bodies parted to allow 86-year-old Phyllis mobility throughout the room. You could sense an air of reverence and respect for her from all of the attendees. A calm silence fell over the room, as people acknowledged her physical presence and lifetime of work for the queer community. I knew she was a lesbian legend and activist, but it dawned on me as I looked at this small-framed woman in quirky glasses, that I actually knew very little about her life and accomplishments.

GSA Network NorCal Program Coordinator Amanda Harris (left)
and partner Risa with Phyllis Lyon (center)

I wanted to know more. Much more. The accomplishments of LGBTQ women in our movement are often hidden, forgotten, sometimes purposefully left out of stories and history books. Here was a woman who had over 60 years of activism under her belt, and I felt sad that I could only recall one or two vague events. The next day, I researched everything I could find about Phyllis Lyon's activism and her lifetime of social justice work with her partner, Del Martin.

What I found was inspiring. Here is a brief timeline of some of their accomplishments:

- 1955 - Phyllis and Del start the Daughters of Bilitis, the first social and political organization for lesbians in the U.S.
- 1956 -*The Ladder*, the first nationally distributed lesbian publication in the U.S., starts with Phyllis and Del as founders and editors.
- 1967 - Phyllis and Del become the first out lesbians to join the National Organization for Women and encourage the organization to view lesbian issues as feminist issues.
- 1972 - Phyllis and Del join the Alice B. Toklas Gay and Lesbian Democratic Club in San Francisco and advocate for LGBTQ people and allies to hold public office.
- 1972 - The couple co-write *Lesbian/Woman* about lesbian life in modern America.
- 1973 - Phyllis and Del co-author *Lesbian Love and Liberation* about lesbians and sexual liberty.
- 1979 - Lyon Martin Health Services is established by community members in the city of San Francisco and names the clinic after lesbian pioneers, Phyllis and Del.
- 1989 - Phyllis and Del join Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, an organization that educates and empowers American lesbians over the age of 60 to oppose ageism in their lives and their communities.
- 1995 - Phyllis and Del serve as delegates to the White House Conference on Aging.
- 2004 - The couple is issued a marriage license by the City and County of San Francisco after mayor Gavin Newsom ordered that marriage licenses be given to same-sex couples who requested them.
- 2008 - Phyllis and Del become the first couple to marry (again) after the California Supreme Court rules same-sex marriage to be legal.

What a lifetime of inspiring social justice work! After learning more about Phyllis's life and her achievements with her partner, Del, I became acutely aware of how I, as a woman in the LGBTQ movement, knew very little about one of my very own pioneers. And further, I knew very little about the amazing work Phyllis and Del did across lines of gender, sexuality, and age. I understood the intense amount of respect I sensed in the air that night at the benefit and hoped that LGBTQ young people everywhere had the opportunity to learn about one of their foremothers.

Unfortunately our school textbooks rarely teach us about these legends. It is important for GSAs to advocate for their school curriculum to include lesson plans that reflect their community's histories and lives. **Is your GSA celebrating Women's History Month?** Consider celebrating the lives of Phyllis and Del, and countless other LGBTQ women who have made our

movement.

A few ways to celebrate Phyllis and Del's accomplishments for Women's History Month:

- **Watch a 2003 documentary** about the couple called, *No Secret Anymore: The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon*, available from Frameline [3] and as part of the Visionaries & Victories DVD with the Youth in Motion project [4] from Frameline and GSA Network.
- If you can travel to San Francisco, **visit the GLBT History Museum** [5] to learn more about Phyllis and Del, and see their wedding outfits from their 2008 marriage.
- **Watch interviews with Phyllis Lyon** in *Coming Out in the 1950s: Stories of Our Lives*, where young activists interview elders in our movement. *GSA Network Board Member, Jason Galisatus, interviews Phyllis Lyon. Watch the entire short film right here!* **GSAs can get a copy of this DVD for FREE! (**You can order the DVD if you email pyeharrisproject@aol.com [6] [please include your GSA advisor's name, school name, and address]).

- **Advocate to your teachers** to show these films and discuss queer women's achievements in class.
- **Call your state senators** and ask them to support the FAIR Education Act [7], so that LGBTQ historical figures, such as Phyllis and Del, are included in school curriculum.
- Research and celebrate tons of cool LGBTQ women icons such as: **Audre Lorde, Jane Addams, Dorothy Allison, Jewelle Gomez, Sylvia Rivera, Gloria Anzaldua, Josephine Baker, Ellen DeGeneres, Cherrie Moraga, Joan Jett, Urvashi Vaid, Kate Bornstein, Frida Kahlo, Kaia Wilson, Carla Trujillo, Sheryl Swoopes, Paula Gunn Allen, Evelyn Mantilla, Barbara Smith, Judith Butler, Pat Griffin, Christine Jorgensen**, and more.
- **Share your thoughts** and what you are doing to celebrate LGBTQ women as part of Women's History on Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, and YouTube.

"We've come a long way from our goal in the 1950s, part of which was to get laws against sexual activity between consenting adults of the same sex wiped off the books. The other part was to be considered part of society. We wanted our full rights and responsibilities," **Lyons** told The Noe Valley Voice in February 2003.

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Links:
[1] http://www.lyon-martin.org/
[2] http://millionfishes.com/
[3] http://www.frameline.org/index.aspx
[4] http://frameline.org/youthinmotion/
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