

Del Martin, Lesbian Activist, Dies at 87



Del Martin, left, and her spouse, Phyllis Lyon, celebrating their wedding on June 16 at City Hall in San Francisco. Credit...Jim Wilson/The New York Times

By [William Grimes](#) Aug. 27, 2008

Del Martin, who married her partner of 55 years, Phyllis Lyon, on June 16 in the first legal gay union in California and who helped found the pioneering lesbian-rights group the Daughters of Bilitis, died Wednesday in San Francisco. She was 87.

The cause was a broken arm that exacerbated her existing health problems, Kate Kendell, executive director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, told The Associated Press.

The June wedding was not the couple's first effort at legalizing their union. In February 2004, Mayor Gavin Newsom of San Francisco challenged California's marriage laws by announcing that the city would issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples who requested them. Of the more than 4,000 couples who married before the California Supreme Court intervened a month later, Ms. Martin and Ms. Lyon may have been the oldest, and were certainly first and the most celebrated.

That summer, though, the California Supreme Court invalidated all licenses for same-sex marriages, arguing that the mayor had exceeded his legal authority. Ms. Martin and

Ms. Lyon were among the original plaintiffs in a series of lawsuits that led to the court's declaring same-sex marriages legal this year.

Mr. Newsom invited the couple to be the first couple to marry under the new ruling. This they did, in San Francisco's City Hall, after living together as a couple for more than half a century.

On Wednesday, Ms. Lyon, 83, said in a statement, "I am devastated, but I take some solace in knowing we were able to enjoy the ultimate rite of love and commitment before she passed."

Ms. Martin was born Dorothy L. Taliaferro on May 5, 1921, in San Francisco. She studied journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco State College. At 19 she married James Martin, but the marriage ended in divorce four years later. Their daughter, Kendra Mon, survives, as do two grandchildren and Ms. Lyon.

While working for a construction trade journal in Seattle, Ms. Martin met Ms. Lyon, an employee at the same firm, and the two became romantically involved and entered into a permanent relationship in 1953. In 1955, having moved to San Francisco, they joined with six other women to found the Daughters of Bilitis, the first social and political organization for lesbians in the United States, which soon established branches around the country. The name was taken from "Songs of Bilitis," a collection of lesbian love poems by Pierre Louys.

Ms. Martin was the organization's first president, and from 1960 to 1962 she edited its newsletter, *The Ladder*, which Ms. Lyon had edited from its inception in 1956. The organization disbanded in 1970 as more radical lesbian groups came to the fore.

In 1964 Ms. Martin helped found the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, which lobbied city government to end police harassment of gay men and lesbians and change discriminatory laws.

Ms. Martin is believed to have been the first openly gay woman to be elected to the board of directors of the National Organization for Women, where she agitated to put lesbian issues on the table. She was also an active member of the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club, which was founded in 1972 to support gay candidates in San Francisco.

In her later years, she was a member of Old Lesbians Organizing for Change. In 1987 she earned a degree from the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality.

She wrote a book, "Battered Wives" (1976), and two others with Ms. Lyon, "Lesbian/Woman" (1972) and "Lesbian Love and Liberation" (1973).