

Phyllis Lyon, Lesbian Activist and Gay Marriage Trailblazer, Dies at 95

When Ms. Lyon married her partner of 55 years in 2008, they formed the first legal gay union in California.



Phyllis Lyon, right, getting married to Del Martin at a wedding ceremony officiated by then-Mayor Gavin Newsom of San Francisco in 2008. Credit...Marcio Jose Sanchez/Associated Press

By [Julia Carmel](#)

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Phyllis Lyon, who when she married her partner, [Del Martin](#), in 2008 became part of the first legal same-sex union in California, died on Thursday at her home in San Francisco. She was 95.

Her sister, Patricia Lyon, confirmed the death.

It was not their first wedding. In 2004, despite state and federal bans on same-sex marriage, Mayor Gavin Newsom of San Francisco began issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Ms. Lyon and Ms. Martin were the first to receive one, but that union would be short-lived. The [California Supreme Court invalidated](#) their marriage a month later, arguing that the mayor had exceeded his legal authority.

Four years later, the same court [declared same-sex marriages legal](#) and Mr. Newsom invited the couple back as the first to be married under the new ruling. Ms. Martin [died](#) shortly after.

“I am devastated,” Ms. Lyon said following her wife’s death. “But I take some solace in knowing we were able to enjoy the ultimate rite of love and commitment before she passed.”

The mauve and turquoise-blue suits that the couple wore to their weddings are in the permanent collection of the [GLBT Historical Society](#) in San Francisco.

Mr. Newsom, who is now the governor of California, [said on Twitter](#): “Phyllis — it was the honor of a lifetime to marry you & Del. Your courage changed the course of history.”

Phyllis Ann Lyon was born on Nov. 10, 1924, in Tulsa, Okla. to William Ranft Lyon, a salesman, and Lorena Belle (Ferguson) Lyon, a homemaker. The family moved to Sacramento in the early 1940s.

After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1946 with a degree in journalism, Ms. Lyon worked as a reporter for The Chico Enterprise-Record in Chico, Calif. She moved to Seattle in 1949 to work at a construction trade journal, where Ms. Martin was also employed. They began dating and, on Valentine’s Day in 1953, moved in together in San Francisco.



Ms. Lyon, left, and Ms. Martin at a Human Rights Campaign gala in Los Angeles in 2004. Credit...Lucy Nicholson/Reuters

In 1955, they joined three other lesbian couples to found the Daughters of Bilitis, one of the first lesbian political organizations in the United States. The name was inspired by “Songs of Bilitis,” a collection of lesbian love poems by Pierre Louÿs.

“There were a lot of laws that were anti-gay, and there were more things to do than just party,” Ms. Lyon said in [an interview for StoryCorps](#). “We decided we’d put out a newsletter, The Ladder.”

The newsletter, which Ms. Lyon edited from its inception in 1956, grew into one of the first lesbian magazines in the country. It published until the group disbanded in the 1970s.

Ms. Lyon and Ms. Martin also co-wrote two books: “Lesbian/Woman” (1972), which won a Stonewall Book Award, and “Lesbian Love and Liberation” (1973).

“There really weren’t any books” about lesbians when she was growing up, Ms. Lyon [said in a 1992 interview](#) with Terry Gross of the NPR program “Fresh Air.” “And then there was nothing that was any good in the libraries in those early days.”

Throughout their 55-year relationship, Ms. Lyon and Ms. Martin were politically engaged. They were among the first lesbians to join the National Organization for Women, and Ms. Martin was later elected to its board of directors. The couple also helped form the Council on Religion and the Homosexual to persuade ministers to accept lesbians and gay men into churches.

On the local level, they were members of the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club, San Francisco’s first gay political organization, which influenced the passage of a bill to ban employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. In 1979, local activists established the [Lyon-Martin Health Services](#), a health care provider, in San Francisco. It is still in operation.

“We were trying to help lesbians find themselves,” Ms. Lyon said in [a 1989 interview](#). “I mean, you can’t have a movement if you don’t have people that see that they’re worthwhile.”

Along with her sister, Ms. Lyon is survived by a daughter, Kendra Mon; two grandchildren; and a great-granddaughter.

Even after Ms. Martin’s death, Ms. Lyon continued advocating for lesbian rights.

“If you got stuff you want to change, you have to get out and work on it,” she said in [a 2017 interview](#) with The Bay Area Reporter. “You can’t just sit around and say, ‘I wish this or that was different.’ You have to fight for it.”