

Remembering Linda Lee: An Ally For Life

BY JAN STEVENSON

We've lost a champion.

Long before others were willing to stand up for LGBT people, Linda Lee was there – out and proud – as an ally for LGBT issues and people living with HIV/AIDS. Linda died March 31, just five weeks after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

When Linda first got involved with the LGBT community in the early 1990s, people wondered why she was so committed to a cause that appeared so tangential to her daily life. What motivated this straight, Jewish woman with no obvious connection to the gay community to become not only an ally, but a leader in the fight for LGBT civil rights and compassionate care for people with HIV/AIDS? It soon became clear to those who worked beside her that what drove Linda was her extraordinary heart and passion for justice.

She became involved in LGBT rights after she and her husband, Henry, attended the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in San Francisco in 1990. She went to a session focused on what was being done with families that have a gay member. Linda was outraged by what she learned and came back to Detroit determined to do something about it.

She became involved in the Michigan Jewish AIDS Coalition in 1991, eventually becoming its president in 1995.

"I first met Linda over 20 years ago when she was part of an effort in the metro Detroit Jewish community to ensure that there were HIV/AIDS services available to members of the community living with HIV/AIDS," said Jay Kaplan, staff attorney of the LGBT Project at the Michigan ACLU. In the 1990s, Kaplan was an attorney with the Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service, an organization that provides legal services for people living with HIV/AIDS.

"Linda had heard about a gay Jewish man who had died from AIDS in a Christian nursing home, because no Jewish facility was willing to take him at the time," said Kaplan. "Linda worked tirelessly on behalf of MJAC to not only increase awareness and education in the Jewish community regarding HIV and AIDS, but to also to ensure that Jewish institutions - synagogues, social services, and the Jewish Center - were both accepting and welcoming to LGBT people."

Born May 28, 1944 in the Bronx,



Linda Lee with her beloved children, Sherry and Andy. This photo was taken just days before Linda's death. Photo courtesy of the Lee family by photographer Marla Michele.

NY, Linda was two years old when her family moved to the Detroit area. She graduated early from Mumford High School and went on to Wayne State University where she earned a degree in education. She taught for three years at the McKinley Elementary School in Southfield. Then in 1968 she met and married Henry Lee, a young tax attorney just starting out. Together they built a strong family and network of friends

extensive network within the Jewish community. JGN is housed at the JCC and produces arts, social, educational and cultural events. In 2012, JGN produced the "Twice Blessed" speakers' series that addressed issues of aging, lesbianism in the Jewish community, family issues and more. "I was so impressed with her drive and vision to make this series a success, and to secure the longevity of JGN as a minority

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- Michael Phillips, JGN Committee Chair

and associates.

Linda dedicated herself to volunteering full time, making a positive difference in each organization in which she became involved. She was a dynamic leader at the Jewish Community Center becoming that group's first female president of the board in 1990. She continued her work at the JCC and with the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, serving on numerous committees including the Soviet Jewry Committee, the Women's Division and the Agency for Jewish Education, to name only a few.

In 2004, Linda used her considerable influence and energy to launch the Jewish Gay Network, a service organization for LGBT Jews, families and friends. Many of the original supporters and volunteers at JGN were recruited from Linda's

within a minority," said Susan Horowitz, BTL co-publisher. "She was able to get JGN housed at the Jewish Community Center and make it so JGN became an integrated part of the JCC's work."

"JGN was a concept we had talked about," said Beth Greenapple, the former president of JGN and a former MJAC board member. "Like many good ideas, once we MJAC board and committee members all dispersed in the various directions of our separate lives, it waited patiently. It would have continued to do so indefinitely had Linda Lee not insisted upon pursuing it, making it manifest. She had an unquenchable passion for justice, and could not sit quietly by while the Jewish LGBT community was not fully

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integrated into the larger Jewish community. In 2004, Linda called me and several other people together and started the ball rolling with meetings at her house. She never let the ball out of her sight either. She stuck with JGN through thick and thin. She supported us at every turn.”

“Linda Lee was committed, dedicated and passionate about equality,” said community activist Michelle Brown. “She loved her fellow man/woman and could see the best in us even when we couldn’t see it in ourselves. She pushed, pulled and sometimes dragged us, myself included, to the table – always with love. She once told me I needed to attend a JGN meeting, when I said ‘But Linda, I’m not Jewish.’ She said ‘And?’ then proceeded to tell me about the work we had to do. We lost a (s)hero, a giant and a friend.”

“The world was made a better place because she was here with us,” said Michael Phillips, JGN Committee Chair. “Linda championed many causes including the Jewish Gay Network of Michigan and the Michigan Jewish AIDS Coalition. She truly embodied the spirit of ‘Tikkun Olam.’ With heavy hearts, we will miss this wonderful lady that touched so many of our lives.”

Although deeply involved in LGBT issues, issues of HIV/AIDS, Jewish community activities, women’s organizations, Cranbrook School committees and boards and countless other outside activities, Linda’s primary focus was always her family. She and Henry’s two children, Andy and Sherry, traveled extensively with their mother who managed to visit every state in the union and all seven continents. When Sherry turned 30, she and her mother went to Southeast Asia, and for her 40th birthday they went to Guatemala. Linda and son Andy traveled to the Amazon. In December 2012, Linda even went to Antarctica.

Linda was a gourmet cook and opened their Bloomfield Hills home for frequent dinner parties and gatherings. Passover Seder always included people who needed a place to call home, at least for a little while.

“Linda Lee was always there,” said openly gay Rabbi Arnie Sleutelberg. “She could be counted on to be present, with open arms and heart, a sweet caring soul, a capable intellect, and a moral compass that helped her see and act upon what was right to do. Her influence on our community will be felt for decades to come. I will miss her inspiring leadership and reassuring smile.”

Linda lost her battle with cancer in just five short weeks. It was startling to those who knew how active and physically fit she was. She loved golf, which she learned to play in her 60s, and was an avid tennis player. Three years ago, out of a field of 200 women, she lost in the finals of the Senior Women’s Double Tennis Championship in Tuscon. Just a little over a month before her diagnosis, Linda was at Disneyworld in Orlando with Sherry, her husband and their two young sons Felix and Hugo. Linda was a devoted, involved grandparent to all four of her grandsons.

“I’m still in shock about Linda’s death,” said Judy Lewis, former executive director of JGN. “She always seemed so full of energy, so committed to human dignity. She was a wealth of ideas - and no matter when I emailed, she was quick to reply. The woman never slept!”

“Linda was an ally in every sense of the word,” said Kaplan. “She was always there, reliable, dependable and willing to help out in any way that she could, fueled by a passionate belief that people should be treated fairly and with dignity. She was a lovely person, inside and out, who truly sought to make a positive difference in the lives of other people and in this world.”