

# Oral History Interview: Kate Kendell, Interviewed by Keilina Heinz for the Lyon- Martin House Project

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

phyllis, house, lesbians, dell, people, question, window, 99th birthday, lesbian rights, activist, tour, life, parties, read, knew, advocacy, women, sweet, early, activism

## ABSTRACT:

Kate Kendell is former longtime (1996-2018) Executive Director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights and current Chief of Staff at the California Endowment. She met Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon in 1993 or 1994 at an American Civil Liberties Union or National Center for Lesbian Rights event. Soon after she began monthly lunches with them in their home, where they would regale her with stories and history. She discusses the home, the living room with their chairs and the view, and their kitchen nook as special places in the home. She discusses parties from the 1950s and 1960s she had heard about there, including the curtains they would put up so women would feel comfortable dancing together. Kendell also underscores the importance of the outside stairs and position of the picture window from the sidewalk, where she could wave to Phyllis in her advanced age and they would blow each other a kiss. She underscores the parallel of the house's modesty to Del and Phyllis's modesty as "how they moved in the world." Kendell imagines the space being used for LGBTQ and women's political salons, community conversations, and community gardening.

**Keilina Heinz:** Hi there!

**Kate Kendell:** Hello., Keilina. Did I say that right?

**Keilina Heinz:** Yes, you did actually. No one ever does, so nice job!

**Kate Kendell:** Well I thought I would give it a shot.

**Keilina Heinz:** Yes! [Laughing] So I know you are a long time LGBTQ+ advocate, you are a civil rights advocate, an attorney, and that you were the Executive Director at the National Center for Lesbian Rights, so if it's okay with you, I will just launch right into it.

**Kate Kendell:** Yes, let's dive into it.

**Keilina Heinz:** Great! So I will start with our first question here. When did you first meet Del and Phyllis? And How long after that first meeting were you invited to their home?

**Kate Kendell:** My partner at the time, who is now my ex-wife, she and I had a long distance relationship for about a year and a half while I was still in Utah working for the ACLU. She was on the board of NCLR, and I bet I met them probably in 93 or early 94 at an event .

**Keilina Heinz:** Okay,

**Kate Kendell:** I certainly knew of them. And you know when I met at an ACLU event or an NCLR event, you know, I'm sure I was like, "oh my god, I can't believe I'm meeting, you know Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon. And so I started formally with NCLR as legal director in October of 94. But I am quite certain I met them earlier than that because Sandy and I would come out here a lot and she would take me to different events together. So I met them in 93-94. And I really was curious, I wanted to get to know them. I wanted to have them in my life. So after seeing them at a few events, you know, and they've known Sandy [Kate's spouse] for years. You know, kind of just invited myself you know, I said, Hey, look, can I bring lunch? And, and can we just visit because I want to you know, I want to hear more about your life and your history and I want you to know me. And so we started a pretty regular routine of maybe you know, once a month or so I would grab sandwiches or something and go to their house and we would just sit in their living room with that big picture window. And I would pretty much just ask them tons of questions and just listen to their stories. Which were always rich and hilarious because they would correct each other and say, "That's not right! And so I had a blast. And so I started, so probably 94 is when I first went to the house and then thereafter you know, I've been there dozens of times. Mostly just me and them, and every once in a while somebody else would come along or would show up but it was mostly just me and the two of them.

02:34

**Keilina Heinz:** That is really amazing. It's funny that you mentioned that they would correct each other during your visits because I interviewed Marcia Gallo before you and she said the same thing. She said it was so hilarious.

02:52

**Kate Kendell:** It was never so hilarious. I mean, they were constantly bickering and you know, fighting and, you know, and losing patience with each other. But oh my god, were they so devoted and just, you know, I mean, they were love of each other's life. I mean, there's no question about that course. But it was— they were real.

03:17

**Keilina Heinz:** That is so funny. How sweet. Okay, so that was quite a while ago, and that was a good amount of time before each of them passed away. I know Del passed away I believe, in 2016 and then Phyllis passed away in 2020. So you knew them for quite some time. Obviously that's why I asked you

to chat with me! But that would mean that you didn't necessarily go to any activist meetings at their home because in the 90s they weren't really doing that anymore, right?

**Kate Kendell:** Yeah, I don't think they were really doing it anymore. They would occasionally go to offices and stuff like that and they would definitely have parties, you know, private parties with their close friends. I remember a couple of different times, running into them at what is now the Whole Foods on 24th. But it used to be a privately owned like a family on the grocery store, I forget the name of it, but I would go there all the time and it was you know, at the border between Castro and Noe Valley and so I was running into them at the store and their car, their shopping cart would always be filled with like a gallons of alcohol.

04:33

**Keilina Heinz:** Oh my gosh, it was and I would

04:35

**Kate Kendell:** And I would be like, when am I going to get invited to the party where you're going to where people are going to drink all this? [Laughing] And you know, they kind of looked at each other and they were like, one of these days and I could tell they were never going to invite me to a party because they had their own circle of friends and so they still held social parties, but I don't ever remember being at their house for an activist or a strategy or an advocacy session.

05:06

**Keilina Heinz:** That's so funny. If I ran into them and I saw a bunch of alcohol. I would be like, hey, I want to go where you're going.

05:20

**Kate Kendell:** [Laughing] Like man, these two know how to live, yeah.

05:23

**Keilina Heinz:** Yes, some of the interviews and podcasts I was listening to when I was researching them. A couple of people that were part of the DOB and would go to the early activist meetings and like the 60s at their house, they would say that everybody was always drinking, which I was kind of amazed. I don't know that anyone mentioned anything about Del or Phyllis' drinking habits like that hasn't really been mentioned. I've never read anything about that, but they did say that a lot of the people that went there were heavy drinkers, so clearly they knew how to host!

06:01

**Kate Kendell:** Yep, oh yeah they did. It was a little bit of a different time. People are much more aware now that, you know, like excessive drinking is just not healthy. Right?

**Keilina Heinz:** Right.

**Kate Kendell:** You know, they grew up in a generation where I mean, you had three Martini lunches. I mean, it was like, Mad Men era Right?

**Keilina Heinz:** Right.

**Kate Kendall:** And so it was just very socially acceptable to, you know, have a party and get plastered. And I do think, when I was there I was always there in the middle of the day and I never saw that. I never saw them sort of day-drinking, but you know, come the evening time or at an event they would, you kind of had to keep an eye on them because they could definitely drink and I think as they got older, they started to recognize they couldn't metabolize it quite as well as they could when they were younger. So Right. I think they tapered off.

06:50

**Keilina Heinz:** Good for them and they still manage to live really long lives which is amazing. Yeah, wow, that's great. How did Del and Phyllis impact your work for Lesbian Rights? Because you've made lesbian rights and civil rights and advocating your life and your careers, so I wanted to know, how did they influence you in that way?

07:26

**Kate Kendall:** I mean, I really feel like I stand on their shoulders. Part of why I was so thirsty to hear from them about their activism is that I was very keenly aware of the privilege I had in being able to be out, in almost every aspect of my life. I mean, really, at this point, by the time I was working at NCLR in every aspect of my life, if I chose not to disclose it like on an airplane or something sitting next to somebody, I could choose not to. I certainly had passing privilege in that way. But I recognize that, you know, their activism, founding the DOB and hosting these activists and salons was at a time of great—that was perilous. I mean, you could absolutely be arrested and be thrown in jail and nobody would give a shit. And so I wanted to just like... what drove them? Because I knew why I was passionate about it, but part of what made me feel passionate about it was also feeling a measure of security. And safety and feeling like progress had been made. And I just wanted to continue to build on that. So their influence on me and appreciation for the work that NCLR did, on behalf of— we had lots of conversations about you know, even though we were the National Center for Lesbian Rights, I mean, they knew that early on, you know, you're representing gay men, we were one of first organizations to do serious trans advocacy, particularly around young people. And they were totally down with all of that they were like, "That's exactly what needs to be done". You know, and I remember Del, in her gravelly kind of voice would be like, "Well, it can't just be about lesbians you know, but we don't want lesbians to be invisible either". So they had a profound influence on me and I felt like part of my work was their legacy.

09:35

**Keilina Heinz:** Wow. That's a really wonderful answer. Yeah, I mean, I would imagine that when you met them, feeling what you feel today and what you just explained to me, I imagine meeting them was also kind of nerve-wracking, considering they were absolute icons. Right?

09:57

**Kate Kendall:** Yeah. I mean, it was really, it was interesting. We had that conversation and I remember saying that to them, and they kind of, I mean, they did the sort of verbal version of psshaw, you know,

they were like, “That doesn't help us..we care about and we want to be in relationship with people. We don't want people putting us on, [as Del would say] a God damn pedestal”. They would also say, “we want to be in a relationship with people and yeah, we're proud of what we've done, but we, I don't like it, [and Del would be very expressive about this and Phyllis would go along with it], “You know, I don't like it when people feel like they don't know how to approach us, we're just people”. And so I kind of went out of my way to you know, once I kind of said that once, I kind of didn't say it again. I mean, I would say you know, how much I appreciated them and how much I loved them and how much time that I spent with them meant to me, but I didn't kind of talk about them as being sort of legends and icons. Because they didn't want to be regarded that way. They felt like that kind of framing got in the way of them being in [real] relationships with people.

11:12

**Keilina Heinz:** Yeah, that makes sense. And also it just kind of goes to show even more that they were fully genuine in their hearts and in everything that they were doing in regards to their advocacy, and that they only really had, you know, obviously more than one goal, but essentially the goal was to just stop making lesbianism a crime, and changing the laws that lesbian women shouldn't be considered different in the way that they could lose their teaching job and their children, I mean, it was insane the kind of laws that were around that were there to punish lesbians in the 50s and 60s, it's insane. And then you know, not having a place to go and socialize (not even the bars) which is why I think it's so amazing and wonderful that they opened up their sweet, cute little tiny home to a ton of people to be able to have that social space and that safe space. So that makes sense.

12:24

**Kate Kendell:** Yeah, yeah, completely. That's exactly right.

12:28

**Keilina Heinz:** So, do you happen to know what Del or Phyllis' favorite thing about their home may have been? I mean, I think I might know the answer if you do.[Laughing] But I think it may be the windows and just that view, that big city view that they had, but do you know if there was a part of the house that they just really loved?

13:08

**Kate Kendell:** That picture [city view] there for sure. Yeah, I mean, they would talk about that all the time. We talked about the view constantly. I would sit and they would sit in two chairs next to each other and I would sit on the couch. I don't think they ever had a TV down there. I think they had a TV in their bedroom and maybe they would watch TV there. They also loved their little kitchen nook. That's where Phyllis would read the paper and do the crossword puzzle and there would be times where we would eat up there rather than down in the living room. I know they loved that little spot to have breakfast or a meal. But they certainly loved that picture window and you would walk in and because the house was so modest, you'd walk in and see that [the city view] and be like, “Oh my god” and they never tired looking at it. I mean, Phyllis would talk as the weather changed, you know, she'd be like, “Oh, it was foggy and now I can see this better, I couldn't see this earlier two hours ago”. So it was literally a window of the world for them. And I think they appreciated it every single day. And they only ever put curtains up in earlier years when they would have the dances with all the women dancing with each

other and the parties because they didn't want people to be seen and they wanted people to feel free to dance with each other and hold each other and whatnot but I never saw a curtain on the window.

14:55

**Keilina Heinz:** Well, that's great, right? I guess that would symbolize the changing of the times. Which is wonderful. So yes, I imagined and I figured that the window was their favorite thing. And that's kind of like what the house is known for. So, I'd like to know if you were a docent for a tour of the house. How would you start the tour and how would you introduce the visitors to Del and Phyllis?

**Kate Kendell:** I think I would start the tour down at the bottom of the sidewalk because after Del died, I saw Phyllis a lot and we got even closer then I think. And at the end of my visits, I would walk down all those stairs and down the sidewalk and down the stairs. And I would get to the bottom of the stairs and I get out by my car because I'd usually be right in front of the house. And I'd look up and Phyllis would be standing in the window and we would blow each other a kiss.

**Keilina Heinz:** Oh, that's so sweet.

**Kate Kendell:** It was so sweet. I mean, every single time I mean it, and it kind of chokes me up thinking about it because she would wait for me and every single time we would blow each other a kiss and wave goodbye. And so I think I would start the tour down there— telling that story. And then just what it was like to look up and just know that she would be there. Even after dementia had kind of taken hold, she would still stand in the window and blow me a kiss. So I would start the tour there. And with that story.

18:47

**Keilina Heinz:** You just made me emotional. That's really, really sweet. How wonderful that you were able to build such a strong bond with her at the end of her life,

19:00

**Kate Kendell:** I was very very privileged with that and that was part of my biography in my life.

19:03

**Keilina Heinz:** That's absolutely wonderful. Thank you for sharing that with me. So given that, how would you explain the significance of the house and their lives to visitors?

19:17

**Kate Kendell:** Well, what's interesting to me is that, you know, they bought the house in what 54 I don't remember exactly. They bought their house in like 62 or something.. I don't remember. Anyway, they paid like \$12,000 for that.

19:41

**Keilina Heinz:** I've read yeah...

19:43

**Kate Kendell:** ..and the thing that I always found interesting is that they never moved to any other house. You know, they never saw that and that, you know, they I mean, they could have I mean they, you know, they were both still working at the time. You know, they could have, they could have sold it for a ton of money given the property given the lot, the double lot that it was on. And then I would ask them about it sometimes, "Have you ever thought about selling the house and moving somewhere else?" And they would be like, "Look out that window. Where are we ever going to find a view like that?" What I so loved about them is that house was like almost an extension of the two of them- unpretentious, guileless, comfortable, you know, lots of stories to tell. You know, just real and, and I feel like in many ways that the house was kind of another character between, you know, there was the two of them and then there was the house and so, and clearly they loved it and made that their home in every possible way. And the modesty of it was sort of how they moved in the world, they had that gorgeous, gorgeous view. And yet the house was quite modest. You know, they did this amazing, amazing work, but just be with us just care about us as people.

21:33

**Keilina Heinz:** Wow. Gosh, I wish I could have met them. They sound like the most genuine and strong willed women.

21:42

**Kate Kendell:** They were. There is absolutely no doubt about that. They did not do anything they did not want to do. That's for sure.

21:49

**Keilina Heinz:** I love that. Not only is it important for everyone to be that way but especially for women. You know...

**Kate Kendell:** I agree, 1,000%.

**Keilina Heinz:** ..given our history of oppression and well, even now in other countries and everything that we deal with, it's vital and man, what forces to be reckoned with. So, at the end of the tour, how would you sum up Del and Phyllis' legacy for you personally, for American society, and in history, generally?

22:29

**Kate Kendell:** Well, I actually think if they hadn't lived, the movement, especially in terms of the visibility of lesbians would have been a lot more anemic and smaller. They paved the way for so many, you know, they paved the way for black lesbians wasn't space in the mainstream women's movement in many ways. They were just uncompromising. And at a time when people made all sorts of compromises to get along, or keep their jobs or whatever, and they just like, we're not doing it! And that ferocity, I think, it has been a tremendous inspiration to you know, activists of every gender and every identity. It's a little bit hard to, I think, though contributions have actually been incalculable, certainly for me personally. And I also think, incalculable given the movements across a whole range of issues, elder issues, they obviously care deeply about elder issues. They care deeply about race, politics, generally. So yeah, they're two people who were bigger than life, and their contributions are bigger than life.

24:03

**Keilina Heinz:** Yeah. I would agree with that. And, you know, the point of this project is to kind of help figure out what the house will be preserved as. And so, one of my last questions for you is, if there weren't any financial constraints, what would you imagine the house to be preserved as what would you like to see it become?

24:33

**Kate Kendall:** Yeah, I like that question. You know, I think it would be great to have some salons have some conversations, set it up so that, you know, somebody could come and, and speak and then you know, kind of have a q&a on sort of cutting edge issues around democracy around LGBTQ issues around, you know, politics just to have it be kind of be reborn as a place where innumerable conversations happen. And in a space where there was no other place where people could freely talk, and so some aspect of that would be great.

25:15

**Keilina Heinz:** Yeah, I agree. And I think, you know, even if it even though it's a small home, I haven't personally been there, but I've done like the virtual tour online, and I've studied the layout of it as best as I possibly could. And I also know that they were into gardening and that they had a garden in the back. Did you ever go back there?

25:37

**Kate Kendall:** I walked through it, but by the time I spent any time there, the garden in front was always fantastic. And they love their front yard in the garden. The garden in the back was a little more bedraggled and I think they kind of stopped really tending to it much by the time I was spending much time there, but definitely out front. I mean, they loved looking at the garden. They loved gardening. For quite a few years, Phyllis had a gardener come and work on the yard and then that kind of went by the wayside. But yeah, they definitely loved the double lot and that yard.

26:17

**Keilina Heinz:** I don't know the size of the yard in the back but I really like your idea of [discussing] cutting edge issues and people going to the house and having a place to talk and like you said, about politics and everything activism. Do you think that something like that would be held inside the house or would you picture it kind of being on the property in the front of the house? I guess it would depend on how many people would be going, right?

26:48

**Kate Kendall:** It would just depend because I know that the other lot got sold so it probably have to be kind of inside the house I think but I don't know, you made me realize when I was looking at question, I haven't even driven past the house since it got sold, since the lot next to it got sold so I don't even know even know what it looks [right now]. I mean, but I haven't seen it since Phyllis' death.

27:14

**Keilina Heinz:** Yeah, right. And also the last question, this may be a bit of an emotional question for you and if it is, I'm sorry in advance.

**Kate Kendell:** It's okay [chuckles].

**Keilina Heinz:** But would you mind sharing with me your last memory at the house? The last time you were there.

27:54

**Kate Kendell:** Yeah, I didn't— as Phyllis was getting, you know, you know about all the caregivers that were coming and going and pretending they were friends? The Caregivers.

**Keilina Heinz:** Yes.

**Kate Kendell:** And so you know, the last time I saw Phyllis and spent a good chunk of time with her because once COVID hit, they were really really guarded about people visiting for all the reasons you would know of course, and of course she died in April 2020. But the good news is the last time I saw her was for her 99th birthday. The night of November 10th 2019, Joyce Newstat and I, in fact, I just saw the picture. The picture just came up in my [photo memories] memories. We took her out for her 99th birthday.. I'm trying to think, I might have gone by myself? I might have been alone with her. Joyce and I took her at another time. But I just remember reminding her like, "you know Phyllis, today is your 99th birthday" and she would be like, "99 really!? Far out!" Like yeah, "you're 99"! And she was so tickled about it. And so you have to keep reminding her, "Hey, you know, you know today's your 99th birthday". And she would go, "Really"? Oh my God, was so much fun. But I would go up to the door, ring the doorbell you know, even though I just called her and said I'll be there in five minutes. She'd get to the door and she'd be like, "I didn't know you were coming". But you just get used to that. And so I remember dropping her off and of course we would walk her all the way up to the door and walk her in and we've gone to the beach, we went to Baker Beach, we went to Ocean Beach. We went and got lunch, we went all over the city. And I remember we were standing in the living room, and we were looking out the window. And you know, I knew she knew that I was someone important to her. But I would have to talk to her like she did not really know who I was. She just knew I was somebody who was important to her. And so you know, and who knew, I mean, we didn't know COVID was coming or anything like that. And right but I I took her by the hand and I was like, "You know Phyllis, I sure love you". And she looked into my eyes and she said again—you know not kind of really knowing who I was but just knowing I was somebody and she said, "Sweetie, I love you too". And we just did that in front of the window and then we looked out the window and then I say goodbye. And then I waved, before I got in my car from the street. And I, in some ways I kind of knew that we're coming to the end. But I remember driving away thinking— oh my god, I'm so glad I got to spend this time with her on her birthday.

31:21

**Keilina Heinz:** Wow. That's a really beautiful last memory to have with someone like that.

31:26

**Kate Kendell:** Yeah, it really was. We should feel this could also be really difficult. But she and I had and she could sometimes do this with me too. But once you kind of got through the angry, angry, angry,

angry part of dementia. rarely did that come up with her. It was just we had a very sweet, we had very sweet times together.

31:46

**Keilina Heinz:** That's amazing. I'm so glad. I'm so glad that you're sharing this with me. Thank you.

31:52

**Kate Kendell:** No I'm so happy to be asked this is. What a great way to kick off my week. So this is good. I really appreciate it. And if you put this together and there's anything else that you're like Oh, I wonder if Kate can help me with that, don't hesitate to reach back out.

**Keilina Heinz:** Thank you! I will. I feel like you answered everything so easily and beautifully and those memories, I really am grateful that you shared those.

32:23

**Kate Kendell:** Take care of my dear. I'm glad you're doing this. Thanks for reaching out.

32:26

**Keilina Heinz:** Yes, thank you very much. And I will send you the transcript when it's ready. And keep you updated. And yeah, if I have any questions, I'll circle back and let you know.

**Kate Kendell:** Thanks. Great to meet you. Take care.

**Keilina Heinz:** Great to meet you, you too. Bye bye.