

Athey's Legacy of Strength Will Endure at Kinheart

By Pamela Jameson

There's a wonderful song by Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder and leader of America's premier female a cappella group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. The song is called "They Are Falling All Around Me" and is about people leaving, people moving on, and people who stay. The lyrics seem particularly and poignantly appropriate to the recent death of Phyllis Athey, co-founder of Kinheart Women's Center and an important and highly visible leader in the lesbian community. The song begins: "Death it comes and rests so heavy, your face I'll never see no more." It later continues: "But you're not really going to leave me . . . it's the record that you set that makes me go on, it's your strength that helps me stand."

Phyllis Athey, who committed suicide on May 23 at the age of 31, helped many people as she dedicated herself, her strengths, her full-time energies and her vision to "helping people stand." She had a strong and powerful effect on the world she lived in.

With her covenant partner, Mary Jo Osterman, she co-founded Kinheart in 1982 and was a moving force throughout the past five-and-a-half years of Kinheart's growth. Until April of this year, when she resigned, she was the center's full-time counselor, advising and helping individuals, couples and groups. Athey and Osterman, as Kinheart's only two paid staff members, were tireless in developing and implementing programs and services for the community, often with sliding scale and nominal or no fees. Together they co-authored two handbooks published by Kinheart: *The Church and Homosexuality* and *The Lesbian Relationship Handbook*, a counseling manual on how to deal with—and without—a relationship.



Phyllis Athey

An intense and highly conflicted relationship of Athey's was with the church. After receiving her master's degree in divinity from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston in 1982, Athey was denied ordination because of her lesbianism. But Athey was not easily deterred and continued to struggle for her lifelong goal of becoming a Methodist minister. A year ago, when her efforts seemed about to pay off at last, she was again rejected—this time on a technicality. Her candidacy became politicized, with letters of complaint from church members to Athey's district committee, threats of bringing charges against the church as a whole if Athey were ordained. A new decision was made: that each district would re-vote on the issue. When the vote was taken, Athey was the only candidate in her group who did not pass. Again, she refused to give up, agreeing to be re-certified, which meant she had yet another year to wait. In her own district, Evanston, she was turned down. Athey decided to seek the votes in another district, and spent much of the past year campaigning and gaining support, earn-

ing votes. She was scheduled to go again before the Board of Ordination the week of her death.

The technicality that originally kept Athey from being ordained was that she "did not have her own church." The irony is that Athey had her own church for years, in the counseling, ministration and immeasurable service she provided to the community she lived in. Athey was a minister already; perhaps part of the sadness of her death is that she had the need to be approved and legitimized by the myopic power structure that instead continually rejected her.

A Kinheart volunteer remembers Athey speaking often of her dream from early childhood of taking care of people, of serving. She always felt that she "had the calling."

Her service was extended and far reaching. In addition to her full-time counseling, she was passionate about providing programming that would be open to everyone, to all aspects of women's lives. She was very clear about championing programming that she believed in, and about remaining open always.

A Kinheart member recalls a meeting of Matrix (the core group of 10 members that makes the ultimate decisions on policies and programming for the center) just a few months before Phyllis' resignation this April. Athey had brought in a proposal from an S&M group for Pride Week events. The Matrix group was initially shocked that such a group would be considered. But as they began to discuss the situation, they came to the conclusion that the center's goal is to be open to all women, that the proposed S&M group offered just as much of a chance to explore another avenue for people as had previous groups for Latinas, women of color, lesbian mothers, and survivors of abuse. When the deci-

sion to accept the proposal was made, Athey leaned back and smiled, saying how happy she was with the decision, since that kind of acceptance and openness was "what she'd been working for for the last five years." The S&M group will be part of Kinheart's programming for Gay and Lesbian Pride Week.

Why did Athey resign from Kinheart? A long-time volunteer suggests, "It was basically a combination of stress and severe exhaustion." As a community leader, Phyllis Athey was an "out" lesbian in every aspect of her life. Her long-term fight to be ordained had kept her under an enormous amount of pressure for an extended period. Her covenant partner was ill and exhausted as well. And both of them had been involved in the uphill and ongoing struggle of running a not-for-profit organization for several years. Additionally, Athey's parents alternately disapproved of and denied her lesbianism. "Even one of those things," said a Kinheart volunteer, "would have put me under." Athey took a long-overdue vacation, and when she came back she resigned.

A few months later, she took her own life. Marcy Lange, another Kinheart member, had committed suicide a year and a half earlier. Donations made at Lange's death were used for a second printing of *The Lesbian Relationship Handbook*; the reprinting carried a dedication to Marcy. Athey was a strong support in helping many members of the community deal with the loss of Lange.

"The concept that she will never leave us, that she stays in our hearts," says a Kinheart friend, "is helping us all get through this." The loss of Phyllis Athey will be felt for a long time. Her presence and her spirit remain.

Donations in Athey's name may be sent to Kinheart, 2214 Ridge, Evanston, IL 60201.