



MICHELLE ABDILL



ROXANNE ELLIS

A COMMUNITY GRIEVES

Two loving, exuberant Medford lesbians are slain. Family, friends and other mourners share memories of Roxanne and Michelle and vow to continue their work.

by Inga Sorensen

Roxanne Ellis and Michelle Abdill had a knack for reaching out to people—even in the most subtle ways.

"I remember our first meeting. My partner Catherine and I were going away for a few days and we needed a pet sitter," recounts 56-year-old Anna Holmes, who shares a home on a sprawling five-acre plot in the Medford area with 45-year-old Catherine Pritchett, her partner of five years. In the great rural tradition, the duo also inhabit their space with a cadre of animals including four horses, three dogs, a cockatoo and an Amazon parrot.

"This was in 1991 and Catherine and I were not out yet. Roxanne had a pet-sitting service back then. When she was driving away, Catherine spotted a pink triangle on her truck. She also left a *Just Out* or a *Lavender Network* on the table."

It was, says Holmes, a quiet yet inspirational connection that left an indelible imprint on her and Pritchett—it was a sensation born of the joy and relief that often come from knowing "members of the family" are within reach. For lesbians and gay men residing in more isolated enclaves, it is a particularly potent experience.

Bumper sticker-speak also helped bring Jim Willeford together with Ellis and Abdill, who were partners for 12 years.

"I was at a flea market [four years ago] and I saw a truck in the lot with a We Are Everywhere bumper sticker and a blue and gold [real estate agent] symbol on it," says Willeford, a 56-year-old Rogue Valley real estate agent, who did not want

his hometown named for safety reasons. "Well, I certainly couldn't resist those two signals, so I left my card on their car and wrote 'Call me.' They did."

That marked the beginning of his rich relationship with Abdill and Ellis, who have called Medford their home for five years. That relationship ended abruptly on Dec. 7, when the couple were found murdered in what law enforcement officials are investigating as a possible hate crime.

The sheer ugliness of the crime sent shock waves throughout Oregon—and the nation—but friends of the women want to make sure that Ellis' and Abdill's legacy of love and commitment to community survive.

"They were *incredible* role models. They had so much passion and dedication to the entire community, and their deep love for each other was obvious," says Brenda Brown, a 35-year-old mental health professional who lives in Ashland.

"One of my biggest fears is that I could not live up to their legacy because it was so powerful and bright," says Brown, who is openly lesbian and a member of the board of directors of the Lambda Community Center Association, an organization working toward the creation of a lesbian and gay community center in Southern Oregon. "They were shining examples of the best a person could be."

Ellis, 54, and Abdill, 42, moved to Oregon from Colorado Springs in late 1990. The Dec. 8 issue of the Colorado Springs *Gazette Telegraph* describes Ellis as the "shy reserved one" who—while living in Colorado Springs—co-owned a catering company called the Picnic Basket. Abdill, meanwhile,

is described in the news story as Ellis' "bubbly, outgoing mate [who was then] a nurse's assistant.... Both enjoyed sports, and a fun day for them might have been passing out Gatorade to runners in a charity race or seeing that a church fund-raiser went off without a hitch."

"We were all big fans of the Broncos, too," remembers 40-year-old Ellen Gabbert, who was good friends with the couple when they all lived in Colorado.

In 1991, Gabbert, a nurse, left that state—due in large part to the hostile climate created by Amendment 2, an anti-gay initiative—and moved to a small town in Minnesota.

"I've been going through my pictures and I remember them organizing our group for our first Gay Pride Parade—we all almost died of the heat but not from fear of the masses," Gabbert tells *Just Out*.

"I remember the Super Bowl parties.... We were all nuts for the Broncos," she says. "I remember the holidays when Roxie and Michelle would have all of us over to be with family—they would invite old partners, co-workers and children. We always talked about helping people to see the gay community as a vital part of the whole community."

She adds: "They were the movers and shakers of our gay community center in Colorado Springs, the rest of us were the followers."

According to the *Gazette Telegraph*, the couple sold their Colorado home "for much less than they had paid for it" because, says a source, "they wanted to go to Oregon where Michelle's family

lived. Michelle wanted to be close to her mom and help her run the business."

And that's exactly what they did. By November 1990 they had sold their home and settled in Medford, a city of about 55,000. Abdill joined her family in running the Annette Abdill Real Estate School and later opened ESP Property Management with Ellis.

"They have this whole female family," says Willeford. "There's Roxie and Michelle; Roxanne's daughter, Lorri; and her 3-year-old daughter, Hannah. And there's Michelle's mother, Annette. They make up the neatest family."

And, says Willeford, they were generous in sharing their family with others. He cites the example of Rex Jessee and Bill Rueger, a longtime gay male couple active in the Southern Oregon community. Both died this year of AIDS complications.

"Michelle and Roxanne were always there for Rex and Bill. They made sure there was a constant flow of food and that errands were run. Michelle was a real administrator," he laughs. "Even when Hannah was a tiny baby they would bring her over to [Rueger's and Jessee's home]. Rex loved Hannah so, and she called him Grandpa Rex."

Ellis and Abdill became highly respected members of the business community and were also deeply involved in church activities. Ellis was on the board of trustees of the Ashland First United Methodist Church, and Abdill was the head of the church's growth committee.

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