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"They were both personal friends of mine. They were close with my wife and my daughter," says the Rev. Michael Powell, the church's pastor. The 48-year-old Powell has known the two for three years.

"They were a vital part of our church family," he says. "They shared many significant moments here. [Two years ago] they were in charge of the lighting of the Christ candle on Christmas Eve. They did it as a couple.

"Michelle, who was a very animated person, was terrified, like she didn't know if lightning was going to strike," he laughs. "That meant a great deal to her. And two months ago she served sacrament with me. She held the bread and the wine. That may have made some people nervous, and they could have shied away from her and taken the bread and wine from me—but they didn't."

He adds: "They were a beautiful couple, and they really complimented each other—Michelle was extroverted, while Roxanne was much more quiet and very dignified. Michelle was short, and Roxanne was tall. They were perfect together."

Cherie Garland, president of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays of the Rogue Valley, spoke with Abdill the night before she disappeared.

According to Garland, Abdill was sharing news that she had just received from a lay leader at the Methodist church in Medford. "The lay leader informed Michelle that the congregation had voted 100 percent to consider the possibility of becoming a reconciling church," she says. Reconciling congregations are United Methodist churches that publicly welcome all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, to participate fully in the life of their communities.

"She called me at about 10:30 pm. She usually doesn't call that late, but she was so excited," says the 65-year-old Garland. "I talked with Michelle every day. [Abdill was the editor of a PFLAG newsletter.] I considered them to be my daughters."

We talked with Garland the morning after it was discovered the couple had been murdered.

"I'm sitting here this morning drinking the last bit of coffee that came from fresh beans they gave me. They knew how much I enjoyed fresh beans," she told us. "I wanted to save it and have it with them.... We were all supposed to get together tonight to have pizza and decorate the tree."

Abdill and Ellis were also set to meet up early next year with Garland's lesbian daughter and her partner in Palm Springs for the annual Dinah Shore Golf Tournament.

"They were so dynamic. If something had to be done, they would do it," says Garland. "Roxie came over one day and helped my husband put up a 6-foot privacy fence. That's the way they were, and I loved them very, very much."

The night the couple's bodies were discovered also happened to be the evening of a scheduled PFLAG meeting at the Ashland church.

Not surprisingly, the news of the murders transformed the assembly into an emotionally charged gathering. It was a place to cry and express fear and outrage. The media were kept out.

Several dozen people gathered in the Methodist church basement, which featured the typical hodgepodge of discarded, mismatched couches.

"I brought candles and a large photograph that I have of Roxanne and Michelle," says Garland. "We sat there in the candlelight. There was something very womblike about it."

The meeting included grief counselors and faith leadership representing many denominations.

"We needed a safe space to express ourselves,"

says Garland. "The grief, fear and anger we felt."

Prior to Acremant's arrest fear was widespread. That was understandable. After all, there was no known reason why anyone would want to kill either Ellis or Abdill. And Medford—actually all of Jackson County, with the exception of artsy Ashland—is known as a very conservative area. Though Oregonians overall rejected the last statewide anti-gay initiative, the measure won a majority in Jackson County, where the vote was 34,467 to 30,065. Abdill and Ellis were very outspoken against the measure.

"Am I afraid? Yes, a little," Garland told us. "Will I stop doing what I'm doing? Absolutely not."

Anna Holmes, who spoke with us before a suspect had been arrested, agreed: "Some people's reaction may be to go back into the closet, but it makes me want to stand up on my rooftop and yell, 'I'm a lesbian. Don't you dare hurt me!'"

This is basically what Medford police have said: Ellis was scheduled to show a man a duplex on Dec. 4 at 11 am. Ellis' daughter, Lorri Ellis, tried to page her mother several times but did not get a call until late that afternoon. Roxanne Ellis said she was going to go shopping. But an hour later, she called Abdill to say that she was at the duplex and her car battery was dead. Abdill left to give her a jump-start.

When Lorri Ellis went by the duplex that night in search of the two, she didn't find either. But she did find Abdill's car—undisturbed and with the woman's purse and credit cards inside.

The family called the police, and law enforcement officials began looking for the women, the man Ellis had met at the duplex, and Ellis' silver Toyota pickup truck.

The pickup was found three days later on Dec. 7, miles away in a Medford apartment complex parking lot, with the bound bodies of the women

a testament to the community's strength in the face of adversity.

Willeford, who many years ago was "taken on a two-hour, 110-mph joy ride and repeatedly beaten" by two young men after leaving a Texas gay bar, says: "We will also persevere."

"This is our worst nightmare as sexual minorities—to be killed because of who we are," says Allanya Guenther, executive director of the Portland-based Phoenix Rising Foundation, which specializes in counseling services for sexual minorities. "Even if we didn't know these women, we can identify with them. We know that this could easily be us."

In Portland, hundreds braved torrential downpours and slick roads to attend a service at the First Congregational Church on Dec. 10. Most of these people did not know Ellis or Abdill personally, but needed to come together to remember the couple and take a collective stand against bigotry and



Memorials for Ellis and Abdill were held in many Oregon towns, among them Medford, Ashland, Corvallis, Roseburg and Portland. Pictured above (and on the cover) is the Portland gathering, held Sunday, Dec. 10.

She too admitted that she was worried that being very public could have placed her and her family at risk. "Catherine is so precious to me...." she says, her voice drifting off. "You know," she says a moment later. "I always knew this movement would have its martyrs. I just didn't think it would be people I know."

Even walking down to the mailbox became an edgier venture. "Catherine told me to take our Doberman, O'Malley, with me. I did," says Holmes, who helped organize a gathering of 300 lesbians a few days after the killings were discovered.

The event was held in a safe and discreet location and was designed to give the women a chance to express their feelings.

"They came from Northern California, Southern Oregon, all over," says Holmes, a mental health professional who is a member of an urgent response team.

Other community gatherings were also held during the days immediately following the discovery of the bodies.

inside. An autopsy determined they were both killed by two shots each to the head at close range. They were not tortured or sexually assaulted.

Police initially said they were exploring the possibility that Ellis and Abdill were victims of a hate crime, though they maintained they had no evidence to support that contention. Lorri Ellis, meanwhile, has said from the beginning she believed this was a sexual-orientation-related hate crime.

Acremant was arrested six days after the bodies were discovered.

"During one of the [community meetings], a rabbi from a synagogue in Ashland told the story of two Jewish girls who were murdered in Medford several years ago," says Jim Willeford. "At that time, the Jewish community was considering plans to build a synagogue here. When the murders occurred, there was so much grief and horror, and the community came together—much like we are doing over this—and asked whether they should keep going."

Today, says Willeford, the synagogue stands—

violence.

Hands clasped, the hundreds pledged in part: "From this day forward, you can count on me. Asking for guidance and strength from all that is sacred, I promise to work for equal rights, justice and respect for all and to live with courage and love. I claim you as a neighbor and friend. I will not forsake you." A candlelight vigil was held immediately afterward.

Back in Ashland, meanwhile, the Rev. Michael Powell says: "We just had our first Sunday service without Roxanne or Michelle. They always sat in the same place.

"We were wondering and watching to see if anyone would sit in their seats—I mean, everyone knew that's where they sat," he continues. "During the service, two beautiful elderly women filled that space.... It seemed like the perfect thing."

PFLAG of the Rogue Valley is seeking donations to memorialize Abdill and Ellis. Checks may be made out to Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, PO Box 13, Ashland, OR 97520.