

Ann and Bill Shepherd didn't settle for quiet acceptance.

Sure, maybe they initially found it unnerving when Susie, one of their five daughters, came out to them in December 1971—just two years after Stonewall (and light years away from the celebrated phenomenon known as Lesbian Chic).

Rather than wallowing in fear or even quietly tolerating their daughter's sexuality, the couple went on to become leading advocates for lesbian and gay rights.

It seemed in keeping with their nature—Bill Shepherd, a Portland attorney, had written a number of scripts for the Oregon State Bar Association for a television series called *The Fountain of Justice*, about civil disobedience and the law.

Ann Shepherd, meanwhile, was a "newspaper writer/editor-turned-housewife who was the publicity committee of every civic group for which she volunteered," says Susie Shepherd, a legal secretary.

In 1975 the Portland Town Council, an early gay rights group, was lining up testimony for statewide legislation barring discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, public accommodations and employment.

The Shepherds were asked to testify. While Bill was working that day, Ann agreed and, says Susie, "took Salem by storm."

The bill eventually was voted out of committee with a do-pass recommendation, only to lose on the floor by one vote, because, says Susie, the swing legislator had to run home to tend to an emergency.

During that time Susie was herself very active in PTC. She'd share ideas and discuss her projects with her parents, who willingly opened themselves up to gay kids who had less-supportive parents.

"Many young people started calling Bill and Ann 'Dad' and 'Mom,' because they had been kicked out of their homes or churches. Mom and Dad couldn't understand any parent rejecting his or her own offspring, and proudly watched their family grow exponentially," says Susie.

In an effort to extinguish so much misunderstanding, Bill and Ann Shepherd, along with Rita and the Rev. Charles Knapp, good friends who were also parents of a gay child, decided to form a parents' support group called Parents of Gays, which met monthly at the Shepherds' home.

"For a long time if they had four couples it was a big meeting," recounts Susie.

Despite its small size, the group made its presence felt, producing a brochure to pass out at Gay Pride Day.

All the while the Shepherds appeared on television programs and in newspaper articles. They were a hot item on the gay speakers' circuit. They lobbied for antidiscrimination legislation.

In 1980, when the organization was created that eventually was named Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Bill drew up legal documents making Portland's POG a national affiliate. Five years later the Shepherds were instrumental in organizing the International Convention of PFLAG, which was held in



Bill and Ann with Misha the Dog, summer 1994

LOVING PARENTS

An April 12 dinner honors longtime Portland-area civil rights activists Bill and Ann Shepherd

by Inga Sorensen



Ann at the breakfast table, 1995

Portland.

It wasn't the only way Bill utilized his legal expertise to assist the gay and lesbian community. In the mid-1970s when, says Susie, Portland police "were very fond of harassing gay men, especially entrapping them in downtown public rest rooms and arresting them," Bill started the PTC Legal Resource Committee, whose initial goal was to let gay men know "that they didn't have to take this kind of harassment and that unbiased legal representation was available."

According to Susie, after two years police finally "got the message and backed off," which in turn allowed Bill and other supportive attorneys to begin focusing on educating the gay community about the need to acquire wills and other documents designed to "prevent homophobic families from destroying years of memories when one partner would die."

When the Oregon Citizens Alliance stepped forward with a series of anti-gay-rights initiatives beginning in the late 1980s, the Shepherds were there providing outspoken resistance.

In March 1995, Bill Shepherd passed away. Yet according to Susie, her father "practiced law until 10 days before he died, and he went out quite literally passing message."

She shares this story: "He was in a coma at the

nursing home and the attending nurse was inquiring about this man she never got to know. Mother was talking about PFLAG, which prompted the nurse to say that her own daughter had come out to her just the summer before. And then she ran and brought in another nurse who had just moved to Oregon with her partner of several years.

"As Mom shared area gay resources with the two nurses, we realized that Daddy had just slipped on out, secure in the knowledge that so much of the work he pioneered with Mother two decades hence was continuing to be carried on."

On April 12, Metropolitan Community Church of Portland will host the first Shepherds' Award

Dinner at the Portland Hilton.

Community leaders, along with keynote speaker Kathleen Saadat, will honor the Shepherds for their numerous contributions to the community during the past quarter century.

According to MCC, Ann Shepherd has given her approval for the event to become the church's signature fund raiser. (The Shepherds were active in the spiritual community as well, both serving as ordained ministers in the First Presbyterian Church.)

Ann Shepherd has a moving memory about the early days of Portland's MCC: "I vividly recall Mother's Day back when MCC was still meeting at Centenary Wilbur Methodist Church," she says. "My own pastor had made a scurrilous attack on gays in his sermon, and I was hurting badly when Bill and I walked into MCC that evening so that I could say a few words to my surrogate children. The love and peace there was overwhelming and strengthening. We both felt whole again."

As for the event honoring her and her husband, she says: "I feel humbled, proud and overwhelmed, and frankly, am as close to speechless as is possible—for me, that is. I say 'me,' although it certainly is 'us,' since my gay-rights efforts back in the early 1970s couldn't have amounted to a fistful of dandelion fuzz if Bill hadn't been there beside, behind and ahead of me—always strong, always supportive and always bursting with new ideas, getting across the message of what wonderful human beings gays and lesbians are, and that they must receive all the civil rights the rest of us automatically have."

For ticket information about the Shepherds' Award Dinner, call MCC pastor Roy Cole at 281-8868.



From left: Susie, Ann and Jean Shepherd in March 1996