

# DEATH OF A HERO

**A tragic accident claims the life of social justice activist Charles Steele** by Inga Sorensen

There were occasions when Lake Oswego resident Donna Saffir admittedly went off on those who maligned gay and lesbian people.

"I remember doing a radio program and someone called in and said, 'Do you know, Donna, what your son does? Do you know about the unhealthy behaviors he engages in?'" recounts Saffir, who is president of the Portland chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

"My immediate response was to slam down the phone. Those kinds of remarks could really get me going," she continues, with an easy laugh. "In the past, I responded with comments like: 'Bigot...blah, blah, blah.'"

In the past, that is. Now Saffir is more likely to gently guide a person through a process that, while rarely culminating in agreement, at least resonates with the more fulfilling sense that substantive dialogue has occurred—a sense that both sides were actually listening to one another.

"Chuck had such enormous compassion, not only for those in the gay and lesbian community, but also for those who didn't understand homosexuality," she says. "The way he could reach out and connect with people was very, very special. The way I respond is different because of his example."

Saffir is referring to Ashland resident Charles "Chuck" Steele, 73, who died April 17 when the camper van he was riding in rolled over north of Medford. Steele's wife of four decades, Candace, was driving the vehicle. The couple was headed to the coast to celebrate their 41st wedding anniversary. Candace, who was injured in the accident, was released from the hospital April 19.

The Steeles are known for their seemingly tireless work on behalf of social justice issues, including gay and lesbian causes.

Chuck Steele was active in, among others, PFLAG, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Jackson County Human Rights Coalition and the American Friends Service Committee. He was an outspoken supporter of gay, lesbian and bisexual rights and testified before several local and state government committees, university forums and service clubs.

Those who knew the couple say Chuck and Candace were near-perfect complements—she being the more fevered and extroverted, while he was the undertone who got things done with a quiet grace and even temperament.

"He was a dear sweet man and very intelligent, and yet he didn't possess a bit of arrogance," says Anne Bliss, a former Portland PFLAG president who has known the Steeles since 1993.

On paper, Charles Steele's professional history is impressive. He served as a U.S. Army radio technician during World War II. Following the war, he earned advanced degrees in electrical engineering from the University of Illinois and in computer science from Stanford University.

He published numerous technical papers and is the author of *Numerical Computation of Electric and Magnetic Fields*, a reference volume for professionals. He was a member of the Magnetic Society, Eta Kappa Nu, an honorary electrical engineering society, and a lifetime member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers.

Those credentials would bloat many a head, but not Chuck's, say those who knew him.

"He was totally without pretense," Saffir says.

Indeed. The Steeles seemed to enjoy life's basics: family, community and nature. Materialism and attitude were not in the mix.

Steele was active in the National Audubon Society and was a member of the Sierra Club.

According to Bliss, the Steeles first met while on a Sierra Club backpacking trip in California. Their enthusiasm for the outdoors never faltered.

In 1987, the duo moved from Minnesota to Ashland, where they became immersed in community activities.

When the string of anti-gay ballot initiatives was launched in Oregon beginning in 1988, the Steeles—who have two lesbian daughters—were out front working to extinguish anti-gay ignorance, says Mitzi Henderson, a California resident who has known the Steeles since 1986.

"They were among the first to be out there fighting," says Henderson, who was national PFLAG president from 1992 to 1996. "They were courageous and at the same time warm."

Cherie Garland is the former president of Rogue Valley PFLAG. She has known the

Steeles for nearly a decade and says Chuck had a "fire in the belly" when it came to gay issues.

"But it wasn't a fire that would singe the hair off your head," she tells *Just Out*. "It was a particular determination. He was a very gentle, patient man who could sit and talk for hours if that's what it took."

Garland also describes Chuck and Candace as "a real team."

"She had a presence and was outspoken," Garland says. "Chuck was more in the background but was always there with her and ready with wisdom."

In an April 21 editorial, the *Ashland Daily Tidings* ran a piece headlined "Farewell to a hero."

It read, in part: "Ashland lost a hero last week... If a hero is someone who can be counted upon to seek justice and fairness for all, then Chuck Steele's role in PFLAG... was a hero-making part."

"The father of two lesbian daughters, Chuck was an outspoken supporter of gay rights and was an active, public participant in PFLAG, marching in parades and acting as a spokesperson...."

"To his family and friends, Chuck Steele undoubtedly was a hero all the time. What they may not be aware of is that he was a hero to the rest of us, too. Our condolences and best wishes go out to his family today."

Survivors, in addition to his wife, include three daughters: Danae Steele of University Place, Wash.; Heidi Steele of San Francisco; Heather Steele of Santa Cruz, Calif.; and a grandchild.

■ Memorial contributions may be made to Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, 1101 14th St. NW, Suite 1030, Washington, DC 20005; Rogue Valley Monthly Meeting of Religious Society of Friends, PO Box 779, Ashland, OR 97520; the Nature Conservancy, 1815 N Lynn St., Arlington, VA 22209.



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