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Friends remember author and activist Sidney Abbott at memorial

By [Tim Gannon](#)



Sidney Abbott in a 1992 photo by Robert Giard taken in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. (Credit: New York Public Library Collection)
Sidney Abbott was a lot of things to many different people.

To some, she was a noted feminist and lesbian rights activist. To others she was a warm friend and champion for the underdog.

To her nephew, David Abbott, she was his “cool aunt who lived in the Village.”

Friends and family gathered for a memorial service at North Fork United Methodist Church in Cutchogue Saturday to share their stories about Ms. Abbott, who died in an April 15 fire at her Southold home. She was 77.

In 1972, Ms. Abbott and Barbara Love co-wrote a book called “Sappho was a Right-on Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism.”

“It was the first non-fiction book with a positive view of the lesbian lifestyle,” Ms. Love recalled at Saturday’s memorial, which was attended by about 60 people. “It was published in 1972, when we were still considered sick by the American Psychiatric Association.”

Ms. Love read from the introduction of the book: “Our goal is to be able to go about our lives as human beings, as women, as lesbians, unselfconsciously, and to be able to spend all of our energy and time on work and fun and not on the arts of concealment or self-hatred. But we know that such a simple goal will be achieved only by sweeping adjustments in the way many people think.”

She said the book was written in 1971 and, while it may sound a bit dated, still has meaning for many.

“A lot of people are still challenged with very tough choices about their lives and their family and their careers,” Ms. Love said. “So, for a lot of people, this is still very valid, I think.”

Ms. Abbott was born in 1937 to a military family that often moved from place to place, the Rev. Alison Caiola said in recapping Ms. Abbott’s early years, having spoken to friends and family.

Ms. Abbott’s father, Ward, was a career military man who once worked for General Douglas MacArthur as an engineer and would retire as a Colonel. She also was a relative of Phillip Livingston, who signed the Declaration of Independence.

Ms. Abbott attended Smith College in Massachusetts as an art major, but found that many of the lesbians there lived in fear, as members of the faculty would periodically expose or even expel them, Rev. Caiola said. She left after her third year at Smith College and graduated from the University of New Mexico.

Despite this, her work is now displayed in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, Rev. Caiola said.

Ms. Abbott joined the National Organization for Women in 1969 and became one of the first people to speak out for lesbian rights on panels at the New York chapter of NOW and at Columbia University, where she was a graduate student. At the time, lesbian-rights efforts met with opposition from then-NOW president Betty Friedan.

Ms. Abbott also became a member of a group called Lavender Menace, a lesbian radical feminist group that protested the exclusion of lesbians and lesbian issues from women's rights movements in 1970.

"I met Sidney in February 1970," said Artemis March at Saturday's memorial. "There were three of us — Barbara (Love), Sidney and myself — and we were starting something that had never been done before: lesbian-consciousness raising."

Ms. March and Ms. Abbott were part of a group called "Radicalesbians" which in 1970 wrote a 10-page manifesto called "The Woman-Identified Woman" and distributed it during the Lavender Menace protests over the lack of lesbian-rights speakers at the "Second Congress to Unite Woman" in New York City that year.

"Whatever the situation called for, she was there, to bring her energy to it," Ms. March said Saturday.

Ms. Abbott, who spent her later years in Southold, also was engaged in politics locally, and loved animals, even becoming involved in a horse rescue effort in 2002 with longtime friend Joan Nixon.

"She had many hardships at the end of her life and she felt that she was forgotten and left alone," Ms. Nixon said Saturday. "But the way we have to look at it is that Sidney is free. She's happy and free ... she has overcome the hardships that she had and she now lives as a spirit in the spirit world."

Ms. Abbott was a member of First Universalist Church in Southold, which burned down about a month before the fire that killed her.

Susi Young, president of First Universalist Church, recalled Ms. Abbott Sunday, saying, "Sidney was quite the character. A great spirit, humor and intellect. She was a strong feminist, writer and activist. She was also a great fighter for women's rights and a tireless Democrat. Sydney definitely kept me on my toes and I will miss her."