

In Step With June  
By Jane Biddinger

The first time is always the hardest. The first day on the job. The birth of the first child. The first AIDS walk without June Delph.

Just as in each of the four prior years, my thoughts turned to June during the week leading up to September 26, 2009 and Cincinnati's 20<sup>th</sup> AIDS Walk. After all, it was June who encouraged me to walk. It was June who was the leader of our pack. It was June who passed away July 1st.

It's strange what brings two souls together. How we become friends. Sometimes it's a mutual acquaintance. Sometimes it's happenstance. Once in a blue moon it seems destined. June was my once in a blue moon person.

Under normal circumstances, the likelihood that June and I would cross paths was miniscule at best. She and husband Harold lived in Cincinnati. My husband and I call Fairfield home.

To an outsider, June and I had little in common. June being an employee at the University of Cincinnati before her career as a realtor extraordinaire focusing on the Clifton area. I kept books for a manufacturing company in Woodlawn.

Though invisible to the untrained eye, June and I had a common bond. We both were mothers of gay sons. A kinship thicker than water or blood. We met at PFLAG. My husband and I were regulars. June and her husband Harold were newcomers.

June and I both were in unfamiliar terrain, stumbling along a path neither of us ever dreamed of. While I grappled with the sexuality of my oldest child, June grieved the loss of her younger child, a son, to AIDS.

When I first learned of our son's sexual orientation, I was afraid to utter the A word. If I dared, my son might be stricken. I was terrified. I told him of my concern for his health, but the word stuck in my throat so I didn't use it, but I was certain my tone let him know I wasn't speaking of the common cold. He promised me he would take precautions. I trusted he would. What more could I do? It was too much to bear, so I blocked it out of my mind, tucking it deep into the recesses of my subconscious where I hoped it would stay. In my little world, my son would be single, celibate, and safe. Except for an occasional nightmare, I held my fear at bay as I focused on the issues at hand. Telling family and friends. Fretting over co-workers reactions.

PFLAG was my salvation. I looked forward to hearing the happily-ever-after stories each month. Accepting siblings. Supportive grandparents. Understanding friends. This is why I came. The hope and promise kept me going from month to month. And I was making progress.

Then came June. June whose son died of AIDS. In June's face I saw her pain. On her slumped shoulders I saw her sorrow. My heart went out to June, but as she talked about losing Paul, I became unnerved and frightened again. June was living my nightmare and the nightmare of every other gay man's mother. She had outlived her son and no woman I know wants to face that. I didn't like being reminded of that possibility.

I was content being the ostrich and tried to put June's story out of my mind. Sometimes I was successful. In time, June grew stronger. Her face softened and her smile returned. Her shoulders lifted along with her spirits. Not that June forgot about Paul; that's not feasible. But June did grow beyond her heartache and into a life of advocacy. She reached out to group after group in the gay community. June was named *Duchess & Keeper of All Children* by the Court. True to that title, she was active in PFLAG long after her need for the organization was satisfied. She organized and led 11 teams for the AIDS walks raising \$20,860. She worked relentlessly in spite of her broken heart. Or perhaps because it was broken, she was able to share its pieces more easily.

I never told June, but I credit her with yanking my head from the false-security of the sand and teaching me there is no bliss in ignorance. June brought me face to face with the reality of AIDS. How it does affect normal people. Normal families. Just like my own. I could no longer think of an AIDS infected person as a statistic. That number now had a face and name—Paul Delph. Son. Brother. Talented musician. Not unlike my own son.

Once my ears were sand-free, I became aware of the attitude that all gays have to do to avoid AIDS is to give up gay sex. No mention made of a loving relationship. No mention of that same recommendation to prevent sexually transmitted disease in heterosexuals. I met a minister working with AIDS patients. She told how often it's as difficult for parents to accept that sexual orientation of their child as it is to accept the diagnosis of AIDS.

Five years ago, I accepted June's invitation to be part of the Delph team walking to stop AIDS. June taught me that fear can paralyze. Paralysis can be overcome by knowledge. With knowledge comes responsibility to act.

The forecast for the morning of the walk called for a gloomy, overcast, and drizzly day. Being a fan of neither umbrellas nor sweat, it's been my habit to pray for sunshine and cool temperatures. This year was different. Praying for sunshine didn't feel right. The inclement weather was fitting. Just as June's family and friends hadn't finished shedding tears for June, neither had the heavens.

We walked in the mist. Missing June.