



Kuehl, Sheila James (b. 1941)

by Linda Rapp

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A photograph of Sheila Kuehl created by Angela Brinskele in 2006. Courtesy Angela Brinskele.

Once best known as a youthful actor, Sheila James Kuehl is now a respected legislator and a vigorous advocate for glbtq rights.

A native of Tulsa, Oklahoma, born February 19, 1941, Kuehl grew up in Los Angeles. She took dance and acting classes as a child and made her professional debut on a radio show in 1949. She had a recurring role as a tomboy daughter on the television comedy *Trouble with Father* (1950-1956) and appeared on other shows and in several films during her teen years.

Kuehl enrolled in the University of California at Los Angeles in 1957 and earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1962.

While attending college, Kuehl continued acting. Her role as Zelda Gilroy in the situation comedy *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959-1963) is the one for which most American television viewers remember her best.

Zelda was continually frustrated in her efforts to become one of the "many loves" of the handsome Dobie (played by Dwayne Hickman), a sweet-natured but rather conventional boy who was seeking a beauty as a girlfriend. Atypically for female sitcom characters at the time, Zelda was extremely smart and assertive, but being "plain," she never had a chance at love.

Kuehl did not have a boyfriend in real life either, but she did have a girlfriend. She had been expelled from her UCLA sorority when some of her sisters discovered letters to her from her lesbian lover.

Like many gay and lesbian actors before her who were fearful that revelation of their sexual orientation would ruin their careers, Kuehl adopted the ruse of having a heterosexual partner, inventing a boyfriend whom she could evoke in conversations on the set.

The popularity of the Zelda character with audiences led to plans for a spin-off show for Kuehl, but the pilot was suddenly canceled. Shortly thereafter, a network executive took her aside and told her that "some of the powers that be at CBS had decided that [she] was just a little too butch."

When *Dobie Gillis* ended its run, Kuehl joined the cast of the comedy *Broadside* (1964-1965), which co-starred Dick Sargent. Acting opportunities dwindled after that, however, so Kuehl embarked on a new career, becoming an assistant dean of students at UCLA in 1969 and later being promoted to associate dean.

She left UCLA in 1975 to enter Harvard Law School, where she excelled as a student. She won the Harvard moot court competition, becoming only the second woman to do so.

While in law school Kuehl fell in love with a woman who was out, and she began the difficult process of coming out herself, first to her sister and later to her parents, all of whom proved supportive.

Upon receiving her law degree, Kuehl returned to California and went into private practice, specializing in civil rights and women's issues. She was a tireless advocate for victims of domestic violence. In 1989 she became a co-founder of and managing attorney for the California Women's Law Center.

Beginning in 1985 she shared her expertise in the classroom, teaching at the law schools of Loyola University, UCLA, and the University of Southern California.

Kuehl made her first run for political office in 1994. With her successful campaign for a seat in the California Assembly, she became the first openly gay person in the state's legislature.

Kuehl was an eloquent voice for glbtq rights, as well as for other concerns, including family leave, child support, the protection of victims of family violence, the quality of health care, and the environment.

George magazine named her one of the "twenty most fascinating women in politics" in 1996. The same year she was chosen to speak at the Democratic National Convention on the topic of domestic violence.

Kuehl acknowledged in a 1997 interview that "it was very, very hard to be the only gay person" in the Assembly. She said that the election of Carole Migden, an openly lesbian former San Francisco city supervisor, was a welcome development, but noted that they were still "just two people out of eighty."

They became two powerful people, however; Kuehl was elected the Speaker pro Tempore, and Migden was named the chair of the appropriations committee.

Migden expressed optimism over the roles that they had earned, saying, "It can't help but forecast success when one lesbian oversees every spending bill and the other presides normally over the house."

One of Kuehl's deep concerns was the safety of glbtq youth in schools. Early on in her legislative career, she introduced a bill to make schools responsible for protecting students from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. After four years of efforts, she nearly achieved victory in 1999 with her Assembly Bill 222, only to see the legislation defeated by one vote. Undeterred, she inserted the language into Assembly Bill 537, rallied fellow Democrats, and finally succeeded in passing the measure into law in the waning hours of the Assembly's annual session. Kuehl called it the piece of legislation of which she was proudest.

Because of term limits in California, Kuehl was unable to seek reelection to the Assembly in 2000. After addressing the Democratic National Convention on the subject of diversity, she went on the campaign trail and won a seat in the state Senate, where she has continued to advocate for glbtq rights and other issues of importance.

In 2004 the Log Cabin Republicans fielded a gay man, Leonard Lanzi--a former executive director of the Boy Scouts in Santa Barbara, who had been forced to leave the organization because of its discriminatory policies--to run against Kuehl. She won handily and is currently serving her last Senate term allowable under the California term-limits law.

In the Senate Kuehl chairs the Natural Resources and Water Committee, the Budget Subcommittee on Resources, Water, and Energy, the Select Committee on School Safety, and the Select Committee on the Health Insurance Crisis in California, and sits on several others. During her distinguished career she has written over 130 bills that have been passed into law. She has also spoken in favor of bills to legalize gay marriage, which have so far been unsuccessful.

Kuehl has also been a strong supporter of National Coming Out Day, a project designed to help glbtq people stand up and express their identity with pride. She was at the side of her friend and *Broadside* co-star Dick Sargent when he came out at a 1991 event. In 2003, as part of the celebration of National Coming Out

Week, Kuehl had the honor of cutting the lavender ribbon at the grand opening of the LGBT Resource Center at her alma mater, UCLA.

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