



Lynne Stewart: A Revolutionary Life Well-Lived

A Biographical Glimpse

by Sally O'Brien and Bob Lederer

Lynne Stewart led an illustrious life as a radical attorney, revolutionary activist, friend, mother, grandmother and 55-year-long partner to her beloved husband, Ralph Poynter. She was a sterling example of Che Guevara's famous dictum that "the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love."

In her early years Lynne worked as a school librarian and teacher. In the early '60s she became embroiled in the struggle for community control of schools, still denied to communities of color today. Seeing the persecution of activists by police and courts inspired her to go to law school. Over the years, she represented hundreds of criminal defendants, often at no charge.

In a tribute to Lynne, political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal said:

"For decades, she and her husband Ralph fought for New York's political activists and revolutionaries. But mostly, they fought for the freedom of the poor and dispossessed of New York's Black and Brown ghettos. She – they – fought often and fought well.... The late activist lawyer Bill Kunstler once opined that defense lawyers should be

officers of their clients, instead of officers of the court. Lynne Stewart was an officer of her clients; a People's Lawyer, beloved and respected."

In addition, Lynne worked extensively – as both a lawyer and street activist – in the early years of the struggle for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender rights, including providing weekly free legal consults through the Gay Men's Health Alliance.

Throughout the 1980s, Lynne Stewart represented several revolutionaries facing major felony charges. She was the attorney for former Weather Underground member David Gilbert, charged in the 1981 aborted expropriation of a Brink's truck by the Black Liberation Army and white anti-imperialists. David and his co-defendants, Kuwesi Balagoon (who died of AIDS in prison in 1986) and Judy Clark, faced felony-murder charges in the shooting deaths of two guards and a police officer. David was never accused of firing a shot. The defendants waged a political defense, indicting the system of white supremacy. They were convicted and sentenced to 75 years to life. In a federal case arising out of the same incident, Lynne, along with co-counsel



SATURDAY, APRIL 22, 2017

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1070 Dean Street

Brooklyn, NY 11216.

Or visit LynneStewart.org

Chokwe Lumumba, won an acquittal for their client, Black liberation fighter and musician Bilal Sunni Ali, who had been charged with conspiracy.

In 1986 Lynne represented Richard Williams, part of a group of underground anti-imperialist revolutionaries (the Ohio 7) charged with bombing corporate and government offices, incidents in which no one was injured. Richard was convicted and sentenced to 45 years. He was also prosecuted twice for the killing of a New Jersey police officer. In his first trial, his co-defendant, Tom Manning, testified he shot the officer in self-defense and that Richard was not even present. There was a hung jury. In the second trial, Richard was convicted and sentenced to life. (He died in prison in 2005.)

Also in 1986 Lynne Stewart teamed with movement attorney Bill Kunstler to defend a young Bronx man charged with the attempted murder of 6 police officers. The controversial case received constant front-page coverage and gained her a high media profile. Larry Davis – who later changed his name to Adam Abdul-Hakeem – claimed self-defense when a team of officers raided his sister's apartment, claiming they simply wanted to question him about the killing of suspected drug dealers, for which he was also charged. Lynne and Bill argued that the charges were a frame-up to excuse the police raid and that the case exposed rampant police corruption. The jury accepted Davis's self-defense argument and acquitted him on both charges but found him guilty of illegal possession of weapons. This was apparently the first time a defendant was acquitted in a shootout with police based on self-defense. (Adam Abdul-Hakeem

was later tried and convicted on another murder charge and was killed in prison in 2008.)

In the final years of her legal career, before her later disbarment as part of her 2006 sentence (see below), Lynne defended several Muslims facing charges based on secret evidence. She won several significant victories in those cases.

But it was her role as one of the attorneys for Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman that brought her the greatest notoriety, and ultimately led to her own imprisonment.

The blind Sheikh was the exiled leader of a militant Islamist organization in Egypt. In 1995, in a media climate of anti-terrorist fervor, he and nine co-defendants were convicted of seditious conspiracy, conspiracy to murder Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and plotting to blow up several New York landmarks. Lynne and the other attorneys argued that the charges against Rahman were trumped up – with the help of an FBI informant who acted as a provocateur – and that the Sheikh had been exercising his free-speech rights to urge the overthrow of an oppressive regime in his native Egypt.

As Lynne stated, “He’s not the first person to go to prison for his beliefs, and he won’t be the last.” He was sentenced to life in prison, and he died in February 2017.

In 2002, George W. Bush's Attorney General, John Ashcroft, traveled to Manhattan to announce Lynne's indictment on charges of providing “material support to terrorists” — merely for releasing a statement to the press from her client, Sheikh Rahman, an act prosecutors maintained was “passing messages” to his supporters in Egypt.

Three years later, after a trial in which prosecutors invoked the spectre of the 9/11 attacks, jurors convicted Lynne.

Prosecutors demanded a 30-year prison sentence. Amid a massive nationwide campaign of letter-writing to the judge, John Koeltl, Lynne was sentenced to 2-1/2 years. Outraged government prosecutors appealed – calling the sentence “too lenient.” While the appeal was underway, and at the urging of the Obama Justice Department, Lynne was suddenly ordered to surrender to U.S. marshals in November 2009. In 2010 a Federal appeals court ordered Judge Koeltl to review and re-sentence Lynne. Her new sentence, imposed on her at age 70 with one bout of breast cancer behind her, was *ten years in federal prison*. Family members called it a de facto death sentence.

Within three years, Lynne's cancer returned and spread to several other organs, and in August 2013, after lengthy delays in getting proper care at the federal prison in Texas that held her, the prison doctor estimated her life expectancy to be 18 months. In a letter to Judge Koeltl, Lynne wrote, “I do not intend to go ‘gentle into that good night,’ as [Welsh poet] Dylan Thomas wrote. There is much to be done in this world. I do know that I do not want to die here in prison — a strange and loveless place...I want to be where all is familiar...in a word, home.”

For 9 long months, Ralph Poynter led a relentless international campaign to win compassionate release for Lynne. There were many protests, vigils, and statements of support from

attorneys and activist organizations.

An online petition received 85,000 signatures, and the support of such prominent voices as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Noam Chomsky, and Dick Gregory, who initiated a hunger fast in solidarity. Even the prison warden indicated her support, but it took several more months before Lynne's application was approved by the Bureau of Prisons and quickly signed by Judge Koeltl.

Lynne was granted compassionate release on New Year's Eve, 2013.

On January 1, 2014, the then 74-year-old grandmother arrived at LaGuardia Airport to a wildly enthusiastic

greeting by over a hundred supporters and family members, expressing her joy and gratitude to all who had worked for her freedom.

Lynne stayed true to her promise of not going “gentle into that good night.” Courageous and active, Lynne Stewart never gave in to the medical assertion that she had 18 months to live. Defiant to the end, Lynne lived three years and three months more – actively organizing and speaking out for the freedom of political prisoners. She died in her home, surrounded by her beloved Ralph, grandchildren, family and close friends.

Lynne is survived by husband Ralph Poynter, son Geoffrey Stewart, daughters Brenna Stewart and Zenobia Brown, sister Laurel Freedman, brother Donald Feltham, and 15 grandchildren. Her courageous advocacy and activism for justice and revolution are missed by many thousands worldwide. ❁

