

Activist, 'Lesbian Grandma' Cindy Clardy Dies While Snorkeling in the Caribbean

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Cindy Clardy was known to many in Michigan's LGBTQ+ community as a queer activist and a "lesbian grandma," as she described herself. Tragically, Clardy died while snorkeling in Turks and Caicos on Feb. 28. While exact details are unknown, Clardy was in the Caribbean on the 50th anniversary Olivia cruise with her wife, Jocelyn Walters. In shock, Walters has asked for privacy. But Clardy's daughter, Stephanie Clardy, said in a Facebook post that her "warrior mother lost her soul to the sea." Clardy was 72.

Clardy, who lived in Southfield, was instrumental in the forming and early operations of Ford GLOBE (later Ford PRIDE), the automaker's queer employee resource group. She would serve as the group's director of communications for several years and remained active until her retirement in 2008. She was also a popular member of the Senior Koffee Klatch that meets at Affirmations.

"She was involved in all of the early organizing," said Ford GLOBE co-founder Alice McKeage. "She became a tireless and outspoken advocate for a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment at Ford for LGBT employees."

Allen Wolf, a retired Ford manager and ally, said in a post on the Ford PRIDE website that "Cindy broke new ground for the LGBT equality movement. She was responsible for the first campus recruiting visit by any U.S. auto company targeted at LGBT graduating students. She was fearless."

Judy Lewis got to know Clardy through the Klatch.

"Cindy was very friendly," Lewis said. "She was the first one to step up when someone needed a ride to Senior Koffee Klatch or food or something like that. Cindy was the person who always volunteered. She was really quite extraordinary in that respect."

Beth Singer, another friend from Koffee Klatch, also described Clardy as loyal and dependable.

"The thing about Cindy, the thing that definitely stands out about her, is she has this endless capacity to help people," Singer said, adding that Clardy gave countless rides to doctors' appointments, community activities, the Koffee Klatch and more. Plus, she was a frequent visitor to friends who were hospitalized.

Clardy was born in Washington, D.C., and grew up as a self-described "army brat." She lived in various locations throughout her childhood,

including Pakistan and Vietnam. After her father retired from the service, the family moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, which she called her hometown. She received a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Nebraska in 1973 and lived in the state until moving to Michigan in 1994.

She ultimately bought a home in Southfield and took a position as an engineer with the Ford Motor Company. She came out on the job after only a year and soon became active in Ford GLOBE, advocating for more rights and protections for its queer employees. After retiring from Ford, Clardy worked part-time

for two years as an election inspector for the city of Southfield.

Clardy was also a motorcycle enthusiast. She started as a member of Women on Wheels back in Nebraska. More recently, she was the safety captain of the Southeast Michigan chapter of Sirens Women's Motorcycle Club. Identifying as a Pagan, "she knew a lot about Pagan rituals and what not, and she would be happy to expound about it," Singer said.

But of all her accomplishments, Clardy was perhaps most proud of her family. In addition to Stephanie, Clardy had two stepdaughters and one stepson. She also leaves behind five grandchildren.

Clardy had never been on a cruise when she and her wife bid on one at a charity event. The Olivia cruise, which departed from Fort Lauderdale and was scheduled to visit Half Moon Cay, San Juan, Saint Thomas and Turks and Caicos, was also to be full of women's music, the kind she loved. Clardy was thrilled when she won the auction. For the past few months, said Singer, she spoke of little else.

The cruise began on Feb. 26. Two days later, Clardy, despite having no experience with it, took place in a snorkeling excursion. She had purchased and tested new snorkeling equipment before leaving Michigan.

"She would joke that she was allergic to exercise and vegetables, so she wasn't necessarily in the best physical shape, but she decided to try snorkeling," Singer said.

But for all her excitement, it was only tragedy that awaited Clardy. Though she was wearing a life jacket, according to Singer she did not resurface with the rest of the group on the excursion and drowned.

Plans for a memorial service will be announced later.



Cindy Clardy. Courtesy photo