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**Love and a lawmaker;**

**Gay marriage laws arrived too late for Penny Severns and Terry Mutchler, but their hearts were joined**

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SPRINGFIELD - Before gays and lesbians could legally marry in Illinois, there was a state senator and a political reporter in Springfield who fell in love.

Both were women.

Both had seemingly high professional arcs.

And both embraced a life-altering relationship mortared by secrecy, exuberance and untruths.

The hidden marriage of the late state Sen. Penny Severns, D-Decatur, and former Associated Press statehouse bureau chief Terry Mutchler ended when Severns, after campaigning for secretary of state, died in 1998 of cancer.

But Mutchler has brought their story back to life in searing, emotional detail in "Under This Beautiful Dome: A Senator, A Journalist and the Politics of Gay Love in America." Her soon-to-be-released memoir is published by Seal Press and available for preorder on Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com.

While raising serious journalistic ethical questions, Mutchler's book shows how society's mores toward gays and lesbians have changed in two decades, and it gives an unprecedented look inside one of the most tragic statewide campaigns in Illinois political history.

"For some people, this will be a story of betrayal. For others, it will be a story of great strength or great weakness. For others still, this story will reinforce the doctrine of punishment for moral failings," Mutchler wrote. "For me, though, this story remains and always will, a love story."

Their love affair was represented when Gov. Pat Quinn made Illinois the 16th state to recognize gay and lesbian marriages. With friend and the legislation's co-sponsor, Rep. Ann Williams, D-Chicago, Mutchler sat in the front row at Quinn's November bill signing, a place of prominence far different from her banishment to the middle of a Decatur church where Severns' funeral was held 16 years ago.

"The separation that unfortunately happened when Penny and Terry were together exists no longer," Quinn told the Chicago Sun-Times. "People can get married, have all the legal rights of marriage and celebrate their love.

"I know Penny is proud today in heaven, thanking all of us for getting this law enacted. It was a tremendous effort of a lot of people," said Quinn, who gave Mutchler a pen used to enact the law. "Having her spouse, Terry, there as it became the law of Illinois was, I think, an immortal moment."

While the governor can refer to Mutchler as Severns' spouse, that's something the late senator's now-deceased father and twin sister never could, though both of her brothers embraced their relationship, Mutchler wrote.

"When we first saw Terry and Penny together, I'd never seen my sister so happy," said Rod Severns, the late senator's older brother. "It was so obvious to my wife, Jane, and me that it was just love. There was no hiding it in our eyes."

After reading Mutchler's book, he said, "I don't know there's one thing in there that she wasn't accurate about."

Penny Severns, who died at 46, was a rising Democratic star in the mid-1990s. A state senator, she helped mentor then-state Sen. Barack Obama and was part of the nation's first all-female, major-party gubernatorial ticket in 1994.

Severns' political stock didn't tank after losing that race with Dawn Clark Netsch in a GOP landslide. Four years later, Severns launched a serious campaign for secretary of state that ended when she was unexpectedly knocked off the ballot days before her death.

At 27 and a native Pennsylvanian, Mutchler arrived at the state Capitol in 1993 as the Associated Press' first female Springfield bureau chief. She was the youngest in a big military family that practiced a fundamentalist brand of Christianity.

One month into her job, Mutchler visited a statehouse vending machine and noticed a "woman with a shock of black hair wearing a red suit," who sent a "jolt of electricity . . . through me," she wrote.

An emerging lesbian, Mutchler called a friend to express her attraction and later identified the woman as Severns while thumbing through a state directory.

The next day, Mutchler introduced herself to Severns, who surprisingly already knew about her appointment and regarded it as a positive sign of female empowerment in the media. From there came meetings in Severns' statehouse office, dinner invitations, and finally, a first kiss late one night on Mutchler's balcony.

Six weeks later, they moved in together with a desire for discretion so intense that Mutchler said she would park 2 miles away from Severns' home, then leave before sunrise to guard against being seen.

Mutchler said Severns broached marriage three months into their relationship, presenting a pair of wrapped boxes. Inside were a ring for herself and a matching bracelet for Mutchler. "We can't marry," Severns told her, "but we've joined in our hearts."

In her political life, Severns planned to run for comptroller but switched course to lieutenant governor when Cook County Board President Richard Phelan urged her to run with him on his spring 1994 gubernatorial ticket.

A month before the Democratic primary, which Phelan lost but Severns won, Mutchler and the senator spent a rare, leisurely Sunday morning together in bed. As Mutchler ran her hand under Severns' left breast near her sternum, she "grazed what felt like a lump," Mutchler wrote.

Both sat up, she recalled, as if they had "discovered a ticking time bomb." Severns' youngest sister, Marsha, had died of breast cancer; twin sister Patty's breast cancer was in remission. Severns went into denial, canceling repeated doctor's appointments until finally getting examined in June. A 2-centimeter, malignant mass was removed, and cancer surfaced in her lymph nodes, necessitating chemotherapy and radiation.

Mutchler's fundamentalist upbringing kicked in. She figured the cancer was divine punishment for being attracted to Severns. So, praying, Mutchler offered to split up with the senator if God would "spare her life," she wrote.

Severns shared the diagnosis with relatives and Netsch, her running mate who defeated Phelan. Then, out went a campaign press release with news that sent "shock waves into Illinois politics." Her local newscast carried a negative tilt to the story, frustrating Severns.

Still at AP, Mutchler responded with what she now describes as an "unforgiveable" breach of journalism ethics. She turned to Severns and asked how she felt. "Good," Severns replied, curiously.

"I picked up the phone, called the Chicago desk of the AP and told them I just talked with Severns by phone. I reported that she was feeling good, sounded impatient, and told me she was restless to get back to work and so was working the phones nonstop from her couch. The AP's 'exclusive' interview made the next news show," Mutchler wrote.

Soon after, Mutchler decided it was time to make right with God and her journalistic conscience, having fallen deeply in love with a source. She sought and landed a job in the AP's Juneau, Alaska, bureau and surprised Severns with that news shortly before the November GOP sweep that swamped Netsch and Severns.

Coping with the twin losses of an election and her spouse, Severns would later find a "luxury house," and she persuaded Mutchler from afar that they should buy it. They did but deliberately kept Mutchler's name off the deed to safeguard their secret relationship, she wrote.

Acknowledging the Alaska move as half-baked, Mutchler left the AP in April to reinvest in Severns personally and professionally back home.

By September 1997, Severns felt well enough for another big political move, staving off talk of disclosing their personal lives to family and friends. "I want to run for secretary of state," she said.

Orland Park Police Chief Tim McCarthy and then-Cook County Recorder of Deeds Jesse White wanted the post too.

Following Severns' Nov. 18, 1997, announcement for higher office, she collapsed, learning later she had a tumor in her head and that cancer had spread to her spine and ribs. Emergency surgery removed the mass in her skull.

Released from the hospital in declining physical condition, Severns faced a McCarthy challenge to her nominating petitions. Clearly ailing, Severns went before statehouse reporters to lash out at his "thug-like" tactics in what would be her last public appearance.

With Severns now homebound, even holding one another's hands had to be orchestrated beneath a blanket to shield their closeted intimacy from unknowing relatives, Mutchler wrote.

After the State Board of Elections sided with McCarthy and removed her from the ballot, Severns re-entered the hospital, short of breath.

In what would be their fifth and final Valentine's Day together, Severns and Mutchler talked in the hospital about fighting the election board's ruling and preparing a will to prevent her father, whom Severns disliked, from getting half her estate if she died.

Burdened by the emotional toll of preparing a will, Mutchler also worried a will would be a public record, potentially outing them. Severns suggested Mutchler draft a "public" will not naming herself and later splitting things up fairly and in private with her sister, Mutchler wrote.

By then, doctors determined nothing more could be done medically. They released Severns. Mutchler tearfully went before reporters to announce their campaign was over.

Keeping Severns pain-free proved challenging. A pharmacist denied Mutchler painkilling medication for Severns because she "was not family." Even after getting the drug, it didn't stop the inevitable: Severns died at home two days after bowing out of the race.

After Severns' death, Mutchler had no say in her partner's funeral or burial because such decisions, again, had to come from "family," Mutchler was told by the funeral director.

At Severns' funeral, Mutchler was shocked when directed to sit 15 rows back from the casket rather than with other family members up front. She also wasn't permitted to deliver a eulogy. Both snubs pained Penny's brothers and seemed orchestrated by Severns' sister, Mutchler said.

After it ended, Severns' parents and siblings formed a receiving line at the back of the church without Mutchler. Embittered, she exited a side door and was greeted by dignitaries bearing condolences, including Jesse White, who thought she belonged in the receiving line.

"I was surprised that she was not where I thought she should be within the church," White told the Sun-Times. "I didn't know then there was friction."

After the funeral, Mutchler's brother urged her to "take some things" that belonged to Severns because the day had given him a "bad feeling," an idea Mutchler initially dismissed.

The "public" will Severns had wanted still wasn't finished. Her sister asked Mutchler repeatedly if she had it. Over the next few days, Mutchler drew it up and used Severns' electronic signature to finalize it. Mutchler expected to stay in the couple's Decatur house, but that was not to be.

Later finding Severns' Volvo and "countless sympathy cards" removed from the house and utilities cut without warning, Mutchler heeded her brother's advice and collected hundreds of love letters the senator had written her, her wedding ring and other sentimental belongings - virtually the only physical ties to Severns she would ever claim.

Mutchler returned to Decatur on the three-week anniversary of Severns' death. In a driving storm, she shockingly found the locks to the house changed with her possessions still inside, a move Mutchler attributed to Severns' sister and father.

"I put my hands on my head, grabbing the hair at my temples and pulling it, and I started wailing into the rain," she wrote.

Sought for a response to Mutchler's claims, Severns' sister, Patty Severns Love, didn't return a voicemail message.

Mutchler has tried to move on, finding love again with her partner, Maria Papacostaki, who helped edit Mutchler's book, a project for which Quinn offered nothing but praise.

"The fact Terry has written a book about her love with Penny Severns is quite special," the governor said. "We should celebrate loving relationships. To me, what Penny and Terry always exhibited was a love of truth."