

Throughout her life, **Donna Utke** shared her quiet intelligence and strength with both Milwaukee library patrons and the local lesbian and gay movement.

Utke was considered a pioneer in the movement, including being one of five founding members of the area Gay People's Union.

She died Saturday following surgery for multiple brain aneurysms. After days of severe headaches and a trip to the doctor, friends realized that she was becoming disoriented and took her to Columbia Hospital.

Utke was 68. She had retired about three weeks ago from her job at the downtown library.

Friends recalled **Utke** as soft-spoken but to the point, intellectual but never at the cost of someone else's self-esteem.

And in the days before the sexual orientation of lesbians and gay men could be made public safely, **Utke** did what she could to help people find acceptance in the world.

Barbara Lightner became a friend when the two women were graduate students in English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"Everyone was very, very closeted," Lightner said. "None of us were `out.' It wasn't safe to be `out.' . . . We all thought we were the only ones in the world. **Donna** was always trying to move us beyond that."

In addition to becoming a founding member of the Gay People's Union, **Utke** served with the Lesbian Alliance of Metropolitan Milwaukee, the Silver Space group for older lesbians and Seniors Active in a Gay Environment.

Eldon Murray, another Gay People's Union founder, remembered how **Utke** would listen at meetings, then cut right to the point with a solution to whatever the problem was.

He also remembered how they teamed up for discussions on local talk radio. They even infiltrated a local religious conference on the subject of homosexuality -- one in which no gays or lesbians were allowed to participate.

"We looked for all the world like a couple from the suburbs," Murray said.

Utke, well-versed in theology, stood and refuted Bible references to the alleged evils of homosexuality.

Because of people such as **Donna Utke**, things have changed, he said.

"Most people sort of understand that gay and lesbian people are not sick or evil or criminal," Murray said. "It's sort of like being left-handed. There are really just different kinds of people. . . . The movement will miss her."

Utke earned a reputation as a committed and quietly effective activist, said Jamakaya, a feminist writer and historian.

"You wouldn't know to meet her that she was an activist," she said. "She was very soft-spoken, but she had a very disarming way of getting things done. She was one of our pioneers. She was one who took the next step and acted on what she believed."

Utke grew up in Milwaukee. She began studying toward a medical degree but ended up earning master's degrees in English and library science.

She began working with the Milwaukee Public Library in 1969, mainly in the science and business section at the central library. **Utke** also did stints at the Capitol branch, the bookmobile and the local history department.

"She loved being a librarian. She loved books and learning," said Tanya Smith, her partner since 1980. The couple used the city's registry for same-sex partners when it became available.

"She had taken German classes in the last two or three years," Smith said. "She loved learning and had many, many interests."

Those interests included gardening, cooking, baking and even roasting her own coffee beans -- and nurturing friends by sharing all of the above.

The sudden loss is all the sadder because her friend is not there to share it, said Cathi Gardner, a longtime friend and co-worker.

"I keep thinking I should call and talk to **Donna** about this (**Utke's** death)," Gardner said.

Other survivors include a sister, Diane Thierfelder of West Palm Beach, Fla.

A memorial service is set for 7 p.m. today at Schaff Funeral Home, 5920 W. Lincoln Ave., West Allis.