

Lewis “Sonny” Turner (1919–2011)

This decorated war hero, performing artist and lover of life could not be out during his lifetime. Now his generosity is helping Lambda Legal ensure future generations won’t have to do the same. BY CYNDE HORNE

Lewis “Sonny” Turner lived a life that most only dream of living. Those who knew him best describe him as “handsome,” “elegant,” “interesting,” and “charming.” He and his partner, Alex, shared homes in Manhattan, East Hampton, and Fort Lauderdale. Sonny was a wonderful cook, and he and Alex often entertained their close circle of friends. By all accounts, Sonny was adored by his friends and his family. But Sonny had a secret, which he kept from even his closest family members—Sonny was gay and his “friend” Alex was his partner.

When Sonny passed away in March 2011, he left a very generous bequest to Lambda Legal of over \$1 million. “Sonny knew this (his bequest to Lambda Legal) was his coming out story,” said Lisa Padilla, Sonny’s lawyer and friend. “The gift speaks for Sonny in a way he could not speak for himself.” He had grown up in an era that made him fearful of living his life as an out gay man, and it was important to him to support an organization that works to change society so that young gay men and lesbians won’t have to live in fear of being who they are. He wanted his legacy to be a gift that would be used to end discrimination and that would also honor Alex, who had been an attorney.

Sonny loved dance and dreamed of becoming a professional dancer. Having studied dance under Mikhail Mordkin, his dream became a reality when he was cast in the chorus of *DuBarry Was a Lady*, starring Ethel Merman, Bert Lahr, and a young Betty Grable.

During World War II, Sonny served his country by joining the army. When asked what he did during the war, Sonny would reply, “I cleared the way for Patton.” Wounded in the Battle of the Bulge and transferred to Walter Reed Army Hospital, Sonny would later be awarded the Purple Heart for his bravery. Because of his injuries, Sonny would never dance professionally again.

For a short time, Sonny and Alex lived in Los Angeles with their black standard poodle, Joe. When they returned to the East, they felt Joe would not enjoy

New York City life, so Joe went to live with their good friend Liberace.

In 1967 Sonny and Alex hired legendary architect Paul Rudolph to design a home for them on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. They lived in this starkly modern home until 1974, when it was purchased by Halston and became “party central” for Halston’s Studio 54 crowd.

Sonny loved to have a good time and could often be seen driving around East Hampton in his Thunderbird convertible. One of Sonny’s fondest passions was cooking, and he was a wonderful cook. Having studied with well-known Chinese cook Virginia Lee, Sonny would often prepare elegant dinners for his friends, all of whom remember his masterful culinary skills.

Toward the end of his life, Sonny turned to his niece, Thai Jason, who had long known that Sonny was gay. When she told him she knew and that it was nothing for him to be ashamed of, he was incredulous that she had always known. Thai speaks so lovingly of “Uncle” and remembers him as a kind and generous man. Thai is thankful that Sonny could do in death what he could not do in life—come out. Lambda Legal is thankful for Sonny’s generosity that makes it possible for us to continue our fight against LGBT discrimination. **L**

“Sonny always said he was the 7th son of a 7th son and this is why he led such a charmed life.”
—Thai Jason on her Uncle Sonny



Turner, in uniform, received a Purple Heart for his service in World War II (top). With a family member (bottom).