

The OLOHP Insider

November 2015

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 29

Arden's Musings

What a busy year this has been. Since I last wrote a piece for the *OLOHP Insider*, I've logged a couple thousand miles. I went to Chicago to do a presentation about the Project at the Halstead Center and squeezed in an interview, too. A bit later, I took a quick trip to Oklahoma for a presentation as well. That was a bit of a different experience in that the presentation was at an RVing Women Convention. And Charlotte and I snuck in an overnighter to Tyler, TX, where I interviewed two more women.

In both Chicago and Oklahoma, we used a new way of sharing, a format that relies heavily on dramatic readings of excerpts taken from Herstories in the collection. The twist is that instead of me reading the excerpts, we ask women in the audience to volunteer. They're given a script that has their parts marked. It's been a very effective way to convey, to both the audience and the volunteer readers, just what the Project is accomplishing. The value and importance of gathering and documenting these unique life stories quickly becomes real when they hear, not just read, the women's own words.

For years, we have tried to build a network of interviewers for the Project – to save travel expenses, to cover more geographic areas in the country, and to grow the ranks of women willing to help with our work; and now that's happening. It may have

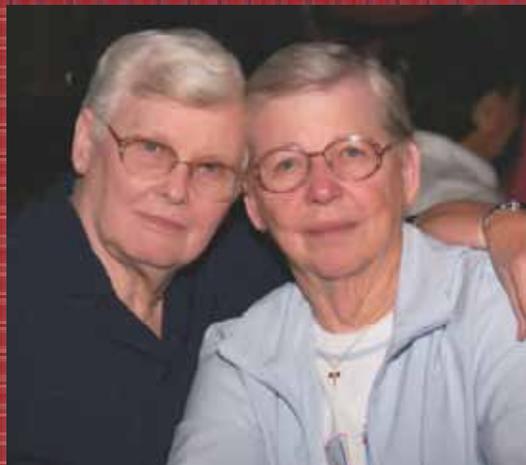
just been the right time for our efforts to pay off, or it may be because of our new dramatic reading presentation. When all is said and done, we're simply thrilled that our ranks have grown incredibly over the past 18 months, and will grow even more in 2016.

We now have a training class scheduled in February for women wintering in Green Valley, AZ (just south of Tucson), and another at the end of June for women traveling to the National Women's Music Festival in Middleton, WI. Classes will result in new interviewers from across the country. And, if all goes well, we'll do a third class, hopefully in the fall, in the Bay Area of northern California.

From our new outreach efforts, we've also had a few women offer to do some transcription work for us. Margaret works with the transcribers, getting them what they need, and technical help when needed. And we love when transcribers help us connect with new women to interview.

I'll tell you about one more 2015 trip in the next issue. Suffice it to say I wrote this article while watching the juncos, nuthatches, Stellar jays, and hummingbirds come and go from the feeders outside the window, surrounded by the towering Douglas firs of the Pacific Northwest.

Arden



Not all the readers of the OLOHP Insider have met the women who devote themselves to making the OLOHP work. This will get you started. That's Charlotte and Arden over there on the left. And that's Mary and Margaret on the right. No more hiding behind the curtain! Watch for more in the following issues.



Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older

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A Story Behind A Story by Margaret

Quite often, there is an interesting story behind, or following, doing a Herstory. Arden interviewed Irene in Apache Junction, Arizona in 2003. In her story, Irene talked about living in the Village in New York City as a young woman and leaving to drive across the country with her girlfriend. They got as far as the Quad Cities in Iowa when the car broke down. One of them had family nearby, so they ended up staying for a few months. Irene was a nurse and found temporary work, raising enough to have the car fixed so they could continue on their journey.



In 2009, Gloria interviewed Eris in Seattle. I was transcribing Eris's interview and when she got to the part where she talked about moving from New York City to California, I had to stop to go on a search: I was sure I had read this story before. It took a bit to find, but it turned out that Eris was traveling with Irene. They hadn't stayed together very long once they made it to California, and neither of them knew what had ever happened to the other.



Since I take care of the OLOHP database, I knew that Irene spent her summers less than an hour away from where now Eris lived with her partner, Aganita. I reached out and asked. The good news was that they did both want to know how to reconnect with each other. The bad news was that Eris, who had been very ill, died before they could talk, but Aganita keeps in touch with Irene now.

Maybe there wasn't a fairytale end to their story, but they were both glad to know they had each lived happy lives and found someone they'd been with for years and years.



Irene



Eris

What Have We Learned Today?

We delight when everything goes according to plan: we schedule an interview, it happens as expected, we get the files transcribed right away, the woman reviews it and sends it back to us promptly, we have quality scans of all the support documents, and a completed Herstory book is compiled and sent back to the interviewee. But that's not always the way things go. More often, we get to look at the situation and say, "And what have we learned today?"

Here is an example. Arden was doing a training for new interviewers a year or so ago, and one of the women in the class was Janet Stetser. After taking the class, Janet dropped Margaret an email. She had reached out to a friend of hers, Janet Dendy, to tell her about the Project, and being a new interviewer, suggest she share her story. Janet D. said she was fairly sure she had given an interview to the Project, but hadn't heard back from anyone.



Whoops! Retracing a few steps, we found we were the ones who had dropped the ball. Janet D. had been interviewed, and she had sent us a collection of photos that we had scanned before sending the originals back to her. We had sent Janet's audio out to be transcribed. Since the transcribed text stopped mid-sentence, and mid-life, it was clear that we didn't have all of her audio. Scrambling, we went back to the interviewer to see if there was another audio file that hadn't come to us. There was, but it was stuck somewhere in the innards of her computer... she'd do her best to get it to us ASAP. Waiting for the additional audio to get to us, we set Janet Dendy's story aside and failed to notice it sat gathering dust for another six months. It might still have been stuck there if not for Janet Stetser reaching out to her.



What had we learned? We learned that Janet Dendy was an incredibly patient person. We learned how quickly we can fast track a Herstory. And, thanks to Janet and Janet, we learned that we needed a new and improved system for tracking exactly where each story is in the process. It did take a village, but luckily, everything came out great in the end.

Examples of pieces shared as dramatic readings in our new presentation.

(Reader, excerpt from JoAnn's transcript)

I learned [in Catholic school] that it was a mortal sin to kiss a boy for more than a minute. (chuckling) But no one ever mentioned anything about kissing girls. Nobody said anything, that it was good, or bad or not. Okay! So, from my point of view, when I got to be 32 years old and discovered there was another way of life besides boys, I didn't have any feelings of guilt, whatsoever, about kissing a girl.



(Reader, excerpt from Jean's transcript)

When Bobbie was in the hospital, the night before the surgery, a young, somewhat snippy nurse came in wanting to know my relationship to Miss Allison. I was fixing the bed and I said, "She is my partner and my companion of twenty-nine years and I have her power of attorney in my purse. Do you need to see it right now?" She said, "No, ma'am." That was the first time I had ever come out publicly.

(Reader, excerpt from Lois's transcript)

I don't know how somebody could live to be as old as I am... and be gay my whole life... and not know that there was a place for women to go. Barbara and I never heard of such a thing. Then we went on an Olivia Cruise. It was the first time in my life I felt what it was like to be normal. You know what I mean?

I felt like everybody else gets to feel normal every day. And I've never really felt that because we always feel like something is wrong.



(Reader, excerpt from Ruth's transcript)

It had been several years since my partner had died when Jean and I went out for dinner and we sat in a restaurant for hours and hours. When we were finished with dinner and it was time to drive back to the house, Jean got out of the car and she hugged me and said goodbye – hugged like I hadn't been hugged for a couple of years at that point. I thought, "Wow! That was a hug that was an intentional hug, not just a goodbye hug, or a hello hug. It was a very intentional hug."

I went back in the house and, strangely enough, I called my daughter who lives in Colorado and I said, "You know, I feel as if someone's coming on to me." And my daughter said, "Go for it, Mom!" I said, "Yes, indeed... I will do that... I'll go for it."

We've recently lost several women who had generously shared their stories. They will be missed.



Barbara Jones Born 1930 Interviewed 2001

A really significant influence is recognizing who I am; certainly acknowledging and being comfortable with my homosexuality. But that isn't all there is to me. I'm not just gay. I'm not just female. I happen to be, and I'm comfortable with it, and there again, no guilt, and no anger. I know so many homosexuals who are so angry, and they are angry because they can't do anything about it. I don't look at it that way; it's a part of me. And I live with it; it's a part of who I am. That does not mean that I think I am without faults. I have gobs. My partner would be very good in pointing them out. But that's ok. That's the balance. So, I accept myself, warts and all. I don't consider homosexuality a wart.

I met my husband because he was at the gay bar. He's gay. He was a nice guy, and I had nothing else. I was living with Phyllis, my sister. And we became very good friends. He would come over in the daytime. Phyllis decided to go home and give up the apartment. I lived with Robert. Just lived with him. And then we just got accustomed to each other after a while. We decided, "let's get married!" He was a hair dresser. All of the women would hit on him all of the time, and he got tired of that. So we decided to get married. Because I didn't know what I was doing, and because I was missing my friend that got married.



Lee Robichaud Frontin

***Born 1924
Interviewed 2015***



Gail Key Born 1938 Interviewed 2011

My philosophy, and Ann's, was always if you live well, then you don't have to really argue your beliefs and what you're doing. So we just came up here and made a good life for ourselves.



How can you be involved in the OLOHP?

Lesbians 70 years of age and older can tell their own stories. Contact us.

If you don't "qualify," encourage older lesbian friends to contact us.

Buy our books.*

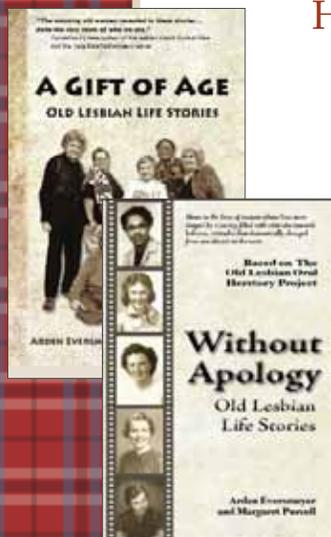
Donate copies of our books to your local library.

Make a tax-deductible donation to support the Project.**

Send us a note of encouragement!

* *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories* and *Without Apology: Old Lesbian Life Stories* can currently be ordered at www.amazon.com and www.alibris.com

** Tax-deductible donations can be made to The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project either by mailing a check (address on page 1) or going to our website and using the PayPal/Donate Now button.



A special thanks to OLOC, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, www.oloc.org, for their ongoing support.