

A Note From Arden

It has been two years since *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories*, went from dream to reality. What a two years! We continue to meet ourselves coming and going, gathering and processing stories, and telling anyone who is willing to listen about the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project.

When you start reading through this book, you may be surprised to find my story included in it. Margaret had suggested it be in the first book, and I over ruled her. To me, that felt self-serving. But she kept working on me until I've come to see that my willingness to let my story be a part of the book made the other women whose stories are included feel more comfortable. Since she wanted my partner Charlotte's story in this book, she convinced me it made sense to make room for mine. And I can see that including it may also offer the reader more insight into how the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project came to be.

The first book, *A Gift of Age*, has been a great addition to OLOHP in many ways, but it also had a complicating effect I hadn't expected. Now, when I initiate a conversation with a women about sharing her story, I often have to reassure her that we are not just gathering stories for another book. I'm afraid we may lose a few stories from women who are put off by our having produced books. We know we are gathering stories to preserve them, to insure their struggles, failures, and successes are there for generations to come. By no means are we capitalizing on their stories. However, explaining all that to potential interviewees has now been thrown into the mix.

Every woman whose story we share has given us full permission twice. The books are being done for one purpose only: in answer to the most common question we get year after year, "How can I read the transcripts?"

Reading actual transcripts will be possible at some point. The OLOHP collection is in the process of being moved from Texas, where I reside, to the Sophia Smith Collection, a preeminent archive of women's history at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Fifty-plus herstories are already there, and we anticipate the majority of the rest of the collection will be at Smith College by early 2012. Processing and cataloging takes time, but once that is accomplished, many of the transcripts will be available for reading there.

What we hope we have done by writing these books, is to do the research for you. We've read and reread, listened to the interviews, and then listened again. Margaret and I feel we've meticulously pulled pieces from each interview that conveys the essence of a woman's transcript in a story-telling fashion.

Working together on a project, such as writing a book, is a fascinating process. Luckily, the two of us complement each other's strengths and weaknesses, and we are able to resolve any disagreements easily. Maybe that's because Margaret and I have one very unusual fact in common: we were both struck by lightning, literally and figuratively. It may be an incredibly unlikely coincidence, or it may be that our ability to work on such a project together came from something beyond us both.

Given how much has happened in the two short years since *A Gift of Age* was published, I can't wait to see what the next few years will offer.

Arden Eversmeyer

A Note From Margaret

There are projects I take on in life that I can put my nose to the proverbial grindstone and stay with, on task, until completed. Working on this book is not one of those. In fact, going from one step to the next was typically such a circuitous route that I often found myself totally lost. Lost, but better for it.

For anyone who is even somewhat open and curious, the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project is rife with bits and pieces that lead one's mind off in one direction, and then another. For anyone trying to accomplish a goal, such as finishing this manuscript, I will testify that the stories can also act as quicksand, sucking you in and not letting go.

An example of this, how many an afternoon has totally slipped from my grasp, was working with Edie Daly's story. Curiosity about things I'd never heard of before lured me off track to learn about: song pluggers in the 1920s, New York coat house models in the 1960s, and life in Sarajevo in the early 1990s. That last one was an eye-opener for me. What could possibly have been so important in my life then that I was barely aware of the conflicts in eastern Europe? The situation there had been so compelling to Edie that she solicited the support of friends and family in order to spend months living with local women in the midst of war-ravaged Bosnia. That led me to look back over other stories in this Project, to find more examples of women stepping outside of their comfort zones, going way beyond what was expected of them.

Working on this book has been such an incredible learning experience for me. I have learned about places, people, and events that I knew little or nothing about. Repeatedly, I was struck by how our early lives are shaped and directed by our families of origin, and just as often by circumstance. In each story, the woman came to one or two crossroads where she opted to take the road less traveled, the road her family and society would not

have chosen for her. I am fascinated by the choices, the risks, and the paths these women have taken. The book is filled with stories that, if you let them, will lead you in directions you never thought of going. My advice is to go with them.

Hardly a week goes by that I don't stop to think about how incredibly lucky I am to be a part of this unique project, and to vicariously share such breadth of experiences through the stories. Each time someone asks how I became involved in the OLOHP, I am reminded how my work with Arden did not come out of any big decision I made. I simply happened to be in the right place at the right time. Maybe, as so many of the stories in the collection have shown, I was also in the right place in my life so I, too, could choose to spend the next decade of my life traveling down that road with Arden and the 250-plus women who have shared their stories with us.

I will be eternally grateful to Arden for inviting me to share this journey. Also, there aren't enough words to express how much I appreciate my partner, Mary's, generosity enabling my immersion in the OLOHP. On occasion, my immersion borders on obsession, and Mary does have to pull me back to reality, which she does gently. When her nephew, Sam, was young, and obsessed with all things baseball, his parents were trying to teach him that he had to listen to everyone else, too. As soon as there was a lapse in conversation, Sam would politely say, "Speaking of baseball..." When I get that way, bringing up some aspect of the book, or a transcription I'm working on, whenever there is a lull in the conversation, Mary will finally look at me and say, with a smile, "Speaking of baseball." She grounds me, and she reminds me that I do have a life beyond the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project, one that I need to pay attention to if I want to have a full, and interesting tale to tell when I reach 70!

Margaret Purcell