

The OLOHP Insider

August 2011

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 11



Musings

I am still on a high from the recent Regional OLOC Gathering held in Tacoma, Washington, the last weekend of July. When we arrived earlier in the month, Margaret printed out a list of the registrants, and I discovered that there were already about 30 names of women who had participated in the Oral Herstory Project. With an already full program to contend with, Margaret, one of the Gathering planners, arranged with the hotel for a private dining room and an invitation only dinner before the Gathering started. The invitation was also extended to those women who would be interviewed during the Gathering, and, of course, partners of participants.

There were about forty of us for dinner, and what a wonderful sight! Rarely would we have so many together from so far away. I stayed very busy with interviews tucked in with Gathering activities. Some interviews had been arranged before we arrived, but a couple were spontaneous during the Gathering. We had interviews beginning as early as 6 in the

morning and some ended at 10 at night! The women interviewed on this trip represented Washington, Arizona, California, Alaska, and Connecticut. It is important to gather all of their stories, but I was especially delighted to work with three women in their 80s. One, in fact, was born in 1921!

During this trip, I also worked with four women who are willing to serve as interviewers. Two will work with the Puget Sound OLOC group, one is from Palm Springs, California, and the other is from Connecticut. All are regions with large groups of old lesbians.

This year I interviewed two who are 90, and several in their 80's and more than a dozen in their 70s. The hope is always that we can still find old lesbians born before 1930, but we are also eager to work with women who are in their 70s. Each decade yields unique differences in the women's stories. The search for these wonderful women continues.

Arden, born 1931

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians Born in the Early 1900s
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Look What Happens When the Planets Align

For several years now, the idea of doing some sort of performance based on materials taken from interviews in the OLOHP collection has been tossed around, but it always seemed like it wasn't the right time, no one knew how to approach it, or it was simply too much to take on. But when the idea resurfaced during one of the earliest planning sessions for the recently held 2011 Regional OLOC Gathering, the planets aligned.

The right people were at the table and what was a nebulous idea quickly began to take form and develop a life of its own. Wouldn't it be great if this could be done at the upcoming Gathering in honor of the women who have shared their stories? Marcia Perlstein, who has experience in community theatre

Over the next 6 months, Marcia, and her merry band of readers, got together to practice, refining the process and bonding with the women whose words they were voicing. Marcia would call Margaret and say, "I'm sitting here with Charlotte on my lap, working on her story," to which Margaret would reply, "I've just spent the afternoon with Dee."

Meanwhile, the readers, with ages ranging from 53 to 78, who had volunteered to bring the words to life were busily making sure they knew their parts, looking up how to pronounce unfamiliar names and places, like Chickasha, Euclid or Allahabad. They also worked on becoming comfortable with their woman's speech patterns, and on projecting their voices, and pacing themselves.



and directing, was there and volunteered to take the lead. Marcia, who has done some work as an interviewer and is madly in love with the Project, knew she'd need someone who was familiar enough with the interview transcripts to pull out material that would tell a story. Margaret was willing to fill that role, and had no idea where to start, but Marcia had a plan.

The performance would be a dramatic reading done in the women's own words. Marcia and Margaret got busy exchanging dozens of emails and phone calls while extracting women's words from the transcripts. What was needed next were women willing to read the parts. Marcia presented the idea at a local Puget Sound OLOC meeting and a dozen women immediately signed on.

"Snapshots and Snippets: Words of Wisdom Snatched from Herstories of our Foremothers" came together on the first night of the Gathering, with ten readers guided by their director, Marcia. In front of almost 200 old lesbians, the readers gave voice to a wealth of memories, experiences, thoughts, and feelings that are found on almost every one of the thousands of pages of words that have been shared.

Photo on Left: Marcia working with the readers during a rehearsal that was, literally, held in a barn!

Photo on Right: Performance night! From left to right, Kathy Prezbindowski, Deirdre Knowles, Nancy Zarins, Betty O'Connor, Aganita Varkentine, Jolly Sue Baker, Casey Hannan, Lin Simpson, JoAnn Fritsche and Sue Weinheimer.

Words and photos are from “Snapshots and Snippets.” These women attended the Gathering during which these glimpses into their stories were performed.



Irene Weiss, born 1926

One time Kate Millet was supposed to be doing a reading from her second book, “Sita”. Then, my girlfriend and I decided we wanted to go hear her. The place was jammed. We had to stand. I remember during the intermission, during the break, someone was gesturing to me from across the room, and I didn’t know it. I thought she was talking to someone else. And I turned around and looked, and she said, “No, you with the gray hair.” And I thought, “Who is this talking to me about my gray hair? I want you to come to my older women’s group.” I said, “Older woman?” No one had ever called me that. I was stunned. And she got to me, finally, and stuck a flyer in my hand, and it was Marilyn, of course. Bold and brassy as she always was. So I did go to her group, because I found her very attractive, not because I wanted to go to her older women’s group.

Natalie Zarchin, born 1922

Yes! I was in a collective. I was involved in the women’s movement and shortly after that I came out, changing me forever and getting the first lover, she started off as my friend. So we got involved. She was a Gemini. And then I never did end up in a relationship with a woman for more than two years. They were a lot younger than I was. So then Dotty came, Dotty Fowler came to me. And then we became friends. And we became that relationship, we became buddies, we hung out together. And she invited me to take over the women’s network – all the leaders. She was an activist. And so I met other lesbians: Betty Shoemaker and Hashdo and Sondhiem. That’s when I decided to become a lesbian, that’s what I wanted to do. But I suspect I knew years ago.



Vera Martin, born 1923

Early on, I was a part of the Speakers’ Bureau for OLOC. In the early years, Shevy and I, and then later Ruth, we did it together. And I have some major concerns that we need to get some more people that are available and willing and capable of making these appearances, because somewhere coming down the pike I’m not going to be able to do this anymore. I live my life and am who I am. When I first came out, I said to my son Tony, “This is what I’m about to do. And how does that spill over on you?” And he said, “If that’s what you want to do and that’s going to make you happy, then I think you should do it.” And I said, “Yeah, but what about your friends?” He said, “Well, you’ve been a parent to my friends. And if they can’t handle it then they’re not my friends!” He’s always been supportive. He has never, ever given me a bad time. And fortunately this wife that he now has has been so supportive. She has just been wonderful.



Gloria Stancich, born 1935

How I survived some of those days, I'll never know. But I had a great time. I finally did decide I needed to go back home and go back to school. So I went back to Ohio, went back to Kent State, and I was working weekends, dancing weekends at supper clubs in the area. "When are you going to get married? When am I going to have grandchildren?" Ya-da-da-da-da-da-da. ... I was fighting it, fighting my mother, but also not having a lot of success in my lesbian relationships.



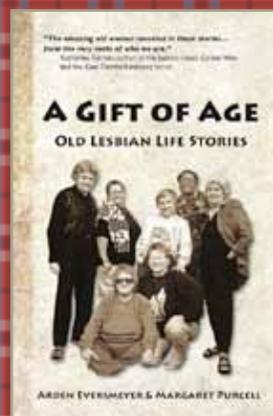
Dotty Fowler, born 1927

I worked in a boarding kennel for a while. Dogs were always glad to see you. So I did that for quite a while, then I fell in love with an older woman who was interested in the theatre. So I ran away to the circus, went to work for a circus in New Jersey. I was a top girl. I was working in some office at the time, doing payroll. I could see myself thirty-five years later doing the same thing. So I had been to this theatre and put my name in, and they called and said they needed a top girl right away. So I was out there. I went to work in the theatre, and I worked in the theatre for twenty-five years - did all sorts of different jobs. It was through the 50s, after the Second World War. There were lesbians in the theatre, more or less a network of lesbians. That's what made it easier to be there, too. It was like a world of gay people.



Ruth Silver, born 1919

Doesn't everybody fall in love with her gym teacher? Noel Scanlon was her name... A beautiful Irish lady. I discovered who I was at that time, that I was different, but I found people like myself. I found other, quote, "lesbians." I saw Lily, who was with Maxine, and Jane was with Elizabeth. That's my life, you know. That's where I belong. I finally found my place in the world. I was 14 and a half.



How can you be involved in the OLOHP?

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

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

*Buy a copy of *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories*.**

Donate a copy of our book 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* can be ordered at www.olohp.org*

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