

# The OLOHP Insider

August 2012

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 15



## *Arden's Musings*

The summer of 2012 is turning out to be full of events. In a round about way, a copy of our recent book, *Without Apology: Old Lesbian Life Stories*, made its way to Olympia Dukakas. Dr. Maddy Gerrish was hosting the North Carolina premier of the movie *Cloudburst*, starring Ms. Dukakas. She then asked Dr. Gerrish to invite me to the event in Durham, NC! Ms. Dukakas was doing Shakespeare in MA and couldn't attend in person, but she sent a video thanking all the participants in the premier event. That was the first time I saw CLOUDBURST, and have seen it again since. It is funny, full of one-liners, and is very touching. I was told to bring "lots of books." I did and sold "lots of books."

After that whirlwind trip, my feet barely touched Texas soil when we were off again to our annual fix at the National Women's Music Festival in Madison, WI. It was four days of ongoing music, workshops (including one about the OLOHP), and seeing old friends.

I mentioned in the previous issue of *The Insider* that Jackie Mirkin and Edie Daly (of Gulfport, FL) were planning an event about the Oral Herstory Project that would take place at the archive at Smith College on July 18. The program included readings

from herstories and lots of Q&A. A couple of our east coast interviewers also participated. With about 50 in attendance, it was labeled "a roaring success." My gratitude to Jackie and Edie, who came up with the idea, nurtured it, spread the word, worked with Smith, and did it all, while I was busy elsewhere. What an incredible gift to the Project. Brava!

It is the first OLOC national gathering that Charlotte and I have missed. Feedback from friends tells me it was another grand gathering of old lesbians. We already had a west coast/Canada commitment for August/September, and being mindful of our energy and expenses, we weren't able to fit it in. But, we don't plan to miss another one. (Rumor is the 2014 OLOC Gathering will be in San Francisco.)

Later in August, we will be in the midst of our next odyssey: we will spend most of a month in Washington, working on various aspects of the Project. From Washington, I'll take a quick trip down to San Francisco for several days of interviews. As soon as I get back, Mary, Margaret, Charlotte and I will travel to Vancouver Island for an interview, networking, and some R&R. Then on to BOLDfest in Vancouver for networking, and – you guessed it – to do more interviews!

*Arden, born 1931*

*Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older*

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## *Confessions of an Interviewer* By Christine Pattee

When Arden contacted me last year to ask if I wanted to be interviewed by OLOHP, I was enormously flattered and agreed enthusiastically. Before she even started, I announced that I wanted to be an interviewer. Always prepared, she handed me the *OLOHP Interviewer Manual*, and I inhaled it on the plane ride home.

In the past year, I've done about a dozen interviews, specializing in the women who have been part of my life: Douglass College, class of '63; New Haven Women's Liberation, where I arrived as a graduate student in 1969 along with the first women undergraduates; the Hartford women's community; Connecticut Women's Political Caucus, whose lesbian members were key organizers of the first state-wide gay rights initiative; New England Women's Musical Retreat (NEWMR); Golden Threads and Silver Threads, social gatherings for old lesbians. In addition to activists, I look for old lesbians who have simply been living their lives for the past seven-plus decades, like "the lesbian down the street who helped me when I was sick."

Before I came out, books were a salvation; after I came out, collecting the A\*\*\* books in Barbara Grier's lesbian bibliography became an obsession. Now, authors are an interview magnet for me. I've already interviewed Ann Weldy (aka Ann Bannon) and Barbara Love; with Charlotte Bunch, Billie Potts and Barbara Smith still on my list.

I love the interview process, and it feels like the women being interviewed are also enjoying



themselves. Because I usually interview women with whom I share a history, I make a conscious effort to limit my personal input to questions and comments intended to encourage the narrator to talk about her own thoughts, feelings and experiences. Interviews with two members of the original NEWMR

collective, music coordinator Kim Kimber and craftswomen coordinator Kathy Lewis, were enormously satisfying, allowing each of us to relive a high point in our lives, as well as reflect on the significant contributions we had made to lesbian lives in the 1980s.

Though I thought I was keeping myself out of interviews, I learned a valuable lesson when I almost lost the opportunity to interview my high school gym teacher (and camp counselor!) by pushing her too hard to identify, 'for posterity', individuals in her story. Fortunately, always the wise,

sensitive teacher, she pushed back before she said no – and I realized that I was inappropriately putting 'my stuff' on somebody else's story. As she pointed out, lesbians of her era (she's 77) are so conditioned to be protective that they will not "out" anybody, even those long dead, for any reason. Having acknowledged that she was right and I was wrong, the interview is set for next month.

Arden often says that she falls a little bit in love with each woman she interviews. I know the feeling, but express it a little differently. For me, interviews have the same intimacy and excitement as youthful sexual encounters, but without the messy consequences. For this time in my life, they are the perfect relationships.

## *As Time Goes By*

When the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project was started, Arden decided her goal would be to collect as many stories as she could from women who were her contemporaries. Born within a decade or so of herself, Arden's hope was that the Project would draw out both the similarities, and the remarkable differences, these lesbians had experienced. As her birth year was in 1931, Arden first decided to focus on women born early in the 1900s, with 70 years of age or older as a basic guideline. But, as it is wont to do, time marched forward, and suddenly we realized many of the 70+ year old women being interviewed were no longer born "early in the 1900s – they were born in the early 1940s. As you might expect, the overall flavor of the stories is changing with the times as well. It's been fascinating, and, with any luck, it will continue to be enlightening for decades to come.

We're going to break out of our usual pattern on these two pages –instead of excerpts from a couple of stories, this piece is from Sally Duplaix's story in our first book, *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories*. Sally died a few weeks ago and while we treasure each and every story in our collection, her's was unique. She was interviewed early, at age 65. Sally talked about being forced into treatment for her "illness." Thousands of other women suffered a similar fate, but few are willing, or able, to share their story.

*I left New York behind. I turned myself into my idea of a New England lesbian. ... That's the beginning of my life, because before that freshman year at Smith nothing out of the ordinary happened to me. I was pretty safe. I was protected. My real life began back then, in 1954 -'55 ... and then my sexual awakening.*

*That freshman year, I met someone. I met a woman who was on the faculty. Jean was a visiting professor [from Spain]. She spotted me, and that was the first lesbian that I'd ever met. A real lesbian. Because other people that I'd had crushes and fantasies about were not. This was the first, and she spotted me, and she actually proceeded to seduce me.*

*It was intense, because it was my first relationship of any kind. And I'd been waiting all those years, and I was now nineteen going on twenty, and discovering love; and it was a very intense and very emotionally charged situation. I went a little nuts in love. You know. This love, this all consuming ... and I can't think about anything else, and it changes your life. ... It actually changed my life in more ways than one, some of which were not so good, and some of which were good.*

*Being with Jean that year ... it was very dangerous. ... A student and a faculty member! ... That "L" word at Smith, in Northampton back in 1954, was not, I repeat, not cool, and we knew it. So there was a lot of sneaking around, sneaking into her room, breaking curfews, lying, danger of being caught.*

*Everything was charged. So in the end it was ... part of the excitement, I think, was the danger of the whole situation.*

Jean went back to Spain, and Sally entered a summer course that immersed her in French. "For me, that summer was a summer of real sexual exploration,

because she [Jean] had awakened the sleeping giant which had been buried for a long time

*All my growing up, it had been buried. I had never ever kissed a boy, I had never necked. I had never done any of that stuff. So there I am in Middlebury, and I'm looking pretty good, and I'm meeting people, and I'm falling in love.*

That summer, Sally became engaged to a fellow student, a Russian man who had lived in France.

He had family in South America. Together they traveled to Columbia for the holidays, and she saw, for the first time, how people lived in other parts of the world. The relationship didn't last, and Sally returned to Smith, where life became even more confusing.

*I guess I was caught in my room with my roommate, in a sexually compromising position ... I was referred to the college shrink at the time. I was referred because my behavior was quite 'unacceptable'.*

The psychiatrist suggested that Sally receive some kind of therapy, and her parents were told that she was having a nervous breakdown.

*I don't know if it was defined as a nervous breakdown or just mania and depression. But I did go that summer. They found me a psychoanalyst in New York City, where I commuted in five days a week to see the shrink.*

*Then, at some point, I don't remember the exact order, the shrink recommended that I go to this place which was a very classy upscale place in New Canaan [Connecticut], which dealt with people who had problems.*

Sally was fortunate to have been placed in a nice facility, and to have a supportive family. Even so, things didn't go well.



## **Sally Duplaix**

**born May 1936  
interviewed at age 65  
died July 2012**



*We had sessions with the analyst ... I continued with my lesbian stuff. ... we're back in 1956 and I'm going around telling people how proud I am, and happy I am, and I think it's the most wonderful thing in the world that I'm a lesbian.*

*Back then that was considered crazy. That was considered serious crazy. You had to be. You had to absolutely be weird to talk like that, to think like that, to not cover it up and be ashamed. It was too easy for me to tell people, because I was so proud of it; I thought it was the greatest thing in the world. Well, it wasn't. ... So I was sent from there. They couldn't handle me, they said, because they didn't have strong enough treatments there. This was too much like day camp for recovering alcoholics, or whatever. So I was sent to a private mental hospital.*

*This was a real mental hospital, but, as they kept on reminding us, a private hospital where we were treated a lot better than if we had been in a state asylum. ... That was the threat: if you don't behave, you could end up in the state asylum.*

*Well, this was serious business. There were medications. There were two kinds of shock treatments. There was electric shock in the morning, and insulin coma in the afternoon.*

*Here I am, little Miss Spoiled Valedictorian, Smith College student, locked up in this cuckoo place ... complete with torture.*

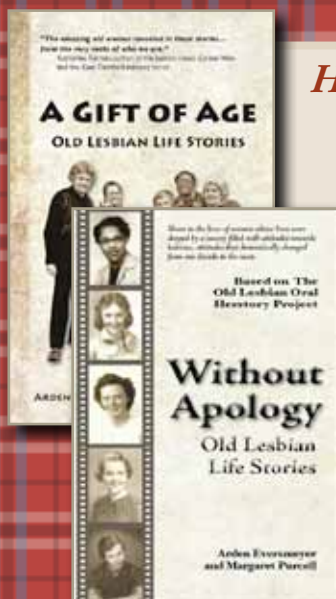
*I mean this is awful stuff happening. This is not like Silver Hill, with recovering alcoholics. This is one step from lobotomy. I was there from August to sometime in December. ... It was like daily horror stuff going on.*

Sally was finally released, but not because they considered her cured. "I really wanted out of there. They released me because my parents promised that they would put me under the care of a psychoanalyst in New York."

Life back in New York included therapy sessions, but it also provided some breathing room for Sally to begin rebuilding her life.

*Arden - My name is Glenna and many moons ago I lived in Houston, where I met and was befriended by Kay Van Cleave. As Facebook would have it (\*smile\*) I was able to find her again about one year ago. She has been "taking up" your books for some time now and as you know, gifted me with both of them. I am absolutely thrilled! My first sitting I read 117 pages .... and hated to put it down. At this rate, I'll be ready for Vol. 3 by Friday. LOL! Will it be ready? Dear woman .... thank you, thank you, thank you for your extraordinary diligence in the interviewing and compilation of our herstory. As wonderfully unique as each of us are, there are so many pink light bulb moments of identification, clarification, actualization. Common bonds ...*

*Thank you again ... these books are treasures to me. Fondly, Glenna*



## **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 our books. \***

**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 and Without Apology: Old Lesbian Life Stories can be ordered at [www.olohp.org](http://www.olohp.org)**

**\*\* 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. You can also support the OLOHP by making a donation to OLOC, one of our sponsors, telling them it is on our behalf. Visit their website at [www.oloc.org](http://www.oloc.org), or write PO Box 5853, Athens, OH 45701.**