

The OLOHP Insider

May 2015

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 27



Arden's Musings

One of the greatest challenges of embracing old age is peacefully accepting the changes in our lives that will keep us healthy and safe. After 45 years of owning a camping rig of some sort, I sold my motor home. It was time. Charlotte hasn't driven in several years, and I don't need the sole responsibility for our safety. We LOVE being on the road. Being welcomed by so many of you to park our motor-home in driveways and yards while doing interviews was quite a bonus. I thank all of you.

Now, before you jump to the wrong conclusion, having sold the rig doesn't mean we're settling down! We are still traveling – I've already taken several trips this year. If all goes according to plans, we'll travel eight times for the Project in 2015. Now we fly and rent a car – or drive our car on shorter trips. We are frequently invited to stay with friends and interviewees, which is not only fun, but helps us stretch our money much further.

One of the newer efforts in the Project has been to train new interviewers in small groups, essentially holding a two-day class. I've done it twice now, and they are proving productive. I also have trained a couple of women individually, and several of the newest interviewers are "off and running." They have provided us with stories from Florida, Arizona, New Mexico, Victoria and Vancouver (British Columbia) already, and we expect a story or two from Colorado to come in soon, as well. Keep in mind that these new interviewers only add to our ranks – our other interviewers continue working hard. Six new interviews were done in May. We know of seven or eight more scheduled for June, and at least three are set for July. Now we need to clone Margaret to keep up with the work. The growth is really exciting.

The OLOHP now also offers a digital program (giving an overview of the Project and its history) that has become a regular part of my road trips. It was used for the OLOC Gathering last summer, and this year, I've presented it twice in Florida and once in Denver. I have four more presentations arranged at varied events: the National Women's Music Festival in Madison, an LGBT center in Chicago, an RVing Women event in Oklahoma and a state-wide PFLAG event in Texas. Women in the Pacific Northwest have now developed a second digital presentation (see page 3) with a different focus. All of this is educational for many, and opens up the willingness to share life stories for others.

Life is good and very busy.

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older

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You Say The Dog Ate Your Homework? Lame Excuse. Watch Us Do Better!

We have an interviewer, Janet Stetser, who lives in McNeil, Arizona. Take a minute to look for McNeil on a map and you'll see that if you drove another half-hour south, you'd need a passport. As you'd expect, that puts Janet in the midst of a desert landscape. That's Janet over there on the right.

A few weeks back, Janet called. She'd been having trouble resolving a technical detail with transferring an audio file. We started by trying to work it out via email, but when that didn't work, Janet said she'd call. We always enjoy interacting with interviewers, but this conversation will go down in history! It went something like this. I was taking notes, but may have lost track due to my laughing!

"Margaret – I've needed to call and ask you for some help with getting a file off my recorder and onto the computer. I had planned to call a couple of days ago, but I couldn't."

"No problem, Janet. Is everything okay?"

"Well, you see, there was a rattlesnake in my kitchen."

"What?"

"It's been there for a few days. I tried to convince it to leave on its own, but it wouldn't. So when I got tired of waiting and having to keep my cat out of there, and I needed the phone, I had to get out my 22 and I shot it."

"I hope you're okay!"

"Nothing to worry about. There was a bit of blood to clean up... and I'll fix the hole in the floor later. Now I have time to work on getting this recording onto my computer."

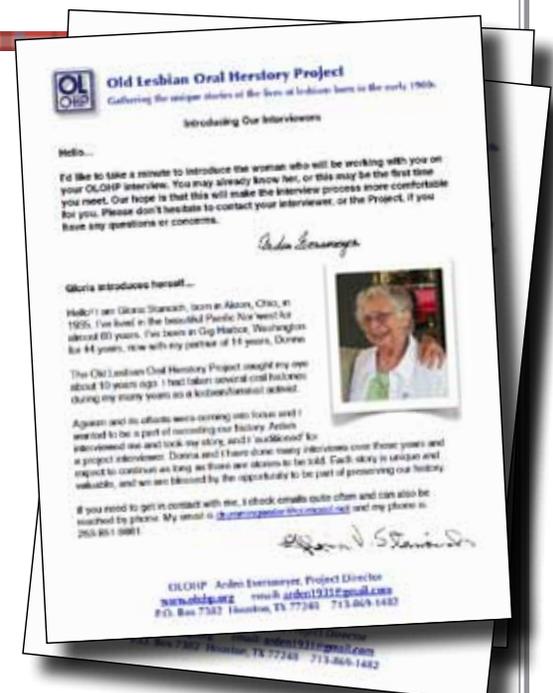
Once I stopped laughing, we took care of her recorder problem. But before Janet said goodbye, she did allow that maybe she was a bit more affected by the whole experience than she let on. "Normally, I'm in bed by this time of night, but I think tonight I need a rum and coke!"



Always Looking...and Open to Suggestions!

We are always looking for ways to improve the Project, especially ways that make it easier for our interviewers and the women sharing their stories. They show an incredible amount of trust in agreeing to be interviewed, and we try to do what we can to make them feel comfortable. Since they are often being interviewed by someone they've not even met before, we've added a personal introduction to the packets of information we provide pre-interview. The packet also includes a welcome, an overview of the Project, a document telling them what to expect and who all will be involved in processing their interview on the back side, contact information and such.

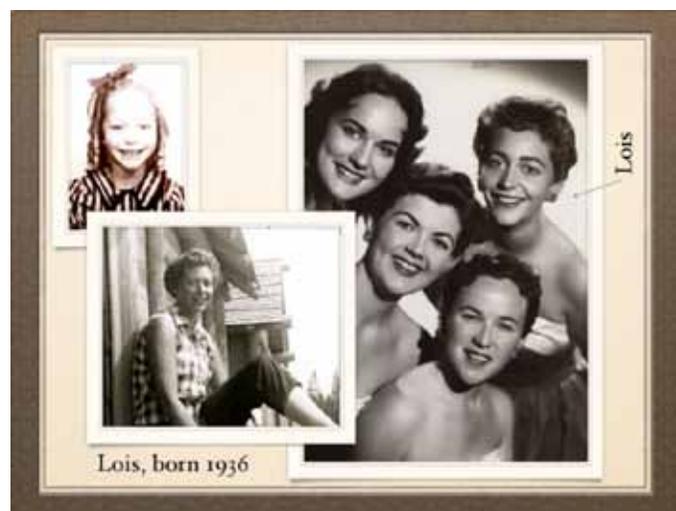
The addition of these personal introductions has been helpful and we're always open to other helpful suggestions. Please don't hesitate to speak up if you have an idea!



Reaching Out In An Interesting Way

When the Puget Sound OLOC chapter was asked to do a workshop on LGBT history at a day-long event in Olympia called Queer I Am: LGBTQ+ Student Summit Exploring Culture & Pride, they knew their audience was likely to be young and receptive, so they opted to focus on PS OLOC's work with the OLOHP. Five women, all who have worked with the Project for years in various ways, developed an interesting presentation that combined projecting photographs to accompany dramatic readings of material taken from OLOHP interviews. They titled their workshop *Our Stories, Our Voices: Insights into Lives of Lesbians 70 and Older*. The format was amazingly effective and very well received.

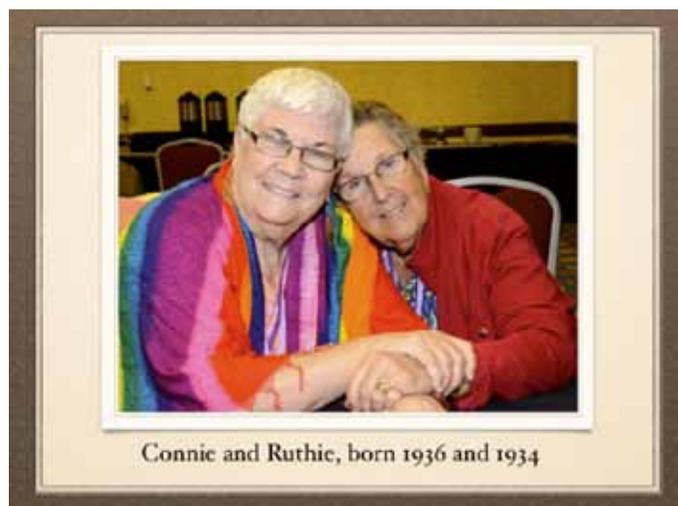
Readings ranged from 20 second pieces to a five-minute piece. Having old women sharing the words, thoughts and feelings of dozens of OLOHP women while their photographs were on a screen made it a highly personal presentation. Here is an example... this slide was on the screen while Sue, aged 80 herself, read Lois's words.



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 every day in their life. And I've never really felt that, because you always feel like something is wrong. If straight people only knew, if they only realized the difference in how we have to feel because we happen to be this way, they'd have second thoughts on it. Too many of them still believe that being gay is our option, our choice. Well, I got news.

Between readings, they shared a quick overview of the OLOHP, but overall, they remained focused on sharing insights and observations taken directly from transcripts.

One more example from the presentation. The words are Connie's and it was read by 74 year-old Aganita.



I think an affair has that moment, has that lust and that passion – it's why it's called an affair. It's the rendez-vous, it's the sneaking, it's the not knowing moment to moment when you're going to see each other. I'm sure it has that element. But I'm talking not only of the moment of an affair, but that moment of the possibility of a life. I could have a life. But I didn't know if I could, because I had no idea how scared she was. I was free. She was scared. I was alive. She was scared. Terrified. Terrified. And here, you see, I had such a tremendous regard for this human being, of her intelligence, of her hindsight and foresight. And here I see her as this lustful, passionate woman, and then I see her scared, terrified. She could not stay away. I could not stay away from her.

The audience was working to develop leadership skills and gain a broader awareness of issues within the LGBTQ community. The PS OLOC women felt it was important that old lesbians be represented and that those attending go away with a better sense of the challenges faced by lesbians in the past, without whom a conference focusing on LGBTQ interests would not even be possible. And, last but not least, they wanted to give them understanding of how important it is that we all tell our stories! Bravo PS OLOC! A new presentation we can take on the road.

*These women who shared their stories have passed.
They will be missed.*

Dee Austin
Born March 1936



Photo taken in 2014 as Dee and Jane married

Speaking about how she and Jane managed things before they moved in together: *Friday we would leave and go back up to go to Cayucos so Jane could go to work Saturday and Sunday. Then I would spend that week at her house and do the opposite the next week. We did that for about a year. I was 60 at the time that this happened. And we decided that this schedule was too much for two old ladies. [narrator and interviewer share laughter] We began not remembering where our clothes were, so we made the decision to live together.*



Jessie Fitzgerald
Born March 1930

I'm not sure what it is to be "out." I just stopped hiding myself. I had to be a little bit careful when I was working, because there might be kids. But for all practical purposes, people know that you're lesbian. Besides, you have to ride horses with pants.

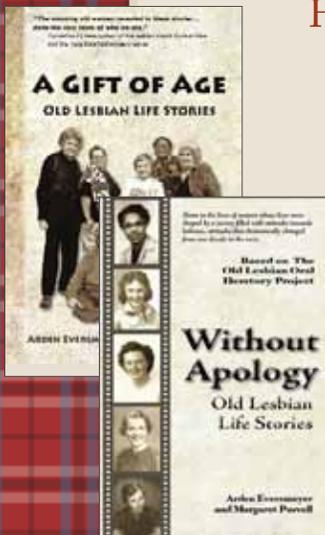
Helaine Zimmerman
Born May 1937



Photo provided for her obituary

I think that we, our generation, have witnessed and lived through the biggest changes of all in gay life. When you think that we lived the secret closeted life that I have talked about, to now, being out and married. It seems incredible. Everybody that I know is out at work and to their families. Straight people acknowledge my relationship with Thalia and include us as a couple in all activities. I mean, it's a world away from the days of the watching your pronouns. It's really so amazing.

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.