

The OLOHP Insider

April 2010

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 3



Musings from Arden

Since the project is now about 11 years old, it is reasonable that a lot of living and experiences have happened for many of the old lesbians who have previously shared their story. So arriving at a means to accomplish the updating of stories has become a challenge.

Each year, I write a letter to all the women in the Project, bringing them up to date on what has been happening and letting them know we are thinking of them. In the latest letter, I mentioned that we were working on a way to update stories if anyone was interested.

There are already requests from Florida, Arizona, and Colorado. A few updates have been collected simply because an interviewer was in the area to take care of the job at the time. Stories in California, Washington, Colorado and Arizona have been updated

at this time because an interviewer was at hand. But for many of us time is of the essence, and we can't wait for a personal visit.

We hope to get quite a few of the updates in person, but we are looking at other options to accomplish this, so women don't have to wait until an interviewer can travel to their area. One option, of course, is submitting a written addendum to a story. An outline, or guide, can be provided if it's helpful.

Another option is using Skype, a telephone conversation made via the Internet. The woman being interviewed won't have to have a computer, just a phone. Using Skype instead a standard phone connection to call, will allow the conversation to be easily recorded for later transcription.

Myself, I'm severely electronically

challenged. But I've committed to learning how to use Skype. Margaret already knows how. And other interviewers will be happy to learn, I'm sure.

We're always open to learning something new, so if you have a brilliant idea that might help us gather all the story updates, give me a call or drop me an email.

For those of you with "old stories," give some thought to what has happened in your life in recent years and let Arden or Margaret know.

And, of course, we're always excited to hear from, or about, new women who would like to participate in the project. We're not ready to slow down yet!

We're always open to learning something new.

Arden, born 1931

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians Born in the Early 1900s

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But She Makes it Look So Easy...

Here in Western Washington, several of us, who have been involved to varying degrees with the OLOHP and other oral history work for the last few years, decided we'd quit just dipping our toes in the water and, instead, jump in feet first. We put our heads together and said, "There are several of us interested in working on it together – we can take on gathering stories from this area to contribute to the Project."

As we enter our second year working together as a team on these efforts, we want to tell you, without any qualifiers, Arden is a miracle worker! We're all mature, experiences adults, so we should have known that just because Arden makes it look so easy doesn't mean it is. Fun, enlightening, exciting and fulfilling... yes. Easy? No.

We'll have to admit that we thought with several of us working on it, we could do it all. We'd set up and do the interview, transcribe it, process all the support documents, work with the interviewee to get the transcript edited, support documents captioned, make any correction and edits, print out copies of everything, get the materials into sheet protectors in notebooks, and send a finished product to Houston.

Our team includes Gloria Stancich (our fearless leader!), Donna Douglass, Mary Henry, Marcia Perlstein and Margaret Purcell. Others are interested in joining. We've completed and sent five stories to Arden to add to the collection, we're actively working on a few more, and have several more waiting in the wings for us to catch our breath. Arden manages to handle all the necessary tasks for dozens of herstories each year.

Locally, we've also tried to add some video-recording to the mix. When interviewees are comfortable with the idea, and a camera and operator are available, part or all of the conversation is taped. We still haven't perfected the process, but we feel it adds one more dimension to the Herstories. Our goal is to include a DVD of video excerpts with the completed herstories.

Another interesting experience we've had is doing an interview in a series of short sessions (instead of one or two longer sessions) in order to accommodate the health limitation of a woman who was sharing her story. We were able to accomplish this by doing the initial part of the interview ourselves, then working with the woman's care team to get additional pieces as her condition allowed. It was a great learning experience, one that we think will be useful again when a similar situation comes up.

Locally, we exchange information and resources with the Pacific Northwest Lesbian Archives. We're also pleased to have received a small grant from the Pride Foundation (www.pridefoundation.org) in Seattle to help defray some of our expenses in 2009, and again in 2010. They too see the importance of documenting the lives of lesbians born when the word *lesbian* was rarely used as anything other than a pejorative.



Two other important developments have come out of our naive beginnings. We realized we needed a packet of introductory materials to provide any woman interesting in sharing her story with the Project. Working with Arden, we were able to develop the packet which familiarizes the interviewee with the Project, the process, and the people involved. Best of all, the packet can be easily customized for use by different interviewers and interview teams.

This also led us to helping Arden update and expand the *Guide for OLOHP Interviewers*. It's helpful to have anyone working with interviews for the Project use the same framework, and this document guides you through the process and shares the insights Arden has gained after a decade of interviewing.

So for everyone involved, the women sharing their stories, the OLOHP, the Pride Foundation, and the local team, we think it's been a win-win situation. And if anyone out there wants to form a team and give it a go, we'd be glad to share more about our experience.

Margaret, Gloria, Mary, Donna and Marcia

Excerpts from a few of the Herstories

On spending time in the mid 1970s with her lesbian daughter who was ill. This was years before Kittu divorced and realized her own attraction to women and beginning a 30+ year relationship.

She said that there were three groups of women on the faculty. One was the married women who left the campus at 5:00 and had to go home to take care of their families. One was the radical leftists who wouldn't help. And one was the lesbians. She said out of those groups, the only group that had been helpful was the lesbians.

I realized that in going there, I was probably going to meet the lesbians [women who were helping care for her daughter] and I had not consciously ever met a lesbian before that I can remember. I had been there two or three days, and as I was sitting in the living room talking to some of the women, I looked around and I thought to myself, "Oh my goodness. I'll bet every woman in this room with me is a lesbian. What do I do?" I was scared. I was afraid of saying the wrong thing, I was afraid of doing the wrong thing. I had no idea what to say. I was just scared.

I tell this story because I want people to know that that was my beginning with the lesbians. I felt sorry for lesbians, because I really thought that their lives must be very miserable because they did not fit into society. I really didn't know whether I could do anything about how they felt. That was my introduction to it.

**Kittu asked that we mention her biography:
A Nourishing Life by Katharine Parker Riddle**

**Katharine
'Kittu' Riddle
Born 1919**

*From her Interview
April 2001*



1936



1999

**Portia Fagan
Born 1939 Died 2008**

*From her Interview
in February 2006*



2005

I did get married one time to a gay man who was about eleven years older. It was after my first [girl]friend had left. I was really down. I met up with him one night at a bowling alley. We were drinking. We couldn't bowl—we drank. He kind of flipped the ring on me and I said, "Well, my goodness." And I agreed to marry him.

We were going to be straight; he didn't want to be gay. I don't think he wanted the stigma attached to being gay. We had been friends for maybe ten years, so we thought we could be straight. I wasn't doing it for cover and I don't think he was either. I was tired of being gay.... I just figured I could graduate from school, be a librarian, and have a nice, "normal" life. Things would be okay. I wouldn't be a sexual person; I would be a professional person.

I'm the one that first said, "Well, I don't think this is me. I don't think I'm comfortable with this." We'd gone to straight things with other straight couples and I just wasn't comfortable. I got a divorce after about 2 1/2 years.

Nancy Osborne Born 1936

From her Interview
in January 2007



Barb and Nancy
in 2006

Barbara Gerber Born 1934

From her Interview
in January 2007

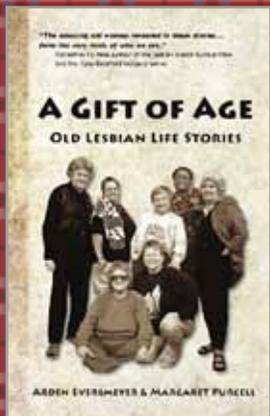
Nancy: On getting to know Barb...

We would pass each other on the highway and I'd see the orange Fire-bird. I was driving a green Volkswagon van. [They parked near each other.] Then we started leaving notes for each other under the windshield. Very early on, her husband, who was a clinical psychologist and a very bright man, said to her, "This woman has a homosexual interest in you." And Barbara said, "You're a nut. Absolutely not. Not at all." Thankfully, Barbara and I drank coffee and sat and talked to each other for two whole years before we knew anything about what was going on. We had husbands; we had children; we had jobs to do. I was in school, a student at the time. But we were just clueless for a really long time. We just knew that we really had a good time talking to each other.

Barb: On living according to society's expectations...

When you have a culture like we grew up in, it was real hard to figure out what the heck was goin' on. And there were enough older women who had things to say about sex that didn't make you think that it was all going to be bells and whistles, so I accepted it. That's part of our socialization.

It's the same socialization that says your husband knows more than you do even when you know you know more! The first house that Bill and I bought, the deed said, "William Gerber and one." They don't even put the name in! And we had to argue with the people because his salary alone wasn't enough to qualify, and my salary added to it did qualify. We had to swear that we were using birth control in order to get the mortgage!



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

** Tax-deductible donations can be made to The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project either by mailing a check or going to our website and using the 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, or write PO Box 5853, Athens, OH 45701.

*It's a good book, fun to read,
and each story is indeed unique.
As one local old lesbian said
after reading it, "I just wanted
to hug each one of 'em!"*

*Your newsletter is wonderful,
ladies. Just knowing others
went before me who are like
myself, well, makes me feel
less alone in this world.*

Thank you!

