

The OLOHP Insider

February 2010

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 2



A friend said, during her interview: *This is the first time you and I, in all the years we've known each other, have ever sat down to talk with each other, and it's a little anxiety provoking. At the same time, I'm very happy to do it because as we always say, "Everyone has a story to tell, and I have one that is intriguing."*

Musings From Arden

When the first comments (almost all complimentary) started coming in after the book was released, both Margaret and I started a file we called "Warm Fuzzies." We traded these fuzzies between us. Then we started getting new fuzzies after the inaugural issue of the newsletter came out. Now we have two files. And there is no way to tell you how wonderful and important these messages have been to us.

Now, let me be clear! ***I don't write!*** Margaret and I lucked out with the partnership we have formed for the book(s) and such. I love doing what I do – finding the wonderful old lesbians and

obtaining the life stories. It's work that also provides an opportunity to travel, attend festivals and conferences, and network with old women. Margaret, on the other hand, is the wordsmith. Her involvement started by digitizing the herstories for the archive, and she got hooked on the stories. So, she led me gently down the path for the first book. When I hear her say "Now take a deep breath, Arden," I know we're about to embark on a new facet of our incredible journey (like the newsletter). I often explain our collaboration as "I go out and play, and Margaret does the work."

Our web site has been getting

some great feedback, also. As the primary source for obtaining the book, more people are looking at it. Mary Henry, Margaret's partner, is our web mistress, and has done a beautiful job with it.

A Gift of Age has certainly changed our lives. Already busy with local LGBT activities, we have done book events in Port Townsend,

WA; Austin, TX; and Tucson, AZ. We had a stall at Houston Women's Festival, and have done programs for a couple of lesbian organizations. That was all in the last few months of 2009 and the calendar is already getting full of travel commitments for 2010. So the work, and the play, continues!

*The work,
and the play,
continues!*

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians Born in the Early 1900s
OLOHP • PO Box 980422 • Houston, TX 77098 • www.olohp.org • info@olohp.org



The oldest couple with stories in the OLOHP collection are Louise Cason & Ruth Taylor. They shared their stories at age 85 and were born in 1923.

About Support Documents

When talking about Herstories, one of our favorite sayings is, “There is no such thing as too many support documents!” Even a single photo is capable of transforming a transcript, magically breathing life into the words.

Women who have agreed to share their stories are encouraged to rummage through their photo albums, desk drawers and shoeboxes before they are interviewed. We love to have photos from all of their lives — baby pictures, playing in the yard as a child, parents, grandparents, starring in a high school play, wedding photos, girlfriends, kids, and more.

We greatly appreciate each and every picture but we always hope for other materials, too. Several stories in the collection include graduation certificates from various levels of schooling. Quite a few have included newspaper articles telling of an event or special accomplishment. Some women have provided copies of poetry, articles or even books that they have written. We even have

a few DVDs and audio recordings from presentations the women have given.

Support documents serve another purpose; the process of sorting through old photos and papers brings up many memories that might not otherwise have been included in the story the woman shares.

Typically, the interviewer goes through any support documents with the woman right after they finish taping the interview, asking who someone is in a photo or when a picture was taken. And, as you might have already guessed, more than once, the interviewer has had to scramble to turn the recorder back on after they thought the interview was over.

Although there are a few exceptions (mostly copies of books) the majority of the support documents are photocopies or scans.

We stay in touch with women who have shared their stories and they’re encouraged to send us anything new, or newly discovered, to add as they continue to lead their interesting lives.

The women pictured below have recently died, leaving friends, families, and their stories behind.

Deedy Breed was born in 1922. She was interviewed in Connecticut at age 79. Phyllis Downey was born in 1934. She shared her story in Texas at age 74.

Janice Levy was born in 1930. She was interviewed in New Mexico at age 76.

Mickie Clifton was born in 1925. She was interviewed in California at age 84 in 2009.



Deedy



Phyllis



Janice



Mickie

Excerpts from a few of the Herstories

D: I should back track a little bit and say that before I met David, this would have been right in the early 40s, a woman came to work in the same department as I did. She was an ex-WAC. And she kind of took a fancy to me. We had a brief relationship, which, of course, at that time... I figured wow (Deedy makes a gasping sound), we were the only two people in the world. I went to look up, I didn't know the word lesbian... I looked up the word *homosexual* and found it was this horrible thing and the only book I read was *The Well of Loneliness*.

And I thought, "Well, even in fiction they can't make it any better, so who wants this? Not me." So that was that. That was just a brief relationship that I put out of my mind and decided I wanted nothing to do with anything that had lesbian attached to it. She left and then a few years later, my husband came to work and one thing led to another and I thought, "Well, he comes from good stock."

On her feminist awakening:

D: I ran for office and I was elected twice as a Republican, which I hesitate to say now because I'm such a Democrat. But at that time, the Republicans were the progressive party in Branford, not the Democrats. And I would come home from some meetings and my husband would start quizzing me on why did I vote this way, why did I vote that way? I would say, "Well, I was the one that was elected." Why was he telling me how I should have voted? That, coupled with what I am learning at the women's center, I am seeing now, right in my own home, there is this power situation and I am the one that is supposed to say yes and follow the male lead.... Once my eyes were opened to what was out there for women and what I wanted to be a part of, [I knew] the marriage was not going to last.

Deedy Breed Born 1922 Died 2009

From her Interview
in May 2001



1929



1952



1999

Lois Heindselman Born 1936 Died 2008

From her Interview
in March 2006



1960

1996



Lois went on her first cruise, an Olivia cruise, in her mid 60s, after having lost her partner.

L: When I first went on that gay cruise, I thought, "You know what? It's the first time in my life I feel what it is like to be normal." You know what I mean? I felt like everybody else gets to feel every day of their life. And I've never really felt like that because you always feel like something is wrong.

I don't care if you're walking down the street or whatever. I don't seem to always feel like I fit in. I mean I act it sometime, but I don't really. And on the cruise, it's like everybody is just like you are. And I can just be, not worry about a thing and live everyday like everybody else gets to live.

And see, if they even knew and realized the difference in how we have to feel because we happened to be this way, they'd have some second thoughts on it. Too many of them still believe that we... well, that it's our option, our choice. Well I got news.

Jennie Gates Born 1927

From her Interview
in May 2000



1945



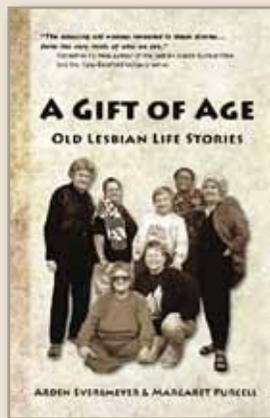
1998

J: When I was 15, I was still in high school, and was an elevator operator in the Rusk Building in downtown Houston. This was during the war when nylons were so hard to get – they were impossible, pretty much – and they had such runs that there was more run than there was stocking, but I was required to wear those to work and that’s what I did. That was a crazy job.

But then I had a chance to work for an oil company. In the meantime, I had met a girl that I was just desperately in love with, I thought. And I’d go to work on Saturday, you had to work five and a half days a week. I’d go to work on Saturday in my “boy” clothes. My brother was in the Navy and I was wearing his drapes and his shirts. Couldn’t wear his shoes – my feet weren’t big enough. But I would if I could have! I’d go to work in that. And one day my boss... oh, I also had another girlfriend... I always had two or three at a time.

I: Variety is the spice of life, Jennie.

J: Oh, I’m telling you! I had one that worked upstairs in that same building and we would meet in the stairwell and neck. Stupid! Well, my boss learned about that and I had only been there a few months when he called me in one Saturday when I was in my brother’s boy clothes and gave me this very sweet, very understanding lecture about how I was presenting myself. He didn’t think it would be a good idea for me to continue to work there. So I’m fired from my first real job for being a dyke!



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

** The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project is a nonprofit but our tax-exempt status is pending. For now, you can make a tax-deductible gift on our behalf by visiting the OLOC website and using the donate button (www.oloc.org) or mailing to OLOC, PO Box 5853, Athens, OH 45701



I truly enjoyed not only the stories, but the warm and tender way each woman’s life was presented. Great job! I like the additional reference material as well.

*With gratitude and respect,
Jeanne*

*Such good work y’all have done. I just finished reading the book a couple of weeks ago, and now the newsletter, Wow! I laughed, I cried, I learned so much about our foremothers. I’m so proud of us. Thanks, thanks, thanks!
love and blessings,
Pacifica*