

The OLOHP Insider

June 2010

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 4



Musings from Arden

The year is not quite half over, and we have already traveled coast to coast. A trip back to the Los Angeles area in January started the year off in fine form. Along with interviews, I hosted a brunch for all the Southern California women (and partners) that I have worked with in the Herstory Project. This has become a tradition for me, and the easiest way for me to keep in touch with the women who have participated in the project. While there, we housed with our friends, Barbara Kalish and Cristina Vegas in Long Beach.

Next, we took the motor home to Alabama and Tennessee. We spent three days at the women's land community, Alapine. It was quiet and beautiful, and provided me with three fascinating life stories. Then we traveled on to Memphis for a couple interviews and the first of three programs for book clubs.

Presenting at book clubs has been great fun. For the most part, they have already read *A GIFT OF AGE*, so questions are quite different from a workshop where the material is new to them. Book club events so far have been in Memphis in March, Dallas, in April, and Houston in June. I will

make an effort to speak to any book club that invites me, and (of course!) plan a few interviews and play days along the way.

In May we flew to Massachusetts and had stops in Northampton and Cambridge, where we housed with new interviewer, Judith Sullivan. The trip also included spending time on the Cape, where we stayed with our friend, Sally Duplaix, who's story is included in the book. We came home from that adventure with seven stories.

Presenting at book clubs has been great fun.

Two of the women interviewed on that trip are also interested in doing interviews, so I worked with them on that aspect as well. The trip also included a visit to the Sophia Smith Archive at Smith College. As busy as we were, we even made a day to play in P'Town and now have our book in both bookstores there.

Charlotte loves to travel, so this makes for happy time for us. And we are especially grateful to the women who house us on our travels. It greatly reduces the expense of our trips.

The second half of the year will be just as busy and interesting with upcoming music festivals and conferences. But I will give you a report on that later.

From the one who has the fun...
Arden, born 1931

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

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All About the Being Interviewed

We're often asked about what actually happens once a woman has agreed to be interviewed for the OLOHP, so we thought we'd share a bit about the process.

We are collecting life stories and want to hear whatever the woman sharing wants to talk about, but sometimes it's hard to know where to start. Beyond the basics about when and where someone is born, we also like to hear a bit about the woman's parents and siblings, then about their education. Our list of questions is really a jumping off point. A variety of subjects are suggested to help guide the interview, but nothing is absolutely required. (Examples of questions appear at the end of this article.)

Each interview is unique. In one, we may have to ask questions throughout the whole interview. In others, we just sit back and listen, only asking for clarification when we'd like more details. Women sharing their stories are encouraged to jot down notes but are discouraged from trying to essentially write their story.

Interviews take place wherever the woman sharing her story feels most comfortable. Most often, it's in her home, preferably in her favorite easy chair. Occasionally, interviews will take place at an event, such as an OLOC National Gathering, or in a neutral location.

The actual interview may be as short as one hour or as long as four or five hours, but the process typically takes longer, allowing time for everyone to get settled, recorders set up and such.

Interviews are very informal and conversational. And, as with most conversations, things often get off track. This isn't a problem. Interviewees don't need to worry about sentence structure, pronouns or syntax. They'll get a copy of the transcript and problems can be rectified in the editing process.



Eris Dreykus, comfortable in her home, surrounded by her own possessions. Interviewer: Gloria Stancich.

It may take more than one session to collect a herstory. Quite often the woman telling her story either reaches a good breaking point or just needs a break. It isn't uncommon at all to hear, "I forgot to talk about..." If possible, we get together a second time to finish the story. If getting back together isn't possible, women are encouraged to add whatever they'd like to their transcript.

Examples of Questions and Topics:

- What kind of home did you grow up in?
- What kind of religious activities were a part of your childhood, if any?
- Did you go to public or private schools?
- What activities did you participate in?
- Did you date in high school?
- Tell me about your first job.
- When did you first realize you were different than most of the other girls?
- Were you aware of any books, magazines or organizations for lesbians? Or anything else that might help you understand about being a lesbian?
- What words did you use? lesbian? or gay? homosexual?
- Were you ever married? Did you have children?
- Would you like to share any thoughts on how your being a lesbian has affected your life in positive ways? or in negative ways?

Excerpts from a few of the Herstories

My parents were not anything even resembling what we see as the “religious right.” It was “religious left.” They were very much action oriented and very liberal and I had a great, free childhood, especially compared to what I saw other preachers’ kids have. I had a lot of conflict, but it was an internal kind of conflict, because I thought I was different; I didn’t know how to explain it.

I remember in my childhood doing a lot of stuff with my brother and wanting to be a boy, thinking that my attraction to girls was like his, and therefore... it was the only way I could explain it, and that was hard. I didn’t really have anyone to talk to about it and I had no words with which to talk about it. At one point, I thought that it probably meant that I wanted to be a boy or should have been a boy. As I look back on it in later years, I realize that it was an early awareness that that’s where the power was; that my brother had the power in the family; that he could do things that I wanted to do.

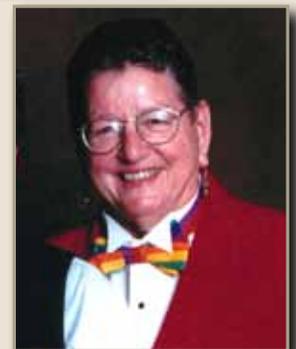
I think I didn’t recognize it as power at the time, and I wouldn’t have put it in those terms. I had had a Freudian background at that point so I probably would have thought it was penis envy. But I think that really was misnamed and should have been power envy or recognition of not having power. At any rate, I didn’t understand what that was about. I dressed like my brother in the summer and I cut my hair short. On some level, I was ashamed of it, or uncomfortable about it, when I got to teen years. I wouldn’t let anybody see those pictures because I still couldn’t explain this; I still felt a distance inside me that I couldn’t account for. Looking back on it, I can put names to things that I could not name at that time.

Annalee Stewart Born 1927

*From her Interview
October 2000*



1933



2002

Shaba Barnes Born 1935

*From her Interview
in January 2003*



1980

I quit my bookkeeping job to work in the Post Office, which was an interesting experience. I remember the first night that I reported to the parcel post station located on 3rd Ave at the waterfront. It was during the Christmas rush. I wore a business suit, stockings and heels. The guys had a good laugh. I had to lift boxes my size, learn how to drive a crane, stay warm and alive. The men resented me, the first woman on their shift, and challenged me constantly. I can still see the large boxes coming at me as they called my name.

They collected money to buy liquor every night. At first, I would not participate; that just made it harder to work with them. Later, I put in a few dollars but I would not drink. Then I learned because the docks were so cold, men drank to keep warm. It was hard liquor but I treated it like a medicine and began to take a sip from time to time. Because they resented me, my coworkers worked me hard and would not help me. They said that I was getting the same salary as each of them, so I had to carry my own weight.

Ellie Schaffer Born 1917

From her Interview
in January 2003



1938



2002

I = Interviewer, Arden E = Ellie

I: So it was like a residence school? You lived there?

E: Oh, yes. We lived in the dormitory.

I: Well that's an education in itself.

E: Pretty strict. You know, you were in by eight o'clock at night, except Saturdays, it would be ten o'clock.

I: That was pretty liberal for the times.

E: When I went there in '34, there was only one place where you could smoke in the dormitory. There were certain rules. Social rooms you could go smoke in. You couldn't smoke in your room.

I: The fact that they even allowed women to smoke, that was very liberal.

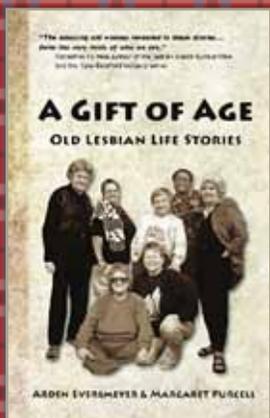
E: Very. This was a part of a first experience with other women, with what we would now say lesbians. And that was a very light relationship, really. Nothing heavy, nothing steady. A lesson or two when you would visit in Philadelphia with somebody's friend or something of the sort. But no exposure, actually, to the lesbian or gay thing. This was the '30s. This was pre-WWII.

I: No vocabulary. No information.

E: Definitely.

I: Many of you were dating guys?

E: Yes. You know you might be hanging around with girls in the dormitory after 8:00. Before 8:00, you were dating guys.



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.

What a gift to get to work
on this and read all these
life stories. We have come a
long way in our society - need
to go a lot further.

Kiki

Thank you for sharing the
newsletter with us. The stories
are all enriching for all of us
with our common bond, as well
as so interesting

Herman and Rodger

