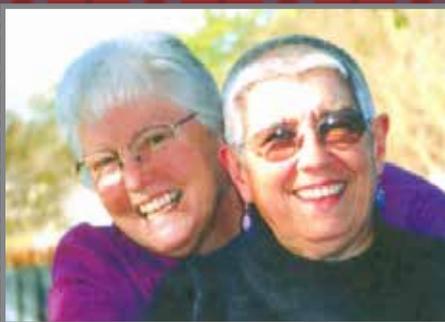


The OLOHP Insider

#50, May 2022

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project



Arden's Musings

It may be only May, but to say this has already been a year to remember is a huge understatement!

I want to start out my Musings column with some news about the Project. We've been documenting the life stories of old lesbians since 1998. Our goal was to span a generation, or a bit more, and we have. We aren't done with this work yet, but we have decided to move into the wind-down phase. In April 2023 we'll stop getting new interviews. That will let us focus more on finalizing the Herstories that are in process, and take care of the dozens of auxiliary tasks that we kept putting off until we had more time. The transition will probably be unsettling, but as they say, all good things come to an end. Assuming all goes well between now and then, I'll celebrate my 92nd birthday and the 25th Anniversary of the OLOHP that same month, which makes this decision feel all the more fitting. (We'll include an article in the next issue about what winding down looks like for us.)

I also want to tell you about another event that has made this year one to remember. In February, a routine lunch outing to a buffet with my sister-in-law quickly went from an ordinary event to the beginning of a roller coaster ride. These past few years, I've used a rollator (a wheeled walker with a seat) when I'm out. As I got ready to sit down at the table, my toe caught on the rollator. And, as June described it, I "gracefully sat on the floor." Folk nearby helped right away and we went on eating. I even made another trip to the buffet without a problem. When we were done, I drove home and napped in my recliner, but I couldn't get back up and ended up hospitalized with a fracture high on my femur.

Since fewer things are simple when you're 90 years old, it took several days before the docs could do what was needed to put me back together. The good news in this story is twofold. First, I had little or no pain throughout the whole process. Second, I'm now back to running errands, shopping for groceries, and, most importantly, meeting up with friends for our weekly margarita outings!

Then, there is the not-so-good part of this saga. I needed to spend some time in a rehab. I doubt I'll ever know what all transpired behind the scenes, but the rehab phase of my recovery was totally mishandled. I won't subject you to a blow-by-blow. In the end, I did manage to walk out of there under my own power, but my leaving the facility would be better described as an escape rather than a release! I'm still trying to wrap my head around it all but I do know one thing for sure – if at all possible, anyone going into a rehab (or a hospital) needs a strong advocate at their side. I'm grateful for those who spoke up on my behalf. I'm still doing some PT at home in the high-rise where I live, and other than the emotional toll it took on me, my life is otherwise back to normal.

Here's looking forward to a less exciting rest of 2022!

Arden

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older
OLOHP • PO Box 7382 • Houston, TX 77248 • www.olohp.org • info@olohp.org

Why We Ask What We Ask

When a woman is interviewed for the OLOHP, other than providing us a name and birthdate, and identifying as a lesbian*, she's not *required* to share anything with us. We do, however, have some suggested questions/topics that we share with her before the interview. When reviewing that list recently, it occurred to us that we may never have shared how it came about. Before Arden started the Herstory Project, she herself had been interviewed by a student in an Anthropology of Women class. The student's term project was to interview a woman of a different culture who had not been fully assimilated into the American culture. As a woman who had recently come out herself, she reached out to Arden, whom she knew of, but had not met. The interviewer was pleased to find that prior to their sitting down together, Arden had put a lot of thought to what she felt would be important to share. In keeping with Arden's nature and academic career, she had even created an outline of her story!

A decade later when Arden was exploring the idea of starting the Herstory Project, she made up her first list of suggested questions and much of it reflected how she had approached sharing her own story. From that starting point, the list has been refined and expanded over the years.

The Project strives to gather as much of the woman's story as she is willing to share – not just sharing about her lesbian life, but her life as a whole. Some people chuckle a bit when they see the list, wondering why in the world we would ask if they had school clothes and play clothes, or when they learned to drive or if they lived in a house or apartment. Granted, answers to some of those early questions aren't especially revealing, but we've found that setting the stage with a few laid-back queries gets the ball rolling making it easier once we get to parts of their life that might be more difficult to share. More often than not, once the interview starts to flow, very few prompts are needed unless it's to clarify something, or ask about the spelling of a town or person's name.

Women we interview are told that nothing is off limits – they can share whatever they'd like. We also remind them they will have the chance to review the transcript, and that as they review it, they're welcome to add a story that was left out, or expand on something.

* Back up to the asterisk following the word lesbian in the first sentence: While it's important that anyone being interviewed has led a significant portion of her life as a lesbian, using that term, or any other, isn't required. Some women prefer the term gay, or would rather avoid labels altogether. That's totally up to them. It truly is their story.



Sharing A Bit of Feedback

Hello to you all at the OLOHP,

My name is Courtney Dieckbrader and I run the seniors and older adults programs for QMUNITY BC's Queer, Trans and Two-Spirit resource centre up in Canada. I want to say thank you for sharing these stories and bringing the experiences of these women to my email inbox. The excerpts that you use to honor those who have passed are always so thoughtful and really help me to show the value of the work I am trying to do. I can only hope that someday my own story touches the heart of a younger lesbian, trying to find her heritage, the way your newsletter does for me.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.
Courtney

Thank you for all you have done (and are still doing) for us! Ruth and Sandra Jo

Whether as an interviewer, transcriber, presenter, or volunteer indexer, working with this Project has been a huge privilege and an amazing, life-enriching experience.

Somehow, even though I am sad to read of the woman who have died, at the same time I am excited and happy that these women found a way to live and love as lesbians in this world that does everything it can to prevent that.
Rand Hall

A Special Thank You from Arden

Sorting the mail that had accumulated while I was temporarily derailed was quite a task. I was a bit shocked when one envelope I opened contained a large, unexpected gift from one of our interviewers. Since we didn't ask if we could share her name, we won't. But she'll know we're once again thanking her!

Donations are extraordinary. Whether it's a volunteer helping, someone sending us a thank-you card, a few dollars, or several thousand, each gives me the same message: The Project has been, and will continue to be, life-changing, not just for me, but for many, many women.

*Excerpts from the Herstories of women who have recently passed
They were all incredible women, well-loved, and we will miss them.*

***Rainbow Williams St Augustine, Florida
Born 1934, interviewed by Arden in 2007***

There was a little episode – I guess it was my second year of college – where a young woman was asked to leave school because it was suspected she was a lesbian. The word was never used, but a finger was pointed and she was asked not to return.

Years later, my best friend and I were just filled with motherhood. And we just wanted to push our strollers and chat in the park endlessly. We talked about lots of different books that we read, and at one point the book that we were discussing was *The Well of Loneliness*. We just felt a great deal of sympathy for those poor dear lesbians and hoped they would get it together somehow



***Nellie Wolf Apache Junction, Arizona
Born 1932, interviewed by Jenny K. in 2016***

When I was 6, I went to the movie and fell in love with Barbara Stanwyck. I go, “Oh, my lord, what’s wrong with me?” I didn’t like the guys, but I sure did like the girls in the movies. I couldn’t picture why I was different or why it seemed different to me, but it did. When I was 19, my cousins were all leaving, going into the service, and I thought, “Here I am, 19 and I’m supposed to do something, or get married. I guess I’ll have to get married, but I’m going to find somebody that’s good looking, so I’ll have good-looking children!” That was the reason I got married! Talk about lame! I knew I was gay, but I had never had any kind of engagement with a woman, ever. “I guess I have to get married,” and I did.

The day I got married, I said, “Well, I’ll give this a week. If I don’t like it, I’m getting out of here.” Little did I know! My life with him was not very pleasant. All I did was have babies. And by 1966, I am a widow with seven kids. The oldest was 13, then 11, 10, 6, 5, 4, and 2. I go to the Social Security place and ask for some money to help me through the month. I thought, “That will help until I get on my feet a little bit.” When I went to the Social Security place, they said, “Do you own your home?” I said, “Well, we are buying one.” Then she said, “Do you have a car?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “Well, we can’t help you.” What I wanted to do was go on the GI Bill (which I had from my husband) and become a mathematician and an art teacher. Now remember, I was 34 – they said, “You’re too old.” “Now what am I going to do? I only have a degree in diaper changing!” But I managed. It wasn’t until three years after his death that I had my experience with a woman.

***Peggy Lubrs Burlington VT
Born 1945, interviewed by Christine P. in 2015***

It was all so frigging mysterious back then, right? There were two women in my dorm who I was really kind of attracted to. I really liked these women. They seemed really interesting. One of them wore a cape and they seemed to be very close. The next thing that I knew they got thrown out of Pratt! I don’t know what for. I don’t know what they did. I can guess now but at the time it happened, I barely could. I really didn’t get it then.

Years later, a guy came up to me one night and said, “Everyone knows you’re the biggest bull-dyke around.” I was horrified. I couldn’t believe he said that to me and I couldn’t think of why and I was horrified. I had looked up ‘homosexual.’ Thinking about myself, it sounded so awful. I just said, “No. That’s not me.” I put it away. Pushed it away. I didn’t understand what it was about. I even was conscious that I wanted to kiss my roommate at one point and I still didn’t put it together.



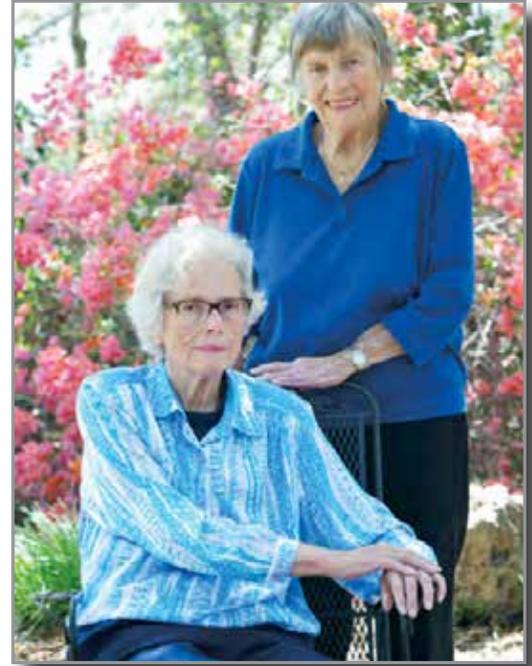
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Nancy Warner and Christine Reynolds

Nancy, born 1923, interviewed by Arden in 2008 in Pasadena, CA

I had some professors that said, “You really should think about going to medical school.” I said, “Medical school? What would I want to do that for?” “You should think about that.” I thought, “In the first place, I’ll never get into medical school.” They only took four women. That would be the standard across the country in any place that accepted women, and plenty of schools did not. So the University of Chicago accepted four women and I thought I might just have a chance. I had the grades but that didn’t cut it.

In the meantime, with the war, the Armed Forces had a desperate need for physicians. They were fighting on two fronts and they had to have more doctors and basically, they took over admission to all the medical schools in the United States. That left the schools with something like 10 or 15 percent of places that they could fill. But there were no young men walking around able-bodied; they were gone. So they took anything they could find. Our schools probably took three kids who were under draft age and they took some older guys, and they still had places to fill. So they took women and I got in.



Nancy (seated) with Christine

Christine, born 1921, interviewed by Arden in 2009 in Pasadena, CA

We had met when I was a child after I’d moved to the north side. I was ten and she was eight. We played together and we spent some of our summer times together. Her family had a cottage up on the river, and they were very nice to entertain all the little girls, you know. Nan was fun to be around. Then they moved away. Years later, she and her mother were on a trip. She was with her mother, so she called me and I said, “Well, we ought to get together, and how about having dinner?” I went over and picked her up at her hotel and we went back to the Valley to this steak house and had dinner and a few drinks and went back to where I was living. We spent the night there. Nan called her mother and said, “We’ve had some drinks so I won’t be back there tonight.” And her mother said, “Okay, we’ll see you in the morning.” So that was the beginning of it all right then and there. It was just like — I don’t know... we’ve talked about this — it’s like finding a nice, normal girl who happened to be gay!

That was 1953, when we started living together. We were committed to each other in 1950. I’ve often thought about it. It was pretty risky, in a way, because we each made a deep commitment. But a lot of people go into relationships, in my observation, with the thought, “Well, if it doesn’t work, we can split.” We never had that idea. This was it.

Thank You to the Kellett Foundation for your support of the OLOHP!



How can you be involved in the OLOHP?

- Lesbians 70 years of age and older can tell their own stories.
- If you don’t “qualify,” encourage older lesbian friends to contact us.
- Buy our books and our DVD.*
- Donate copies of our books and our DVD+Guide to your library.
- Make a tax-deductible donation to support the Project.**
- Send us a note of encouragement!

* *A Gift of Age*, *Without Apology*, and the DVD *Our Stories, Our Voices: The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project* can be ordered at www.olohp.org.

** Tax-deductible donations can be made to the OLOHP either by using the Donate button on our website, or mailing a check.

