

The OLOHP Insider

#42, Fall 2019

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Arden's Musings

Whether it's been a month, or six months, since the last issue of the OLOHP Insider, I'm always surprised when Margaret drops me a note and says, "It's time for you to send in your Musings."

It has been an incredibly busy summer, filled with a variety of events. After attending the National Women's Music Festival in Madison, I flew out to spend time with many of the women in the Pacific Northwest who are a big part of the Project. One of the delights of visiting that area is sleeping with your windows open and having to pull up the covers while listening to the tree frogs sing and the sound of the wind moving through the towering fir trees. If my life wasn't so deeply entrenched in Houston, I think the Puget Sound is where I'd be.



One of the many aspects of the Project that needed our attention this summer was working out some changes our working relationship with Smith College, where the work of the OLOHP is being archived. The photo here shows Edie Daly and Jackie Mirkin (devoted supporters of the Project) hosting an open discussion about the Project at the archives at Smith a couple years ago. On page 2, there is an article about the outcome of our discussions with Smith.

While in the Puget Sound, Margaret put me to work wrapping up more than a dozen Herstories. That was

quite the adventure! It's been years since that was on my to-do list and the number of steps involved sure seems to have grown. Having time to focus intently on each story turned out to be a bonus. I know in my head that having others help with the interviewing has been great for the Project, there is still that part of my heart that regrets no longer being the one who interviewed every woman as I did for years. Spending several hours finalizing each of the Herstories I worked on during this trip helped. I couldn't help but feel like I got to know the woman as I read the transcript over and over while deciding where certain photos or other supporting documents would be inserted.

Following the "all work and no play makes us dull women" mantra, we managed to slip over the border into Canada to spend three days at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival. So here we are, in Jericho Park, overlooking the beautiful English Bay, navigating the festival site along with thousands of other people, and wouldn't you know, I ran into a woman who had been interviewed for the Project several years ago!

I continue to love each and every hour I spend on the Project, whether I'm paying bills, filing, answering e-mails, or doing interviews. For that, I am grateful. Be well and be safe.

Arden

The Kellett Foundation

We are very pleased to tell you that we have been honored by receiving a grant from the John Steven Kellett Foundation. After Mr. Kellett died, the Foundation's Board did one final round of grants to distribute the remaining funds. We greatly appreciate that some of those funds were shared with the OLOHP in recognition of the value of the Project's past, and ongoing work, in documenting the lives of old lesbians in the Houston area. Arden has interviewed fifty-plus Houston-area lesbians already, and another twenty-five or so in the rest of Texas –and she's not done yet, with several more interviews already scheduled. Thank You to the Kellett Foundation!



Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older

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What Once Seemed So Simple...

What ever happened to that simple thought Arden started turning over in her mind in about 1996? You know, the one where she'd just ask her contemporaries to share their stories so those wouldn't be lost forever? Well, that "simple thought" is so far gone you can barely even see it in the rear view mirror!

Over the years, tasks in the Project have been tweaked, and dozens of steps have been added. And, yet nothing has been eliminated. The list of what it takes to do this work just keeps growing. Admittedly, there are times we find ourselves wondering just what we've gotten ourselves into! But give us a few minutes and we shake off the doubts and keep moving forward. And, as often as not, we come up with some other new aspect we want to add that makes it that much more complicated.



Which brings us to the here and now. We've always required women participating in the Project to sign a contract with us. They have the choice of signing an unconditional or conditional version where they spell out any restrictions. To keep up with changes in the world, we recently revised our contracts.

The newest challenge to the Project has to do with archiving the Herstories at Smith College. The world has continued to change for Smith, just as it has for us, and it has necessitated a need for all of our new interviewees (going forward from here) to sign an additional document, a deed, with Smith.

So, once more, we are adding another layer to that "simple little project."

Will We Ever Learn?

Wouldn't you think that by now we'd have learned our lesson to make doubly sure that we number each new issue of the *Insider* correctly. After all, we skipped #19 for no good reason! But no. We have just now, months after the fact, noticed that we somehow assigned Issue #39 to both the actual 39th issue and the Special Anniversary Issue, which should have been #40! We managed to get #41 right, and this one, #42 is right – let's hope we can keep the streak going as we begin putting together #43, which we plan to send out in December.

Whiplash! And Thought-Provoking

You may remember that we devoted most of the *Insider* issue before this one to sharing news of more than a dozen women in the Project who had recently died. It's happening more and more – in fact, the next page of this very issue is devoted to another seven women. Losing women is a difficult part of working with the Project, but there is no doubt our lives have been enriched by knowing them.

Most of the feedback we received after that last issue was positive. Rand wrote, "Somehow, even though I am sad for the women 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." And Tangren shared, "I always enjoy reading the issues, getting to know other lesbians of my era and before. Thank you all so much for creating this body of knowledge and heart."



Then the whiplash! A woman in the Project wrote, "Depressing to receive a newsletter with photos of dead fish and dead lesbians. Of course climate change, war, fascism, poverty, racism, sexism, etc., are of no concern of old lesbians." Wow! First, why dead fish? It took a minute before it dawned on us that there was a photo of one of the women who had died; she was pictured with a string of fish. That mystery solved, we still were perplexed by her note. Setting aside her accurate (and somewhat insensitive) referral to photos of "dead lesbians," we found the rest of her statement interesting. She's right in that we don't write about climate change, fascism, and such. We do our best to stay focused on the OLOHP – we devote our energy to making sure the experiences of old lesbians are not forgotten, not overlooked, and not told thru a filter – that they are sharing their stories in their own words. We work to ensure that these valuable Herstories are preserved and protected.

So no. You'll have to look elsewhere for articles about those other topics that were mentioned... things that are, most assuredly, concerns of every woman participating in this Project. That said, we truly appreciate your taking time to express your feelings. It reminded us that, no matter what is happening around us, we need to keep working to make sure the valuable stories of lesbians 70 and older are not the missing pieces in the puzzle.



We have learned that these women who shared their stories or worked with the OLOHP have died. They were loved, and we'll miss them.

Jean Adele, born 1936
Interviewed in 2012 in Alabama

Suspicious? I didn't have any at the time, raising kids, and running around doing everything. I don't remember having feelings. I didn't have time to do that kind of thing. It didn't really hit me until I moved and I ran into other lesbians.



Nancy Breeze, born 1932
Interviewed in 2007 in Florida

When I went to D.C., I looked for a place to live. I lived in the Y for three days and I went to the women's center and now I think, "What do people do today?" Because in the early seventies, every single town had a women's center.



Gloria Zufall, born 1935 Interviewed in 2017 in Arizona

I can't believe that my mother or my father wouldn't have figured me out. It was no big secret. I've been the same since I was five. Really. Well, they probably got waylaid when I was engaged to Earl. That doesn't really mean anything. You can be married and not be very happy. Or, do it for convenience. There's a lot of ways you can handle it. No, we never talked about it ... until this past year. My brother knew we'd been together fifty years. So when I said something on telephone, he said, "We all knew."

Marlene Schuman, born 1947
Interviewed in 2018 in Missouri

I, with great nervousness and butterflies in my stomach, went to a meeting. I guess that was my official coming out, because that's what everybody was doing in the group. They were saying when they had come out. I got to say, "Well, I came out," and I looked at my watch, "about 20 or 30 minutes ago."



Toni Cannizaro was born 1938, but died in 2018, shortly before she was to be interviewed. So that all was not lost, her story shared by friends in 2019.

Mary Lou Perkins, born 1927 Interviewed in 2012 & 2015 in Massachusetts

I would like to add one sentence to my Herstory. It pretty much sums up my philosophy on life. It's from a favorite little book. "Given the choice to sit it out or dance, I hope you'll always choose to dance."



Margaret Catches, born 1938 Interviewed in 2014 in North Dakota

We went to the gay bar. That's the first time I ever entered a gay bar. I stopped and looked at everyone and thought, "Oh, my god. They're like me!" (chuckling) They're playing pool, and they're dancing out there, and sitting here. They were like me.

Queer. I didn't like "queer" because that's what they called me a lot as a kid growing up. I never called myself anything until I went to California, and then I said I'm gay. I think that's what a lot of people our age probably wound up with.

From time to time, we like to devote a page in the Insider to a longer-than usual excerpt from one of the stories in the OLOHP collection. We recently re-read this Herstory and immediately wanted to share part of it with you.

I have never fully understood my travels through life as much as I would have liked. My mother trained me, as did every other part of our culture, to be a good wife and mother. That, of course, meant that I was to put my husband and children first. I did that quite well for many years. Unfortunately, I lost myself in the process. I don't know how it happened, but it did. I think that I was a pretty strong individual when I was married, and I always had the strength to handle situations that needed it. I just lost the "individual" part. I so immersed myself ... that his life became mine. I didn't realize, I guess, that two people cannot share one life.

Since I did not believe in divorce, I lived a pretty difficult life for many years. When I finally realized that I could no longer live like that, I made my first attempt at a break. ... The counseling I went to for two years kept me alive, that was all. I reached the point of suicide three times, but, fortunately, something always prevented it.

There is no doubt the Women's Movement provided the catalyst that made me realize there was no reflection when I looked in the mirror. It was a shock and a struggle to try to figure out just who "I" was. It took me a long while to come to the realization that I actually am a lesbian. This is a subject of which I had no knowledge growing up. When I did hear of it, it scared me to death. The little bit I knew of women homosexuals was along the line of the "dykes on bikes" stereotype. I always knew that I was certainly not one of those! My life was turned upside down by my love for Linda. Did that make me a lesbian? I asked myself — of course not! We were just different!



Carol Herbert
1934-2017

I have come to the place in life where I look in the mirror and like me! I had lived behind walls in my life for so long, that it has become a most freeing experience to live as I came to this life to live. I am a most proud dyke. I love Linda and am loved by her with such devotion, that it often takes my breath away. We are in a community that is extraordinary. They are such strong women.

When we used to dream about being together, it was always in that same male heterosexual dream of life. ... And of course, what did we do? We moved to the country and became country dykes. Strong, strong country dykes. So what we learned when we went back to the city and bought a condo was never say never. ... We lived in the condo for eight years, and then we moved to Florida. When we came here, this was the house we just dreamed of. It's probably nothing special to most people. To us it's just our perfect house. It's so easy to say we'll be here the rest of our lives, and we'd love to. But it probably won't be that way. We don't know.

Night time, that's our time. We sit on the sofa and Linda sits there with her head on my arm and we watch TV, or she sleeps while I watch TV. And this is our life. We just love being together. We are the most blessed people that I've ever met. I wish everyone in the world could be as happy as we are. And I wish they would have a love like we have. I don't know why everyone doesn't, but it's just the way it is.

Life is wonderful. Our friends always tell us that we have to expand our vocabulary to find words other than "wonderful."

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.

