

The OLOHP Insider

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The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project



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Arden's Musings

My tendency is to start out my Musings by saying, "It's been an interesting few months," but I think I finally understand, as I near my 89th birthday, that that statement is always true! So then why am I always surprised when I sit down to write a new piece and realize how busy life has been since I last wrote? Beats the heck out of me!

After I lost my first long-term partner, Tommy, to cancer while in my mid-50s, I found myself gaining solace from listening to music that I had no idea existed until then. I was struggling, needing time to heal from Tommy's death. I didn't know how. Tommy was the first death in our friendship circle. We were a dozen lesbians who were out to each other, but hardly to anyone else. Tommy's death shook them, too, and they didn't any longer know how, as a group, to be with me, now that I was alone.

I found myself drawn to a local shop, where I could sit in a rocker, and spend as long as I wanted reading or just thinking. The owner, a friend who knew what I was going thru, gave me that safe space. She also introduced me to that "something" I hadn't known existed – music of various styles, all created by women, for women. Many of the artists were lesbians, singing of experiences that spoke directly to me.

I was hooked and as I started, once again, to move forward, I began to explore the world of that music, seeking out recordings, going to concerts and festivals. One of the many things I've been involved with over the past decade that feeds my soul is that I'm helping produce small music concerts. The artists are lesbians – some I've known about for decades, others that are relatively new to me. With the help of a few friends, we invite these artists, and we gather together an audience. I love it: I love the musicians, the music, the energy, being a part of bringing this music to my community, and watching the audience as they get caught in the same spell that captured me decades ago, laughing, crying and always clapping.

You may be wondering how these Musings relate to the Project. People often inquire about what questions we ask women when they are being interviewed, and how those questions came about. Because of my own experiences, and those of several friends, one of the questions we try to ask is about the role Women's Music might have played in their lives. For some it played a significant role, as it had in my own life. I'm now making it a point to try to interview as many of these incredible artists who have touched the lives of so many lesbians in this Project, and include their stories in the OLOHP collection as well. Even though some of them are a bit too young to meet our criterion (70 and older), they, too, are an essential part of our history.

I can only hope for each and every one of you that you find and embrace the special things, like Women's Music, that bring passion to your lives. I wish a safe and happy future for everyone.

Arden

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older
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A note from Arizona:

I just came home and found my copy of my OLOHP at my front door. What a shock when I opened it! It is absolutely beautiful! I paced through my house in great, sobbing tears for about 20 minutes after I saw this book. I don't yet completely understand where these tears are coming from, but I do believe it is saying "my life has meant something." I cannot thank you enough for what you are doing for the lesbian community. I feel, for the first time in my life, that I am leaving a legacy that might make a difference to someone - sometime.

I thank you Margaret, Arden, Donna, Carolyn, and all the women working on this project with you, for the great contribution you are making in Lesbian Herstory. Thank you! Thank you! I can't remember when I have been so deeply touched.

A note from South Carolina:

I know Barb, my interviewer, let you know my Herstory got here safely last week. I'm wowed by the most excellent work and the time, trouble, and expertise required to achieve it. Please know that I so appreciate the opportunity to be a part of the project and tell my story that has never been told in its entirety before.

Above, we shared with you some of the positive feedback we have received from women who are involved in the Project. Honesty dictates that we not try to make it look like everyone loves us, or that we are anywhere near perfect – so below, we're writing a little about the flip side of that coin. We'd love if everything we did went according to plan, and that our ways of doing things pleased everyone. But we're realists, and know all we can do is strive for balance.

It wasn't in our plans! But we do goof up. And we sometimes struggle to meet our goals, especially in getting some things done in a timely manner. We must have been unavailable when they handed out the crystal balls. We seem to be hit with challenges we didn't see coming on a regular basis. That said, from our perspective, they are learning experiences, lessons we can tuck away to help us with whatever comes next.

We need to fully accept that, despite our best efforts, we cannot be all things to all people. An example: Recently, we were working on a complex aspect of the Project and no matter what we did, no matter how many ways we tried to meet everyone's expectations, a few people were unhappy with us. As we struggled with how to deal with the unhappiness, a friend suggested we put it in perspective, saying,

A note from Florida:

It meant so much to me to open the latest *Insider* issue and see the full-page excerpt from my beloved Carol's interview. I'm in tears from the love and gratitude that filled my heart. I still feel connected to Carol every day, but you gave her a chance to connect with others again. She felt so honored to be interviewed for the project, and now you've honored her again. Thank you so very much.

It's such a hard journey to adjust to life without Carol's physical presence. You gave me a very special gift today. With gratitude and all best wishes to you, Arden, and everyone involved in this wonderful project.

A note from Texas

I received my hard copy of my Herstory today and I am overwhelmed with gratitude to all of you for making it happen. I think the production is excellent and I want to thank both of you personally for making this such an amazing experience. Thank you again, with all my heart!



"There are people who aren't happy unless they are being contrary, or complaining – so when we do something that upsets them, we're actually doing them a service, making them happy by giving them something to grouse about!"

We can easily give you a dozen examples of things we could have done better, or errors we have made and had to spend time correcting. But what would that accomplish? We have to stay focused. Besides, any list of our shortcomings would be dwarfed by another list of all the things we've done right over the past twenty years. Looking at the lists, it would quickly become clear that while there certainly are places where we've stumbled and people whom we've disappointed, we've also consistently worked to fix anything that can be fixed, and learned from what cannot.

So, yes, there are going to be things for which we need to apologize, people we disappoint, and errors we'll need to correct. All we can do is hope that all of you who care about the OLOHP know that we strive to do our best when working on every aspect of this Project. We love and believe in it, and we will continue to do so until we have transcribed the last recording, scanned the final set of photographs, printed up everything, and mailed the last completed Herstory.

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.



Jan Stubbe, Washington, Born 1948, Interviewed in 2019

In Portland, there were about two or three gay bars. Some were for women. Some didn't want any men. Well, why not? I mean I don't have a problem with that. We used to have cops come in all the time. In their uniforms. They would walk around and look. We never went outside by ourselves. We always went out with a group because even if somebody wanted to go home, you would walk them to their car. Several of us would walk together back to the place because you could get beat up. You get beat up. One friend had a friend who had a gun pulled on her. She was just standing there, and this guy laughed and drove away. You had to be careful.

I got a ticket one time. My girlfriend Tony and I were going back to her place in Tigard, Oregon. I had a 1970 Buick Skylark and it had a bench seat. She was sitting right next to me and I was driving. A cop pulled me over and gave me a warning for driving while embracing another. I'd never heard of that law! I don't know if he did either. I think he was checking to see if I was drunk, which I was not at the time. I wouldn't have been. I kept ticket all these years because it was "driving while embracing."

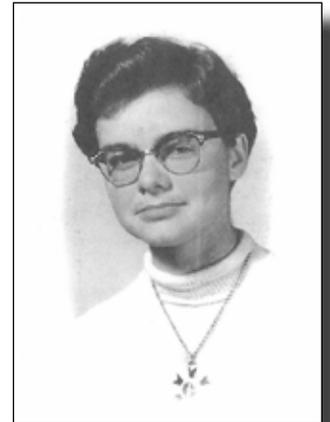
Lucy Frey, Missouri, Born 1932, Interviewed in 2007

I: Have you known all your life that You were lesbian?

N: Yeah. Well, not when I was three! But by the time I was in fifth grade, I knew it wasn't that good-lookin' boy that I was attracted to. It was that eighth grade girl who played the guitar so well. I just knew that I wasn't destined to be some guy's wife. I didn't have the language for it until the women's movement of the seventies gave me the language. Then I knew who I was and that I was okay.

I: I think that's pretty much the way for most of the women of our generation.

N: Mm-hmm. That's why they don't let us talk about it now. Because if more women glimpse that as an opportunity, would they ever shack up with that guy that they're having to put up with now? I don't think so!



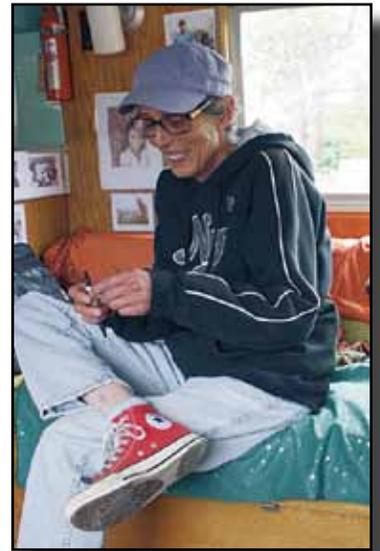
Jean Mountaingrove, Oregon, Born 1925, Interviewed 2003

The woman running the meeting said, "Now we'll go around the room, and each woman will talk about some woman she has loved in her life. You know, maybe it's your teacher, your mother, your grandmother." Oh, my God. It all started to click into place. Click, click, click.

I fell in love in third grade with my music teacher. When she got married it broke my heart. I tried to fall in love with the gym teacher. It didn't work. But I stayed in touch with that music teacher 'til I was twenty-eight. I fell in love with my nursery school supervisor, the minister's wife. For the one who was my 3rd grade teacher, I used to take violets to her school and leave them at her door, and four-leaf clovers that I would find on my way to school. With the minister's wife at the nursery school, I sent Valentines with no names on them. Then, I went to graduate school in social work. I fell in love with my supervisor there. And I think I tried to take flowers to her door, you know, anonymously. She said she could be in touch with me after I graduated that summer, but she never got in touch with me. I did, several times, go and park across the street from her home, in case I could see her coming and going.

Back then, I never knew the word lesbian. But now, I decided, after all those clicks, that I had potential to be a lesbian — maybe a history of being a lesbian!

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. We shared in the previous issue of the *Insider* that Morgan had recently died. Here she is, pictured on the right, in the mobile mini-museum she created telling the story of the Gypsy people. Morgan was born in 1948, and interviewed in 2012, making her one of the youngest women we have interviewed. From time to time, the Project does make exceptions to our 70-and-older criterion. In Morgan's case, we spoke with her early for two reasons. She was dealing with a long-term debilitating illness, plus she was one of the few lesbians we spoke with who had survived repeated shock treatments yet retained enough of herself to be able to share that story decades later. What follows is her recounting of that experience. Apologies if we've shared this excerpt before, but it's one that gets into your head and won't leave.



Government officials took us, all the Gypsy children, from our families. I had been forced into the Catholic orphanage. It was my sixteenth birthday and me and my girlfriend, Sue, we got out at night. Sue knew a place where we could get a drink. We should have used our heads. At the hour that I had been born, she leaned over and kissed me. Everyone in the whole place saw it. We decided we had to get out of there pretty quick. It was a motorcycle bar. We left and then got jumped in the alley.

So I'm in the hospital. Sue was in the hospital, too. I had my head all bandaged up. I'm slowly getting better, getting ready to be released, and they said, "You're going to Pilgrim State Children's Mental Hospital." Sue and I both were sent there. (Pause) Sue ended up committing suicide and I just spiraled.

Everything that they could do, they did, including electro-shock.

The reason they sent me there was because of my lesbianism, the kiss. Nothing I was doing was convincing them that I was okay. They said I was "rebellious against the female role," and that I was "asocial." That was the label Hitler put on us Gypsies: "asocial."

So I'm trying to figure out how to get out and one day, it dawned on me. I borrowed a skirt and a blouse, got one of the nurses to come in so I could shave my legs, and I curled my hair. The next day, I put on makeup and went down to the main room and said, "Who wants to play cards with me?" Well, I was cured, lickety-split.

[long pause] I ended up on the street. I feel as if they had made me into someone who used drugs. I hadn't used drugs at all before that. Then I'm out on the street, and I'm trying to make money. I'm selling drugs, doing drugs, and prostituting. Anything.

I was just a kid. I don't think I was even eighteen years old yet. And the cops? They never even looked for the guys who beat us up.

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.

