

The OLOHP Insider

#45, Second issue of 2020

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project



Arden's Musings

I have learned enough in my 89 years of life to fully appreciate the hundreds of experiences I've been fortunate enough to have. If asked as 2020 began, I probably would have claimed I'd "been there, done that," and been pretty sure I was right. If asked again now, several months into this year, I'd give a different answer: "I never could have imagined." The circumstances under which we are all living right now have been nothing if not interesting. After that first few weeks of letting things happen to, and all around, me, I'm suddenly finding myself more motivated than I've been in the past year or two.

Early this year, Margaret (Herstory Project Manager) took on the task of providing every active interviewer with a status update on each interview she had conducted. We have Herstories in a variety of stages of completion, all the way from totally completed and already included in our archive at Smith College, to interviews scheduled, but not yet even conducted. Some have been transcribed, but not edited, and others are in the stack waiting to be printed and mailed to the women. So, Margaret sent me my list. Luckily, 90% of my interviews are a done deal, already sent off to the archive. Trouble is that leaves 10%, and since I've done more than 325 interviews, that left quite a few for me to work on.

Skip forward two months (which I'll explain a little later), I've been checking in with dozens of women I've interviewed. It's turned out to be a really good thing. I've enjoyed catching up with so many of them again. As you might expect, I did learn of a few deaths I hadn't known about, but most of the women I've spoken with are doing well, and reconnecting has been good for my soul.

Now, about that two months I mentioned. The same week I got the list from Margaret, updating me on the status of some of my interviews, I also had a meeting with my docs at MD Anderson here in Houston, a meeting to tell me the outcome of a battery of tests they'd done on me after I'd noticed a swollen lymph gland that seemed not to want to go away. MD Anderson is who had taken me through my earlier journey with breast cancer more than 15 years ago. The bad news was that I have Mantle cell lymphoma, a rare, aggressive form of Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma. There are some treatments that are making it easier without diminishing my quality of life.

The Project has, for 20+ years, been an incredibly rewarding part of my life. I fully expect to continue to be involved. At the same time, we may need to revise some of our long-term plans. I'm glad the changes in my life aren't sudden, and that I do have time to work things thru, both regarding the Project, and other parts of my life. I have never had an ache or pain, just the swollen lymph gland. I feel fine right now, and plan on continuing that way. And I am at peace with this journey.

Love to you all,

Arden

Changing With the Times

We hope you all are hanging in there, doing whatever is needed for you to stay safe and sound. The ongoing national crisis has necessitated some changes in the OLOHP, as you can imagine, and we wanted to share how we're adapting.

The foundation of the Project has always been conducting personal interviews with women willing to share their life stories. Typically, the interviews take place in the woman's home, where she's most comfortable. Often she is sitting in her favorite chair, in her favorite room, surrounded by photos on the wall. Sharing memories, good and bad, can be worrisome. Interviewing at home like this helped minimize any anxiety. A few interviews were done elsewhere, but those were the exceptions.

The recent stay-at-home orders (due to the virus) have made doing business as usual impossible, which left us with a couple of options. 1: Make the decision we know we'll have to make eventually and stop seeking out interviews. 2: Delay scheduling any new interviews for now, in hopes that the crisis will pass and everyone involved will feel safe enough to go back to our method of doing our interviews in person. Or 3: Explore new ways to do



the work of the Project, including conducting our interviewing remotely.

Our goal has always been to document the life-stories of lesbians 70 and older who were born in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. We've done all we could to ensure that the stories of lesbians of that era, told in their own words, are preserved. After having interviewed 700+ women, we're still finding women who fit our criteria, and who are willing to share, so we hate to stop. We're also very aware that the value of the work the OLOHP will be enhanced by being able to compare the experiences of women born earlier to those born in the 40s and 50s.

Over the past year or so, we've been slowing down, but for now, we want to continue to build and strengthen the Project. So, we've gone with Option 3.

You'll find an article by Aganita below about interviewing remotely using the teleconferencing app called Zoom. On the next page, you'll find another article sharing Elizabeth's experiences interviewing via telephone and Skype.

We hope at some point to get back to in-person interviewing, but until then, we're making it work!

Interviewing Using Zoom by Aganita Varkentine

In the old days, before the pandemic, interviewing with Zoom, Skype, or even less optimal, phone, was considered a last resort. This was used only when the Project could not possibly get an in-person interview. Now things have changed. So, I became a guinea pig in trying out interviewing via Zoom.

The Project did some research and found that the simplest way for us was to set up a Zoom meeting between the interviewer and the interviewee who were, of course, warned in advance.

In our first experiment, Mary Henry interviewed me. I'd originally shared my story in 2012. I'd wanted to update my own for years, and it was a good way to test our setup. Margaret invited us to a Zoom meeting, and made sure both of us knew she was recording. After we gave our permission, she hit record and then turned off her own video and muted her microphone. Mary then interviewed me for nearly an hour. As we came to an end, Margaret came



back online and closed the meeting, saving the recording to be transcribed later.

Since then I have conducted two interviews using Zoom, following the above procedures. One was with a local woman whom I know personally. She was also updating her Herstory. The second was a new interview with someone in Michigan whom I did not know before. By the time we did the second Zoom session, Margaret learned that I could also record it on my computer, thus giving a backup like we normally have when we use two recorders.

I would say that Zoom interviewing works really well. The interviewer and interviewee can see each other. If the interviewee uses gestures or shows pictures during the interview, the interviewer can see (and the transcriber can describe what happened). Even after we can move about more freely, I think this will allow OLOHP to interview people in hard-to-reach areas.

Interviewing From Afar by Elizabeth Berrey

Imagine my disappointment after working for months to organize a bunch of my old Cleveland sisters for OLOHP interviews, to have to cancel the two planned trips there for interviews! Sigh. And these womyn professed disappointment, too! But will old Lesbians be deterred from contributing our Herstories for future generations? NOT! Margaret Purcell had already been pursuing Zoom interviews as a modality and encouraging interviewers to consider how to proceed long distance. So, immediately upon cancelling my March and April trips to Cleveland, I contacted the (then) ten womyn who had agreed to be interviewed. (Sadly, Maureen Kennan, who was to have been interviewed in advance of the others due to her terminal diagnosis, was too weak to proceed. She, and I, were both saddened by this. This earth misses you, Maureen!)

In the end, six moved forward – six adventurous old Cleveland-area Lesbians determined to go forward. Two agreed to Skype interviews; four to phone interviews. Technologically, both methods of interview were equally easy. I simply set up both my recorders to record the audio for both Skype and phone. I tested the mics, as we always do, to assure that each of our voices were clear and audible. Here are the differences that I noticed in conducting these interviews this way. For Skype, it was great to be able to see the womyn and let them see me. I think, though I'm not entirely sure about this, that because of our visual connection, there may have been less inadvertent talking over one another, but I'm not sure. There is sometimes a lag on Skype. I do know that there was



talking over with the phone. But I hope (dear transcribers) that it's not too bad. In the end, each narrator commented on how much she enjoyed the interview, was so happy to be included and to participate right now, and was appreciative that our Project could be so flexible. The other major difference that I noticed is that these interviews were noticeably shorter than I feel they would have been in person.

Other stuff I learned: All permissions had to be signed – and in my possession – prior to the interview.

This usually takes place in person, right there on the spot. But now I had to rely on each one's technical skill level as to whether they could send them to me electronically or via US mail. And also, due to our geographic distance, I required that each one have her pictures and any other supporting documents to me in advance of her scheduled interview time. You've heard of herding cats? This was more like moving frogs in a wheelbarrow – LOL! It was more or less successful (all permissions definitely in my possession prior to the interview).

It necessitated hours of work, of friendly reminders, both via text and email, and of reviewing the pictures and documents to make sure they were usable, and so forth. In the end, this advance effort on my part was totally worth it and was also a relief to each narrator. It allowed her to relax and thoroughly enjoy the interview without anticipating further effort on her part – well, until the editing, of course.

Margaret, thank you for your encouragement to us interviewers to keep moving forward by using newer “modern” technologies!

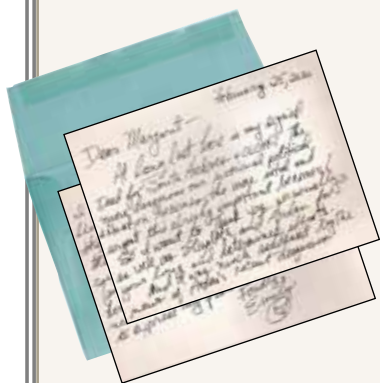
We appreciate each and every note we get from women who have participated in the Project, and thought we'd share this one with you. It is from Emily, a woman Elizabeth Berrey interviewed in Georgia a few years ago.

At long last, here is my signed deed for the Smith archives and the OLOHP. The more dangerous our national political situation becomes, the more vital and urgent this already important [effort] becomes!

So I want to thank you personally, as well as Elizabeth and Arden, for your long and determined efforts.

I was much saddened by the news of Arden's recent diagnosis. I know that affects all of you whose lives she has touched. My thoughts are with all of you in the OLOHP circle. Arden has made such a great contribution to lesbians (and feminism, to me), especially with her early insight and initiative in how needed this is. I will e-mail her myself to express my gratitude.

Fondly, Emily



*We have learned of the passings of these women who shared their stories with the OLOHP.
They were all incredible women, well-loved, and we'll miss them.*

Carmah Lawler

Born 1929

Interviewed at age 72

and again at age 80

Interviewed in Colorado

by Arden Eversmeyer



Gerri Pries

Born 1929

Interviewed at age 87

Interviewed in Arizona

by Dee Kimmell



Jean 'Shewolf' Boudreaux

Born 1932

Interviewed at age 72

and again at age 79 and 86

Interviewed in Florida

by Arden Eversmeyer



Phyllis Lyon

Born 1924

Interviewed at age 88

Interviewed in California

by Arden Eversmeyer



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.

