

The OLOHP Insider

#56, Fall/Winter 2023-24

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Margaret Checking In

Greetings to all with hopes you are enjoying the holiday season, no matter what holiday it is that you celebrate. Here in the Project, we are celebrating the incredible honor it was to have known Arden (the founder and heart of the work we do) who died around this time last year. Always humble, wherever Arden is now, she'd be surprised to know she remains a strong force in many, many lives, which is something to which we can all aspire.

A friend of ours sent us (my wife Mary and me) a copy of the book *The Butterfly Effect* (by Andy Andrews) this summer and I keep it on my desk where I see it most days. The woman who sent us the book had been in the Girl Scout troop we'd led more than 40 years ago. She wanted us to know that, after barely having had any contact in decades, many of the everyday interactions we'd had when she was a teenager still have a positive affect on her life today. I'd heard of the butterfly effect in general terms— but hadn't spent much time thinking about it. It seems like a charming notion. But the gift, and the meaning behind it, made me see beyond the charm of the concept. Maybe I understand it differently now because of the passing of the years, or the loss of dear family and friends. Whatever the reason behind the heightened awareness, it feels like I can't wake up one more time, turn one more page in a book, see the beauty in the leaves needing to be swept off the sidewalk, or have a simple conversation with a friend without consciously thinking about the impact everything has on us, and the impact we have on everything, good or bad.

It is my privilege to be a part of the OLOHP. Through it, I've gotten to know and work with dozens of amazing women. It's allowed me to hear and read the stories of hundreds of other women whom I wouldn't have even known existed. With any luck, I'll continue to be involved for years to come. We have lots still to do. The film and the NBC news article about it (see the next page) has kicked up a renewed interest in the Project, so we've fudged a bit on our being done interviewing by taking on a few new ones.

In the current issue of *Lesbian Connection*, one writer said something about being glad she was able to read about the lives of ordinary lesbians, to which the Editor noted, "Is there such a thing as an ordinary lesbian?" Amen! The Project has now interviewed around 900 women, and none of them ordinary. I would hope that every single one of them knows that, as is said in the *Butterfly Effect*, "The very beating of your heart has meaning and purpose. Your actions have value far greater than silver or gold. Your life, and what you do with it, matters forever.

Margaret



OLOHP: Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older

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Documentary Short About the OLOHP

Early in 2022, Arden began exchanging information with a young lesbian documentarian named Meghan McDonough. Meghan expressed a strong interest in doing a film about the Project and was able to meet with Arden that fall. That film, entitled *Old Lesbians*, is now complete and has made its debut at the *Aesthetica Short Film Festival*.

The array of buttons and such in this graphic is a screenshot of the beginning of the film. Here is how Meghan describes her film: “*Old Lesbians* honors Arden’s legacy by animating the resilient, joyful voices she preserved in the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project, from first crush to first love, from the closet to coming out, and finally from loss to connection.”



And here, Meghan shares a bit about herself and working on the film project: “My name is Meghan McDonough, and I’m the director and editor of this film. Ten years out as a queer woman, I am still seeking real representation of my community wherever I can. I was deeply moved when I learned about OLOHP online and reached out to Arden. When we spoke, she emphasized that these are entire life stories, from beginning to end, in a woman’s own words. Each interviewee has a chance to add in or take out the parts of her own life that she wants to share. At the end of the process, she gets a bound copy of her own herstory. This summer, I had a chance to visit the archive in person at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College with my collaborator, the photographer Rengim Mutevellioglu. We witnessed firsthand the love and care baked into each herstory— pages of research about how to prepare for an oral history and make interviewees comfortable; meticulous documentation of names, dates, and locations at the beginning of each recording; and scanned photos mounted on squares of cut-out purple paper. It’s a masterclass on how to write the world we want to read.”

We know Arden would have been thrilled to have watched the film. We encourage you to check out the trailer. You can find it at www.oldlesbiansfilm.com. Meghan is also looking for venues at which to show the film. That same website has a form where you can get in contact with her.

You might also want to check out a recent article that was published by *NBC Out and Proud* entitled ‘*Old Lesbians’ documentary highlights the importance of recording ‘herstory’*. Drop us a note and we’ll email you a copy, or you can access it online at <https://tinyurl.com/56twjmh4>

Here At the Project, We Love It When...



That’s Elli G over there on the left. It’s a relatively current photo of Elli who is now 94. She was first interviewed in January 2001 by Arden. Over the years, Elli occasionally either calls or drops us a note and **we love it!** Too often we lose track of women in the Project, but thanks to Elli, that’s not so in this case. Her most recent mailing included several photos as well as a note to us sharing what she called “some shreds of evidence of my life here in Scottsdale.”

Reach Out To Us, Please

We’d love to hear from any of the women who have been a part of the OLOHP, whether you interviewed a few years ago, or a few decades ago. One of the lessons we’ve learned along the way is that although we may be a bit slower once we retire or hit age 70, the hard parts about aging do not preclude continuing to live a full life.

We’d love to add your more recent insights, activities, adventures and accomplishments to your Herstory.

Our contact info is in the footer on the first page.

About the OLOHP Address

After Arden passed late last year, one of the many details that needed to be taken care of was to change the OLOHP mailing address. After taking care of that in what felt like dozens of places, I crossed that off my list. We kept the PO Box address Arden used in Houston open for about nine months, but since it required someone (thanks Janice!) to check it on occasion and send anything on to me, we did finally let it go. Despite thinking I'd changed it everywhere it was needed, hardly a month goes by when something goes to the old address and gets returned to the sender. Luckily, the sender typically lets me know via email, which lets me know about one more place, most often some paperwork we have sent out, where I need to change our address. Hopefully, we've about got it. But just in case, here is our mailing address!

OLOHP c/o MPurcell 6912 35th St W University Place, WA 98466



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

Kathleen Prezbindowski, born 1943

Interviewed in 2011 by Arden Eversmeyer

When asked if her daughters were comfortable with her lesbianism, Kathy replied:

When my children were growing up, we lived in Cincinnati in a very conservative part of the city, German Catholic. It was a big thing if you were divorced, no less lesbian. I saw the change in my daughters when they went to college and they started having friends who were coming out as being gay. They could say, "You know, you ought to come over to my house and talk with my mom." So then, being a lesbian, was a real asset.



Note: Soon after learning about the Project, Kathy became one of its biggest cheerleaders. She served on our Board, participated in presentations, was the driving force behind our DVD, and editor for our written materials.



Jeanne Hanson, born 1928 *Interviewed in 2017 by Beck Forth*

But my mother was very patient with me and wanted me to go with her so finally I decided to go with her to church. And lo and behold, I saw this beautiful young girl at church and I was immediately attracted to her. It was a totally new feeling to me - to be able to think, "This is somebody that I think- I love her." You know. It is high school. We were the same age. Her father was the preacher.

But we became good friends. Because we went to the same high school, we became good friends. Sometimes, I'd stay at her house, she would come to my house, and we were just very close. I did love her dearly. And I think she felt the same way, but I couldn't put a name on it. I had no idea about anything. The word lesbian? I'd never heard it in my life. I didn't know what it was. Even if somebody had said it, I wouldn't know what it was.

You don't know anything, but you know what you feel. And you know what's real. I felt like I had come home somehow. I felt like finally I am somebody. There's somebody that I love who cares about me too.

Joyce Pierson, born 1933 *Interviewed in 2008 by Arden Eversmeyer*

My husband and I got married in June. I had known what was really going on in me at that stage. During my wedding ceremony, all I could think about was running out of the church. I could just see myself running out of the church. I knew it was not the right thing. And it was really sad because I then, just committed myself to being a good wife. That was where I was in my head. It was really sad. I was in denial. I was not really in love with him enough to be married. It was a miserable situation. I didn't do him any favors. It was really awful.

One of the things that I think was also in play inside of me was I had such a need to be accepted. This came out for me, many years later, after I had been a lesbian for a while and a group of us were doing the life-long lesbians who had married kind of thing. What was our internal experience that led us to give up ourselves when we knew that we were different? You know what? I think I didn't know I was different as much as I knew something was wrong with me for having the kind of feelings I had. All those feelings were totally unacceptable.



*Excerpts from the Herstories of women who have recently passed
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Susan Turner, born 1946 Interviewed in 2017 by Elizabeth Berrey

I am concerned about the loss of the Lesbian community. I miss that camaraderie, that tribe connection. There's so little of that now. What's happening to women's music. Women's bookstores hardly exist. I miss that. It's exciting, the young college students are coming to my practice. They're out to everybody and call themselves queer. It just feels like such a different world than the '70s. I guess it's going to be okay. Maybe my generation had something special. We didn't have our own rights (laugh) but we had our sisterhood! So, I'm glad that we have our rights now, but I miss a bit of the feeling of the sisterhood that we had.

Rita DeQuercus, born 1947 Interviewed in 2019 by Elizabeth Berrey

Becoming a Lesbian was actually the most significant part of my life path, because it completely broke me out of that small world that I grew up in, and opened me up to everything about the real world, how big, and complex, and interesting the world is. That is the world I have lived my life in, this big, complex, interesting world!

Lesbianism was what did that, and it certainly has been the basis of an awful lot of my social and emotional life, not all of it, but a lot of it. It is who I consider my family to be. It is still my chosen family. It has been highly significant. Sure, we got shit for being Lesbians in a lot of ways, but there's nothing that's happened to me that counterbalances all the positive things that it has been for me.



Martha Ficklen, born 1937 Interviewed in 2007 by Arden



Arden: You said that you knew after you'd been married for awhile that it probably wasn't going to work, that you had girlfriends. Did you have a word for the feelings that you were having?

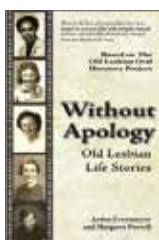
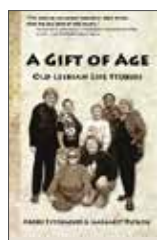
Martha: I knew what the word was. I wasn't sure that I wanted to use it on myself. I knew what 'lesbian' meant, I had a very close friend in Newport News who felt like the word 'lesbian' was an abomination, but of course she had the same tendency, and we had sex and good times together. She was not a person that I wanted to live with, but she was a lot of fun to be with. Eventually she decided that she didn't want to be a lesbian. She and her family moved to California.

Arden: So you knew before you left. Did you know before you got married?

Martha: I always loved women, but I grew up in a woman-run home and I didn't think that that would be any significant thing.

Arden: Let me ask. Were you out to your parents?

Martha: Yes, after I met Nan. Nan and I met in New York City after having written letters to each other. Her address came from a Lesbian publication created by Barbara Grier. When I told Mama, she turned her face and pursed her lips and said, "Don't tell me any more, Little Dearest, that's all I can stand to hear. I love Nan, too, but I don't want to hear about it." But she was very nice to Nan.



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

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

