

The OLOHP Insider

#53, March 2023

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project



Zoom Celebration of Arden's Life, April 4

We're still missing several of the essential details, but we wanted to be sure you all knew that there is a Zoom celebration of Arden's life planned for Tuesday, April 4, 2023, at 3 pm EDT. It is being sponsored by the National Women's History Alliance, www.nationalwomenshistoryalliance.org/. We expect the word will go out through a number of venues, but in case you don't already have the info needed to join in, feel free to email us and we'll do our best to get it for you. Margaret.OLOHP@gmail.com

Margaret Checking In

To characterize what's been going on in the OLOHP over the past few months as "interesting" would be an understatement, at the least! Let me share a bit of it with you.

As 2023 settled in, and the fact that Arden is no longer with us sank in, it became clear that no matter how well we thought we were prepared for a huge change, like Arden's death, we weren't ready. For example, Arden had always taken care of all the bookkeeping, and I was happy about that. I'd created a few financial reports and budgets as needed along the way, but that wasn't my thing at all. And that was a mistake on my part. In retrospect, it's easy to see I should have had a much better idea of what all Arden took care of.

So here is where I start my "thanks to..." statements!

Thanks to Barb Kucharczyk, (friend to the Project, interviewer, and Arden's executrix), we've managed to get most of the records transferred into my care. Barb also put us in contact with the women (lawyer, accountant, and bookkeeper) Arden had worked with in Houston on required taxes and other forms. After dozens of e-mails on that front, the good news is we won't be hauled off to jail for non-compliance any time soon.

Our thanks go to Janice M., a good friend of Arden, who has taken on various Houston-based tasks on my behalf including checking the OLOHP post office box on a regular basis and packaging and sending off completed Herstories that had been in Arden's files for archiving at Smith College.

An extra big thanks goes to Aganita Varkentine, who stepped up to help with a variety of time-consuming, detail-oriented tasks, all while continuing to serve as the Project's primary transcriber.

Thanks to Nancy Manahan for helping solve a mystery that has existed and perplexed us for years. (Read more about that on page 3.)

And thanks to Mary, my partner, who not only has allowed me to tune out things around me so I could stay in the zone while finding my way through the changes, but has also patiently listened to me vent whenever I've been frustrated.

All of these women, and more, have earned a few more stars in their crowns. As we continue to move forward, I have no doubt that others will join the ranks of the proverbial village that it takes to do the work of the OLOHP.

Margaret



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

6912 35th St W, University Place, WA 98466 ✉ www.olohp.org ✉ Margaret.OLOHP@gmail.com

Re: E-mail from the OLOHP to You

Here is another place where there has been quite a bit of confusion. For years, Arden had her mailing list, and Margaret had hers. No matter our efforts to keep the duplicates out, and at the same time make sure no one got left off the lists, our “system” had its glitches. The glitches became more evident only when Arden began to have more troubles using her computer, and Margaret tried to send copies of the newsletter out for her. So at this point in the Project, we felt a need to meld the lists and clean them up. For most of you, it worked.

Because we’ve had issues with some hacking at the OLOHP.org email addresses, we’ve opted to send everything out from Margaret.OLOHP@gmail.org. Again, for most of you that worked, but we did get a fair share of bounces and a few of you let us know our e-mail came thru marked with **Warning** and **Danger** signs. Instead of making any further changes, we’re sticking with the plan for now. If a message comes back to us to indicate our email didn’t get through to you, we’ll do our best to track you down.



Testing. Testing.

Sometimes being tested is a good thing, but not when it comes to dealing with hacks to a website. For months now, we’ve been repeatedly fixing problems with the OLOHP website, only to have them recur.



And they’ve been slippery problems, showing up hit-and-miss for some users, and consistent for others. On any given day we might be able to access 95% of the website on a variety of browsers, but then click one of our links, and off you go to some other website pushing crypto currency. Or you may visit our website only to be greeted with bold red warnings about how dangerous the site is. It has been like playing Whack-a-Mole.

As we get this current newsletter out, we’re in the process of migrating a rebuilt (not pretty yet, but hopefully functional) website to a new host. Keep your fingers crossed.

If you try to access www.olohp.org, but can’t get it to do what you had expected, please drop us a note.

“Always plan for the fact that no plan ever goes according to plan.”

That may sound like something you’d read in a fortune cookie, doesn’t it? Here in the Project, we’ve adopted it as our mantra. Our plans for this issue of *The Insider* had been to fill it with excerpts from Herstories of women we have interviewed who continue to thrive. We have a backlog of names of women who have passed, all of whom we’ll acknowledge in future issues, but we were feeling a need to focus on others right now. However, once we began, writing we quickly realized we’d used up most of our room. So, we have a new plan. We’ll make the next few issues a mix of passings and excerpts from women who are thriving. At least, as of today, that’s what we plan to do!

The Proverbial We

When we write in the *Insider* that we are doing this, or that we decided that, you might wonder just who that We is? As of right now, the leadership structure of the OLOHP is this. Margaret Purcell, who has served as the Project Manager for years, is now also serving as Project Director. But this isn’t a one-woman show. On the Board with Margaret are:

Ruth Debra, from Palm Springs, CA
Kathleen Prezbindowski, from Puyallup WA
Aganita Varkentine, from Tacoma, WA
Mary Henry, from University Place, WA
and Deirdre Knowles, from Seattle, WA

We’re certainly West-Coast heavy, but it’s made collaborating a bit easier.

A Last Surge of New Interviews

As most of you know, last summer Arden and I had finally made the decision to set an end date for gathering new interviews. Because she had done the first interview in April 1998, we chose April 2023, the 25-year mark, as the right time. We reached out to quite a few women who had earlier expressed an interest but had yet to be interviewed. We also used several venues, including a small box ad in *Lesbian Connection* and sending out some flyers, to spread the word of the impending end date for that phase of the Project.

We won’t be hyperbolic and say there was a flood of requests, but there certainly has been a significant surge and we’re doing our best to manage the requests. I’ll throw another thanks in here – one of our interviewers in St. Louis, Sharon S., offered to conduct several of the new interviews for us even while she was working to squeeze in a few more she’d already been working on.

Sharon wasn’t the only interviewer doing her best to fit in a few more with her own connections. There is hardly a day going by that we don’t hear from long-time interviewers like Barb K., Ann N. or Chris P., all working to gather a few more Herstories to add to our growing collection.

Part of us says not to say anything more that might bring up new requests, but we’ll risk it. If you, or someone you know, fits into what we’re doing and would like to participate, get in contact with us soon.

What Now? And What Next?

Soon after having she received the last issue of *The Insider*, we had a note from Ellen K., a friend and supporter of the Project – she'd shared her own story in 2009: *I'd love to see a follow-up article on the future of OLOHP. Continuing interviews? Or just finishing ones in progress? Another book? Or?* All good questions! So here we go.

Until the end of April, we will continue to be more-than-busy doing new interviews. Even though you wouldn't think so, once we've reached that milestone, we'll still be working with some interviews. There will be a group of interviews we've started before the end of April, but have not had time to complete, so for those, we'll be an additional part (or two!) to complete the first interview.

We'll also work on getting back on track with an effort Arden had started, which was to reconnect with many of the women who had been interviewed early in the Project and, if they're willing and able, doing a brief follow up interview to catch up with them. It's been our experience that even in their 70s and 80s, most of the women participating in the Project stay active, busy and productive and we love to hear more about what they've been doing.

As you might imagine, shifting our time and energy to gathering as many new interviews as we could before the cutoff date has made keeping up with all the other tasks nearly impossible. Over the past few years, we'd been able to keep up with transcribing, but not anymore. It will take us most of this summer to get the new ones done. With each new Herstory, we have photos and other documents to scan and such. And we've also fallen behind on finalizing Herstories. We need to buckle down and play catch-up in that area as well. On a larger scale, once we've caught our breath after the influx of new interviews, we'll refocus on wrapping up earlier interviews (of which there are many!) that are still in process.

We also need to continue our efforts to create a finding aid and abstract for every Herstory in the Project. Thankfully, we have a group of volunteers who are helping with the indexing/abstracts – but even with help, it will take us quite a while to work our way thru 850+ interviews. (If you'd like to help with indexing and abstracts, just let us know.)

Then there is our long to-do list when it comes to archiving at Smith College, which includes getting digital copies of everything to them. There are some Herstories that won't be included in our collection at Smith, so we'll continue to work with other archives to make arrangements for those.

What else? We'll continue getting out *The Insider*. We also had to rebuild and move our website, and as time allows, we need to smooth out its rough edges and add more content. And while we're not sure we can devote the time it would take to produce another book, we are looking at a few other options for sharing the wealth of information the Project has gathered and preserved.

As the saying goes, it looks like we'll be busy enough to keep us off the streets for the foreseeable future!

Our Mystery Interviews



Back in 2017, CS, a woman we were interviewing, asked if we would take six interviews she herself had done and add them to ours. She wanted to be sure they were preserved and protected, and we agreed.

In retrospect, we should have said, "Sure, but you'll need to send up all the contact information and paperwork on each of them first," but we didn't. We took the video interviews, transcribed the audio, and since we had yet to get the contact info for the interviewees themselves, sent the transcripts back to CS, where things stalled. No matter what we did, we couldn't get the details that we needed or move them forward.

After her death, we learned that CS had had some memory issues – which probably helps explain it. However it came about, we ended up with a handful of stories that were in limbo, and there they remained for several years.

Fast-forward and something jogged our memories. It occurred to us that one of the mystery women had talked about Carefree in Florida. Maybe someone there knew them. So last week, we reached out to Nancy Manahan, who has shared her own story with us and lives at Carefree, and asked, "Do you know any of these women?"

Bingo! Nancy was able to connect us with four of them right away. Dana, one of the remaining two, had passed, but Nancy put us in touch with Emily, Dana's partner. That left one, and Nancy has a lead and is working on finding her as well. And as a bonus, out of all of this, CS's videographer, has reached out and offered her assistance.

After remaining a mystery for 6+ years, within a matter of days, we went from discouraged and disappointed about this group of mysteries to riding high on success.



An Interesting Diversion by Margaret

In the article about the mystery interviews (on the previous page) we mentioned that we were now in contact with Emily, the partner of one of our mystery interviews, Dana. It happened that Arden had interviewed Dana as well, so we once had contact information for her; but Dana had died recently. Ideally, we still needed some sort of paperwork or permissions so we could archive Dana's mystery interview, so we began an e-mail exchange with Emily. It turns out Emily had never seen the video interview nor did she have the transcript of Arden's interview. Of the six mysteries, the Project had the video of three – one of those was Dana, and we were glad to be able to share that with Emily.

This is where things took an interesting turn. Emily mentioned that she had several photos and articles that she'd like to add to Dana's Herstory. One item was a copy of an article in *Lesbian Connection* noting Dana's passing.

I immediately wrote back, telling Emily, "Early last week, I took some time to go thru all the old copies of *Lesbian Connection* that I had saved. Paging through them, I cut out any articles related to women I recognized as having been part of the OLOHP. The back issues covered several years and were not in any specific order. As I went thru them, I piled up the pages I'd cut out and set the stack next to the scanner with plans to deal with them soon. When you mentioned having the *LC* article about Dana's passing, I rolled over to the scanner. Right there, on the top of the stack of dozens of pages waiting to be scanned, sat Dana, smiling up at me. Even if you don't believe in outside powers, you have to wonder at the odds of my having dealt with that stack this week, of my having connected with you this week, and, of all the pages waiting to be scanned, for Dana's to be on the top of them."

Now, not only is Emily willing to help us add to Dana's Herstory, she has agreed to be interviewed as well. This is such an incredible project to be a part of!!!



Excerpts from Dana's Interview

About her feelings as a child:

On some level I had known since I was about ten or twelve and so I knew in high school. I knew, but I didn't know. I didn't want to know. I wanted to be normal like many people that I know. I really translated a lot of that into, "Well, I'm just not pretty and I'm not attractive to boys, and somehow it's my fault." That's a miserable feeling.

I remember talking to my brother George, who is two years older, and him trying to reassure me that I would find someone and there was nothing wrong with me. I didn't tell him that I was attracted to women. He may have known. He later knew but anyhow, he tried to help for which I am eternally grateful.

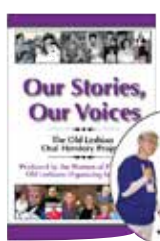
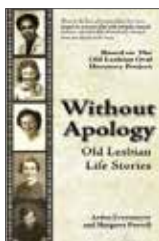
About meeting Emily:

Emily came to help out when J. went on vacation. Emily stepped in to help with the secretarial stuff. That was all she wrote. I remember looking across the room and seeing her. I had been in the one relationship with the woman from Stanford but that had been short-lived and I hadn't been in one since.

During the time that I left Stanford, which was 1955 until mid '60s, I was so frightened of being gay I couldn't even pick up the phone to call New York City and ask about the Daughters of Bilitis. I had heard about them but I was too frightened. I thought maybe somebody would trace it back to me and find me out. Oh, god, what a way to live. It ain't livin'.

So, anyhow, there was Emily and I saw her. I could still tell you today what she had on. And that was it. It was wild! (laughing) And she had three children. She was still in her marriage, so it was not doing well. We went off talking with each other at every diner in the county. We were just ... doing things. We weren't being sexual but we were just enamored of each other. Finally, she divorced him and I moved into the house and became the second mother. There were three children, two boys and a girl. I had said all along in my life, "I'm never going to have children." Go figure. We got together in 1974. Forty-three years. Yeah. A while.

[They had been together 46 years when Dana died in 2022.]



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!

