

The OLOHP Insider

#60, December 2024

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project



Margaret Checking In

Readers of *The Insider* know well that we have a pattern, a basic style, that we have followed, not just in layout and design, but in terms of content. Quite a few of you let us know that while the issue that came out in Sept. 2024 may have looked similar, it clearly took a different path when it came to content. That issue garnered more feedback than any issue I can remember! Here is an example that summarizes what we heard back: *This issue of the Insider is crazy good, makes me laugh and cry at the same time, thinking of everything we as lesbians and older women have gone through. But we've always held our heads up high and kept going forward, despite all odds. And we have ended up finding incredible joy, happiness, love and truth – about ourselves and the world. Thank you, OLOHP, for connecting us together – we celebrate you all!*

Wow. While this new issue might not be able to live up to the previous one, we'll do our best to make sure it reflects exactly why it is we have spent (and will continue to spend) thousands and thousands of hours (and more dollars than we want to think about) doing what we do.

Well, we've finally reached a point we knew would come eventually. Despite having declared more than a year ago that we would stop seeking out/conducting new interviews, we still had a lot of catch-up work to do with women who had reached out to us before our declaration, but for one reason or another had yet to complete their interview. Getting caught up on those kept us more than busy for another 18 months. While we continued to do work to catch up, sometimes a woman we were working with would ask if we could possibly squeeze in their partner, or a friend who had expressed an interest. Or during the time we were spending catching up, someone else would reach out to us. It was also during that time span that Meghan McDonough's documentary based on the Project (*Old Lesbians*) was released, and it stirred up some new interest from people who, before having watched the film, hadn't even heard of the OLOHP.

Here is where the problem became clear: None of us working on the Project are very good at saying no! In fact, we're really bad at it. That said, we knew we had to be realistic. Even after the very last interview is recorded, there is still at least a couple of years worth of work we need to do. And, given that all of us working on the Project are in our 70s and 80s – with all the challenges that brings – continuing to push what needs yet to be done further into the future doesn't make any sense. So, we've finally gotten to that point where we have been, very reluctantly, saying no.

We had hoped to identify another project where we could refer women who had expressed an interest in participating in ours. We'll keep asking around, but so far, no luck on that end.

I'll wrap up my part of this issue by urging you to read a recent piece in the *New York Times* about the life and passing (at age 81) of lesbian poet/activist/writer/professor Nikki Giovanni. We did not have the opportunity to interview her for the Project, but one of our other interviewees, JoAnn F., brought the *New York Times* article to our attention and mentioned that she wholeheartedly agreed with the quote from Nikki that ended the piece: *I recommend old age. There's just nothing as wonderful as knowing you have done your job.*

Margaret

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

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A Plan? Or an Accident?

The inaugural issue of *The OLOHP Insider* came out in late 2009. Fifteen years later, this is the 60th issue. Given that it really came about by accident, we seem to have done fairly well! What do we mean, accident? Well, only months earlier we had wrapped up our first book, *A Gift of Age*, which was a much bigger undertaking than we'd imagined. Arden was spending some time with Margaret and talking about what to do next. The thought of starting on another book was exhausting, so Margaret suggested maybe we could accomplish much of what we wanted to do in writing a book by putting



out a regular newsletter that featured experts. Arden's not here to defend herself, so we've only got Margaret's side of it which was that Arden conveniently missed the part about the newsletter being instead of another book! Next thing you know, *The Insider* was born... and began work on another book.

Advertising? Or Sharing Info?

We've never taken any advertising in *The Insider*. That said, we are sometimes presented with a piece of information we want to share that comes to us from someone who has participated in the Project. It feels much like advertising, and left us wondering what was the right thing to do. Here is an example. Beatrice Stewart (a close friend and travel companion of Arden's) contacted us asking if we'd mention a book she had written called *White Allies White Supremacy: What Can We Do?* We ordered a copy ourselves read it, and would like more people to know about it, but that pesky "No Advertising" thing made us hesitate. Is that advertising or not? We don't know!

For several years we handled this kind of request by having a page on our website where we would share about what various women in the Project were doing now. But when we had to rebuild our website (thanks to hackers), we ended up streamlining the site, eliminating that page.

Without resolving our current dilemma, we've decided to do this: If you have something you'd like us to mention, send us an e-mail with the details. No promises, but if we have time to take care of it, we'll add a short piece to the splash page of our website sharing your information. We'll do our best to leave it there until something else comes in and we need the space. And if it gets to be too much to manage on our end, we'll go back to the drawing board!

Feedback

Thanks for another great newsletter! I enjoyed every bit of it! Thanks for all you do to keep Arden's legacy alive. Be well, "Jay"

I get a little choked up just reading about what you do. Looking forward to more.
Lynn

Thanks for the opportunity to take part in your project and for sending me the newsletter. It's so professionally done and the stories are impressive. It takes all kinds, doesn't it?

The stories of discovering who we are and coming out are particularly impressive. We all have had bumpy roads to travel and it's remarkable so many of us have made it through the mess of finding ourselves and what we can be.

I applaud you and OLOHP for taking on this task and wish you and yours all the best,
Pame R.

Thank you again and again and again! What an incredible gift of pure love you're giving to us and to the world.
Jazz

Hello! I am still replaying our interview and conversations in my mind, smiling, reflecting, full of huge appreciation for that opportunity, and what I learned about myself in the process. It ended up to be a deeply profound and moving experience.
With great warmth, Laura

Dear OLOHP-

Thank you so so very much for all the great work you do, recording and transcribing our herstories – the realities of our diverse lives. Gathering and sharing the value of our diverse lesbian lives. The evidence. The evidence that we were here. We are here. Erasure is such a primary tool of patriarchies – by many methods. Even now younger generations of lesbians have received partial (at times misleading) information about elder lesbians from the 1970's Second Wave of Women's Liberation and that huge wave of lesbians coming out.

Your vivid recent issue sparked my response in these dangerous divided times in the U.S. We refuse to vanish. OLOHP is testimony to this strength.

Emily Culpepper (Pomona, CA & Macon, GA)

The following are excerpts from the Herstories of women who have passed, some recently, others years ago. They were all incredible women, well-loved, and we will miss them.

Rita 'Rete' Carie, born 1944
Interviewed in 2017 by Nan Brooks

Crushes on girls? Oh yeah! Yeah. My girlfriends...lots of them. That started in grade school, maybe junior high, but I didn't think anything of it. I just thought, this girl I like more than the other girls. And then I would like somebody else. And somebody else. I was probably, maybe junior high [age] when I was starting to notice anything, like sexuality, and I didn't have any language.



I had no idea. I would hear other kids making fun of queers... I eventually knew what that meant, but it didn't sink in.

Care de Leeuw, born 1930
Interviewed in 2003 by Arden E.

I knew when I was five. I was a tomboy. I thought of myself as a lesbian since I was a teenager. No... there wasn't any question. But it was still a psychiatric disease, so you had to be fairly careful about it, about everything, particularly considering that I served twice in the military. You just had a double life and you knew, you just knew... who to connect with and who to avoid... what you could do and what you couldn't do. You knew how to make the rules work for you. Some people weren't real lucky, because they got associated with the wrong people, or at the wrong time, or the wrong place. But I seemed to squeeze through without any large problems.



Ann Herndon, born 1933 *Interviewed in 2014 by Barb Kucharczyk*

I had a security clearance; it wasn't top secret. When I went into the area where I needed the top secret clearance, they said that an Army Intelligence guy was going to come pick me up, take me downtown. I didn't know why. Then they put me in a room and they just would ask me all kinds of questions. "Well, did you know so and so?" I said, "Yeah, I knew them." "Well, did you ever kiss them?" And they would go through this whole litany. The first day he didn't put me on the lie detector, but there was a mirror which was so out of place. It was just stuck up there on the wall. The second day I'm getting very, very irritated, because they're following me and they're tapping my phone and they're doing all kinds of crazy stuff.

I was about 21, 22. This was a lot to go through at that age. The second day they put me on the lie detector and, of course, they try to impress you with the fact that if you tell a lie, it's going to show up. They've got these little things on my fingers. They've got this thing around my chest and things on my head. I looked like Frankenstein. I'm sitting in this chair and looking straight ahead. He's over there with the machine. He would ask me a bunch of stuff about: "Have you ever" He said things that I never even heard of, like sodomy and something I can't even remember. "I don't even know what that is!" We went through all this and so I was answering the questions, but he said, "You really don't have to answer any of the questions because the machine is going to register the response anyway". When he would come to a question where he wanted a reaction, he'd ask me the question and then he would clap his hands and, of course, I would jump. That's how they got a reaction to whatever question when they wanted one.



Well, I knew what it was all about. I knew what they were trying to do, because I'd seen other people get fired and thrown out of the service. That was a really big thing, too. But, I asked him, "Now what are you going to do with all this stuff that you wrote" One day he said, "You're not the first person that's ever sat in that chair and you won't be the last." And I said, "Well, I guess the only consolation I have is that while I'm in here, you're leaving someone else alone."

I had the Top Secret clearance, but there were years and years and years I couldn't even talk about this without just shaking. It was horrible going through this at that age, or any age.

They were all incredible women, well-loved, and we'll miss them.

Diana DeWeese Schmidt, born 1946

Interviewed in 2017 by Carol Seithel



I was married and had two children when I met Cat. She applied for a job as a baby sitter. My husband was an alcoholic and I had just bought a beauty salon. I needed someone to stay with the children, even after he got home, because he was unreliable.

Cat had been baby sitting a couple weeks when I found out that she and her friend were queer. That just turned my world upside down. I called my Al-Anon sponsor on the phone. I was crying, and I said, "These ladies are homosexuals, and they are watching my little girls," and she came up very quickly, and said, "Diana, they are homosexuals. They are not perverts. They don't want your children. They want people of their same age and sex." She said, "You told me yourself that this is the best baby sitter you have ever had. Stop worrying about it."

Once I stopped worrying, all holds were off. I became interested right away. The more I was around Cat, the more I was drawn to her. It didn't take very long. I grew really comfortable with it. We all decided to go out one night, she and I and Suzanne. I knew they were queer. I was all right with that. That's the night that I came out of the bathroom, and Cat was standing in this little alcove waiting to come in. When I came out, I just put my hands up there and grabbed her face and kissed her.

That was the beginning. She kissed me back. I am the one. I am the perpetrator of all that. It has now been 44 years. It will be 45 in February.

Bev Bedeaux, born 1930

Interviewed in 2014 by Arden E.

During my time in the Air Force, I met some gay people. And, before I knew it, I was kicked out of the Air Force – for association only. I got what they called an undesirable discharge. Then I met and I talked to a woman who said she could help. "We're going to get that changed." I worked with her for about two years and I now have an honorable discharge from the Air Force.

That was the worst thing. They went around the country during those years and, you know... it was just association, a witch hunt. I was only in about two years. But I loved it. I went through radio school and had to learn code – I just loved that. That was when I had to come out to my mother and father. When I came home, of course, I had to tell them. First time in my life I ever saw my father cry.

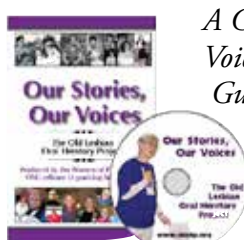
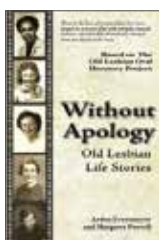


There were no benefits. When we were kicked out, they didn't allow us anything but the clothes we had on. I suppose with the change of the discharge I could have fought it, but I just couldn't do it. I just couldn't go through the hassle, which was probably crazy because I'm sure they owed me some money. But I wouldn't go through that mess again for anything.

Donna Douglass, born 1938



Donna never shared her own story with the Project, yet she was its biggest cheerleader. She spent untold hours working on our behalf. Donna's partner, Gloria Stancich was interviewed by Arden, and her story was featured in our second book, *Without Apology*, and she went on to become one of our interviewers. Donna assisted Gloria in every interview she did. At those interviews, if the woman was comfortable with it, Donna would video tape. Those tapes not only helped if we were having trouble transcribing the audio, they've added to the richness of our efforts to document our collective Herstory. So, while Donna wasn't officially a participant in the OLOHP, she has helped us get where we are. We appreciate all she did.



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!

