The OLOHP Insider

#63, October 2025 **The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project**

Margaret Checking In

If it wasn't anything else – which it is – working with the OLOHP has been an amazing, ongoing learning experience for me. I expected that to be the case, but also thought that, after a few years, it would become more routine and I'd have a grasp on every aspect of the Project. Nope.

Here is a recent example: When Arden died, I needed to combine email addresses for mailing out *The Insider*. Sounds like that would be relatively straight forward, but she and I each had parts of the list and each was in a different application. (I'm sure we had a good reason for doing it that way back then, but in retrospect, those "good" reasons seem far from good!) When the time came, I opted to create a new master list of contacts and groups using Google Mail. I had used Google for that purpose before, so that wasn't a steep learning curve. I did the job and was sure I'd melded everyone from both the lists. I didn't think about it again until recently when I stumbled across a group of addresses in a folder, that was tucked inside another folder. Ironically, the folder was named *Friends* and none of those names had made the transfer. Not only are they in the mailing groups now with my apologies, but I've gone thru every extraneous folder I could find with email addresses to make sure others hadn't fallen by the wayside as well.

In reconnecting with those whose names were on that missing list, I asked the recipients if they'd check and confirm that they hadn't received an *Insider* for the past two years – that turned out to be accurate. In response, we got several nice notes back including this one that I loved!

Thank you,
The most recent issue I had received – prior to this welcome mailing – was Number 52. I was saddened that The Insider *had apparently ended, but that's the way it is…, and I thought it inappropriate to investigate. Now I've read #61 and #62 with pleasure and viewed* The Guardian *film – together amounting to a dizzying hit of lesbiana.*

With gratitude, Ann

I'm sorry we lost contact with those in that wayward group of email addresses and grateful we were able to reconnect. I'd say lesson learned, but one thing I have come to understand after 20+ years working on hundreds of Herstories and dozens of newsletters is that no two are the same. Each presents me with a slightly new challenge, which to me, is a good thing.

With any luck, I'll continue to learn every day I work with the Project. Learning how to better manage time continues to be a stumbling block on my end. I meant to have this issue out mid-September, but here we are in October already. The goal has always been for *The Insider* to be a quarterly newsletter, and we've done well on meeting that goal the past few years. I'll have to hustle, but right now I'll pledge to have anther issue out before the end of the year.

Margaret

Something we could all use more of… Smiles all the way around!

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

Reach Out To Us, Please

We'd love to hear from any of the women who have been a part of the OLOHP, whether interviewed a few years ago or longer ago than that. 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, even the hard parts about aging do not preclude continuing to live a full life. We'd love to add more recent insights, activities, adventures and accomplishments to every Herstory.

"I couldn't have Levis since the zipper was in the front, and girls's jeans had the zipper on the side."

Over the years we've had women volunteer to do some of the interviewing for the Project. We have tried to be cautious about accepting offers, especially if it was someone we didn't already know. In most cases, it worked out well.

Along the way, we also had a few queries from women who, in our minds, were too young to be interviewers for us. From the outset, we'd gone into this adventure believing that it was important that the interviewer be close enough in age to be considered a contemporary with the women they'd be interviewing. In our minds, making sure there wasn't too much of an age gap would put everyone more at ease from the get-go and avoid a "Tell me more, Grandma" feeling.

We do have an end goal: We want the accumulated work of the Project to help everyone, of all ages and sexualities, to gain an understanding of what it was like to live as a lesbian during their unique period of history. The along-the-way-goal was a bit different. First, we wanted to provide a safe, comfortable way for women to share their stories. We wanted them to know what they had to say about their life experiences mattered, not just to the Project but to others. Second, we wanted our interviewers to learn from the women they were talking with. Our hopes were that by minimizing the age gap between the two, it would be a matter of gaining a deeper understanding, not learning things they didn't know anything about. We didn't want interviewers who would be hearing for the first time that women sometimes lost custody of their children when they came out, or about Stonewall, or about shock therapy, or asking, "What do you mean you couldn't have Levi's because the zipper was on the front?"

In the end, it did mean the Project turned down a few offers from younger women to become interviewers, but most of them helped us in other ways. We feel we did the right thing, both for the interviewers and for the women sharing their story. In terms of "it takes a village," ultimately more than 50 women, most of them in their 60s or 70s, conducted interviews for the Project, some doing 1 or 2, others dozens, and Arden more than 300 on her own!

Anonymous & Pseudonymous

The Project has always allowed participants to opt to stay anonymous or use a pseudonym. They've also been offered the option of saying they didn't want their Herstory to be used until some future date when the woman sharing her story was gone. Managing all of that sounded simple, but it really wasn't. Women who signed saying "not until after my death" assumed we would know when they had died. We don't always. When the Project only had a hundred interviews, it was doable, but not so much anymore. So if someone wants to share their story but not their name, we urge them to use a pseudonym. We can still have materials held for a future date, but it has to be a specific date.

The bulk of our Herstories are archived at Smith College which has its own guidelines, adding another layer of protocol to how the Herstories are used. Submitting materials using a pseudonym isn't too problematic. But anonymous is tricky. Follow this link if you'd like to see how Smith handles such requests: **https://tinyurl.com/2jucw3ww**

Passings

Nancy Berry, born 1936
interviewed in 2015 by Paula F.

My husband... we were living in Albuquerque, and we went to El Paso often. He saw on the front page of the paper, where someone who had been his children's camp counselor was in a big mess of problems at Fort Bliss. Her name was Laurie Cryer. I said, "I don't want to stop by and see some hairy chested old WAC," and he said, "I just want to say hello." So, we went to Fort Bliss, and she was washing her car. She was in the officer's quarters. I have never seen anybody so beautiful. We went in and visited, and then she had a fake fiancé. I say fake, because it was all a cover-up. He and my husband went to get some wine or something and left me with her. She looked at me across the room and said, "Have you ever been kissed by a woman?" I said, "No." She said, "Well, you are about to be," and she kissed me, and that was it. I knew instantly that that's what I had been missing.

Women sharing their stories with us are almost always asked about their coming out experience. These two pages are a sampling of the wide range of responses.

JL (anonymous) born 1927

The nurse had changed Bobbie, she'd given her a partial bath, put some dry clothes on her, had washed her face and was combing her hair when she noticed that Bobbie had stopped breathing and her heart had stopped. Of course, I wished I had been with her, but if I had to do it again…

We had never held hands out in public. But before they put her in the ambulance, I kissed her on the forehead and whispered that I loved her. It was the very first ever show of affection… and it was in front of an ambulance driver. I call that one of God's whispers.

JeanAnn Werst, born 1934

(Elsie is the woman with whom JeanAnn spent the next 60+ years.)

When Elsie told me she was lesbian, I took it upon myself to make her straight! She was not going to run with these other women… the softball team, all these tomboys. I thought they all were [lesbians] and that they influenced her lifestyle. I told my mother, "She just needs some guidance and some help, and I'm gonna help her do that." I said to Elsie, "You just have to stay away from them. We'll do other things together."

I went to the hairdresser to have my hair bleached blonde, and I got her to do that. And I got her to wear dresses instead of the slacks that she wore… I don't think she did earrings… and high heels and be more feminine… although she really wasn't as masculine as I have seen some of the girls to be. I was just going to get her out of that lifestyle. I thought she just needed somebody that would show her the right path to go down! I really worked hard at it, and so did she. I have to say, she went along with everything that suggested. She was really smart and cool when I think about it. She played it right.

Meanwhile, Elsie's friends, Mary Lee, Gloria and the other ones, they knew what I was trying to do, but they could see it wasn't going to happen. They were taking bets as to who was going to change who!

Phyllis Irwin, born 1929

(Phyllis' excerpt illustrates that coming out can be a lifelong process)

When I lived in San Diego as a teenager, I got hold of *The Well of Loneliness*. My dad came home on leave and I'm sitting there, and he says, "Whatcha reading?" And I thought "Oh, my God." I said, "…… *The Well of Loneliness*." All my father said was, "Oh, yes, I think I read that in an abnormal psychology class." Well, you can imagine what my stomach did. Errp!

Lillian and I never came out to my parents particularly, but Lillian knew that her book, *Surpassing the Love of Men,* had gotten a major review in a big magazine. My father got that magazine and Lillian knew that my father was going to get it. I get a telephone call at work, in the music department. Lillian said, "I'm in a panic, you better come over here." So I ran across campus, and she says, "They're reviewing *Surpassing the Love of Men* in *Atlantic Monthly*, and you know that your dad gets that. What are we going to do?" I called my cousin Sharon, my lesbian cousin, who is a psychotherapist and Sharon called my father and mother. My father said, "Oh, that's great, she'll sell more books."

When Lillian was pregnant with Avrom, my dad was excited… he was going to have this kid, and that was better than my horses on the dogs! One of his buddies asked him, "Well, why didn't she get married?" And my father said, "Well, she wanted a child, not a husband." We never discussed it, but I know that my father must've known about me all those years.

Well, my father passed away, and as I said earlier, my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. But she was kind of getting along okay. I was down in one of my many visits then to San Diego after I retired. We were sitting at the breakfast table one morning in the condo down in San Diego, and my little mother – and you'd have to picture her, she's is very pretty, little, I mean, a lady. She's sitting across from me at the breakfast table, and she looks at me, and she says, "Dear, …… do you and Lillian consider yourselves lesbians?" Well, I thought I was going to choke. I mean, it was too early in the morning, I hadn't finished my cup of coffee yet! And here my mother used the "L" word. So I kind of gulped, and I said, "Well, yes, Mother, we do." And she said, "Oh." And that was the end of it.

Dee Austin, born 1936

I had wanted to tell my son before I got involved with anybody. I met Jane in September and I was going to New York to visit him in October, so I was basically semi-involved – I had met someone. I was sitting in his kitchen and I said to him, "Do you ever wonder why I spend more time around women than around men?" He said, "No." I said, 'This is not going to be an easy conversation.' And so I went ahead and I told him. Then I said, "Is there anything you want to ask me? Any questions? Do you have any feelings about it?" He said, "No." I said, "Does it surprise you?" And he said, "No. If you were married, that would surprise me." (I had been divorced for over fifteen years.) "But since you're not, that doesn't surprise me." And that was that.

Rand Hall, born 1945

I told my mom that I was a lesbian, and… so sweet,… she said the same thing she said when I told her I was pregnant. She said, "Oh, no, you are not." She got over it in about five minutes, but the first words were, "Oh, no, you are not." She actually gave me a much harder time when I got a tattoo! It was okay.

She said, "You will have to tell your father. I am not telling him," because she thought that would hurt him because I was rejecting men or something. The next night I took my dad out, we went for a walk and I told him. He said, "So. Do you think I am surprised?" I said, "No." He said, "I never understood what you could see in guys anyway." "Okay, Dad, thanks." So, that was that.

Marjorie Clearwater, born 1943

It's so sad, when everyone is saying that you are sick. Sick, sinful and insane. Breaking all the rules. My mother and my father …… I disappointed everybody. I felt like my mother and father's dirty little secret.

One of the people that was good to me early on was Mrs. Caballa. She was our school crossing guard. I loved Mrs. Caballa, and she gave me a place of responsibility. Mrs. Caballa always made me feel special.

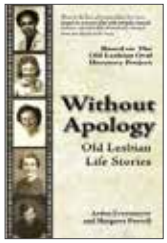
When I came out as a lesbian, I just assumed my mother and father and Mrs. Caballa would understand. Well, my mother and father never did. I was their dirty little secret.

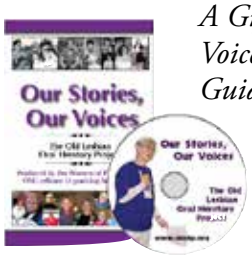
Janice Lee Ives, born 1940

I never really did have that conversation with my parents. Even when Scottie and I broke up for a while, there never was a whole lot of conversation about it. But then when Scottie and I did get back together, my mother says, "Well, good. You're back where you belong." She was comfortable with that.

My take on that always was that my mother and daddy were really smart people. So however they justified my relationships in their brain was fine with me. They never gave me any grief. Whoever I was living with was always invited and accepted at home.

By the same token, while I don't remember what Mother's obituary said, Daddy wrote Mother's obituary and he listed Scottie as a daughter.





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!

JOHN STEVEN KELLETT FOUNDATION