

The OLOHP Insider

#65, March/April 2026

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Margaret Checking In

As I began to work on this issue of the Insider, I noticed I hadn't done a good job of updating the date/issue# in the header. Last July, it was issue #62, then October was #63, then December was #62 again! How I managed that is quite the mystery. I can't take all the wrong ones back, but I can make sure this one was is correct: March/April 2026, issue #65.

Most of you know that Arden was a huge part of my life for more than 20 years. Lots of things remind me of her, which is predictable. But what has made me think about her, and chuckle each time, involves spam e-mails. Messages addressed to arden@olohp.org now comes to me in case there is anything that actually needs my attention, but those e-mails are fewer and fewer as time passes. Even so, I get dozens of e-mails to her each week. I love the ones that ask for feedback on her recent purchase at Lowe's, the changes she's requested to her BlueCross/BlueShield policy for this year, the order she just made for Omaha Steaks and... my personal favorite... the free luxury pillows she earned because of her recent stays at the Marriots. I do enjoy thinking about Arden, kicking back and relaxing at the Marriot nowadays!

Recently, I was going through a stack of papers I'd set aside to look at later when I came across a back issue of the *Women's History* put out by National Women's History Alliance. It included a small piece about Arden. I was glad to find it, but as I paged through that publication looking for the article, what struck me the most was how often they used the word "stories". The more I saw the word "stories", the more something felt wrong. Calling them "stories" bothered me – it felt minimizing. Given our name, The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project, and the number of times it appears in our own writings, you'd think I wouldn't react to it. But the same week I was pondering my reaction to using the term stories, I was working a crossword puzzle. Clue 17 across was Storyteller? The answer was four letters. You may be ahead of me and have already guessed that the correct answer was Liar.

Growing up, that was how the term was often used. If someone said "you're just telling a story" it was that what you were saying wasn't taken seriously or a flat out lie. Unlearning something sure seems to be harder than learning it in the first place! Out of curiosity, I checked to see if the dictionary might help, but I found this: *Storytelling -- the act of telling or recounting stories, whether fictional or true.* It's what is called a contronym, a word with two definitions that contradict, or are the reverse of, each other. Personally, I guess my reaction is a contronym!

As someone who has read almost every transcript, listened to hundreds of the audio recordings, and done a few of the interviews, I can assure you it's not just about the end product. It's about the experience of participating in the Project as well. For many of the women, being interviewed was the first time they felt their stories and experiences were valued. Sharing our past experiences, sometimes teaching and influencing, and at times, inspiring, is what it is all about.

While I may always have that initial cringe when I hear the work of the OLOHP described as a collection of stories, I know that that is what it is... and that it is of incredible value. The Project has created a unique collective history of a cohort of women whose stories might otherwise be forgotten. *Margaret*



Arden,
thru the
ages... left
in 1932,
next in
-1939



Above in
1946, left
in 1965,
below in
1978



One of our favorites – Arden,
age 92, taken in 2023

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

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We've recently learned of the passing of a few incredible women who were a part of the OLOHP. We'll do our best to share a bit about all of them over the next few issues, starting with this one.

Geraldine 'Jay' Ingersoll, born 1941
interviewed by Barb K in 2017

The old nun often wanted to go to Charleston, and the younger one, of course, had to drive her. Christine Marie had too much to do, so we got left home alone. That's when I got in her bed. That was absolutely the most electric time in my life I had a tremendous amount of guilt associated with my sexual relationship with her. I had taken vows. She watched me and was concerned for me. We had a confessor who came to the convent for the nuns; we didn't have to go to the church. She never pressured me, but at some point she asked, "Have you told him?" I said that I had. He was an order priest. There was no big reaction from him. I don't think he even said, "Go and sin no more." I knew that I wasn't going to go and sin no more. (laughing) I knew this was addictive. This wasn't going to end!



Typically, we only include a short excerpt (like the one above) with our writing of the passing of one of the women from the Project, but in Jay's case, we couldn't help but include more. The photo of Jay (on the left) with Barb, her interviewer. This additional long excerpt is about being interviewed and is taken from an addendum Jay wrote to add to her transcript:

I found OLOHP and their contact information, e-mailed the address given and wrote, "I'm an old lesbian and I want to tell my story." It had taken over 50 years for me to be able to say the "L" word in reference to myself. I was told that an interviewer from North Carolina would contact me.

In May of 2014 Barb Kucharczyk e-mailed me. At that time, I was recovering from emergency heart surgery. Barb continued to maintain e-mail contact. In August, I had a heart ablation procedure that stopped my life threatening atrial fibrillation. In 2016, I had extensive pelvic organ prolapse surgery and a long, difficult recovery. Barb continued e-mail contact and support, as she does with all potential interviewees.

After well over two years of delays, Barb e-mailed suggesting we set an interview date. In spite of having prepared extensively when I was able, I panicked. Barb gently insisted I consider it. We settled on Easter weekend.

With Barb's arrival imminent, I realized I knew nothing about her except that she had been in the Air Force and had been stationed at Shaw for a time. I had no idea what she looked like, nor had I even heard her voice. An extensive Google search turned up nothing until I added USAF to her name, then wow! I was hosting a retired Lt. Colonel, Colonel-Select. Women who attained that rank were rare and, indeed, part of a select group. I was impressed.

Funny the things we think about. Having read Barb's bio and military service record, I was afraid she

might be too tall for the twin beds in the guest room. When she arrived, I was relieved to see that she wasn't as tall as I had imagined!

The interview weekend was hard work. I had never told my story to anyone and it was cathartic to share it. Barb was supportive and encouraging. We enjoyed getting to know one another and had some good laughs and conversation. After Barb left, we continued to exchange e-mails, and I realized I was smitten and very much wanted to see more of her. Barb called a few days later and asked if we could do a follow-up interview. She would like for me to elaborate on and clarify my decision to enter the convent, about my initial convent training, my decision to leave, and the process of leaving.

By the time Barb departed after the follow-up interview, we had agreed that we wanted a closer relationship. Many visits and many phone calls later, Barb and I became a couple in a committed partnership. Finding this lovely, loving, giving, smart, generous woman is an amazing gift.

Some time ago, I confided to a closeted, lesbian friend that at this time in my life, the only way I would find anyone would be if they knocked on my front door. On Barb's first visit, I greeted her with a hug before she got to my front door, but she would have, indeed, knocked on my front door.

I cannot believe my great good fortune. I have not only found my lesbian community, but my life partner. Thank you, OLOHP!

Theme for this Issue: Understanding/Learning the Word Lesbian



Annalee Stewart, born 1927, interviewed by Arden

I didn't know the word 'lesbian' until I was fifty! During my adolescence, I fell in love with my best friend, Marilyn. I followed her around like a little puppy dog. She and I spent a lot of time together. I remember when she was ill, broke her foot, or had her appendix removed, because she came to my house to recuperate. We thought that was wonderful. If Marilyn wanted me to do this or that, that was fine. I knew that I had feelings for her, and I didn't understand what they were at that juncture. I just knew that they were not to be talked about. And I didn't know the words with which to talk about them. I never told her anything about my feelings until we were forty years old.

There was no vocabulary and I knew no one else ... there was nothing. It's not like today where you have "gay" and "lesbian" in the paper, news, phone books and all kinds of places where you can find somebody, although I think it's more difficult in the rural area. I didn't know anything until I finally got into college, where I picked up the word "homosexual."

Hah! That was huge ... you have feelings for somebody of the same sex. Now that began to sound like me. Although my main crush was on Marilyn, there were other girls that I sort of had a crush on, and again, I kept it totally to myself. But when I picked up the word "homosexual," I went to the library and started looking up things. It was a pretty big library and they'd have all kinds of things, I thought. So that's where I started to look. Everything I read was by males, generally by psychiatrists, about men who were very sick. I didn't understand some of the terms they referred to, and it didn't sound like anything I felt. I couldn't identify with it at all. So that left me out in the cold, knowing that it was same sex, but it was male and I wasn't anything like these people.

So, I just kind of kept it all to myself and went to college, with crushes I never revealed. I kept dating, because that's what you were supposed to do. Besides, eventually some young man would kiss me and the bells would go off like they did for Rock Hudson and Doris Day in some movie I had seen.

I never got any bells. So what I did was invest myself in my career.

Beverly Barney, born 1935 interviewed by Judith F.

In hindsight, you just didn't know what a lesbian was, that it was involved with same-sex people. Maybe you heard the words, but you didn't know what it was. Certainly at summer camp as a young teenager, I played kissy face with another girl at camp.

When I was 17 or 18 years old, we went to gay bars. There were a few of those around. But it never dawned on me, because I definitely thought of myself as heterosexual. It seems odd saying that we'd gone to gay bars, but I didn't know what it really meant.



Tina Gianoulis, born 1963 interviewed by Aganita V.

I didn't really know anybody that was a lesbian... I didn't know the word. Being in a girl's school, we joked about it a lot. I remember we used to have queer Thursdays where we would joke and sit on each other's laps and make fun. Maybe we even used the word "lesbian" in that kind of jokey way. But I didn't really get the idea. I did ask my sister something. I can't remember the words, but I asked her something about lesbians, and I remember her saying that she thought everyone went through a homosexual phase.



Anonymous, born 1917

We had fun together, but there was no talking about it, let alone even knowing that there was such a word as lesbian. Well, I knew there was such a word... I had heard about it from time to time when I'd been a child.

Lesbian was a bad word.

Theme Continued: Understanding/Learning the Word Lesbian

Jane Riss, born 1937, interviewed by Mary H.

I was in college, and there was this professor. She taught classics. I took a couple of courses from her on Greek literature culture. I became friendly with her. Basically, I think she recognized that I was gay and kind of became a mentor as well as a professor. In my senior year, I went to Greece with her for a period of about three weeks. It was an incredible experience. In class, one day she mentioned that she had spent the summer with a bunch of lesbians. And then she said, "Ah. Let me restate that. I spent the summer on the Isle of Lesbos." But that was the first time I'd heard the term lesbian. Then I went and figured out what it meant.



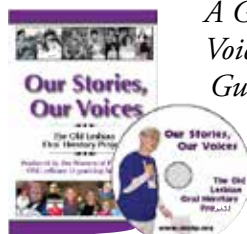
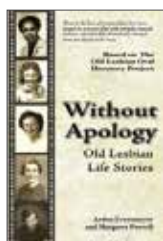
Shaba Barnes, born 1935, interviewed by Arden E.



I did not know it at the time, but my mother was very worried about me. One day my butch cousin called and said she was coming by to visit. I remember being afraid of her when I was a child. She did not look like the women I knew. She smoked, drank, talked loud, said bad words, wore tee shirts like men and pants. I had not seen her for many years, except at my father's funeral so I thought it was odd. She bought a bottle of Mogan David wine, the kind we drank at Passover. She spent the entire weekend with me. At first we talked about my dad, then other members of the family. I fixed a nice dinner, she played with the children. I was enjoying her company. I began to lighten up. The next day she told me the purpose of her visit. My mother had called and told her that she thought it was time for her to have that talk with me. My father had asked her to be there for me when I needed her. My mother and father both knew that I was a lesbian long before I could even grasp as such a concept. All of these years, I had suppressed my feelings and covered it up with situations that victimized me. My cousin also shared with me the other members of my family who had lesbian relationships. I could not believe it. As I looked back in retrospect, I remembered them and their "special friends".

Alix Olson, born 1947, interviewed by Aganita V.

I knew very early on that I was different. I guess I'd say maybe when I was 10 or 11. I knew I was attracted to girls. I knew that I liked boys, but as chums, as friends, as pals... not as a romantic interest at all. It's really funny, but I also knew that I couldn't talk to anybody about these feelings I was having. No one told me that. I just picked up on it somehow. Maybe it was because I came from a straight family. Maybe it was because of all the messages, the subliminal and the overt messages that we all get through life, from the media, from the movies, newspapers, teachers, school books. When was the last time you saw a history book with anybody gay in it? This just doesn't exist. We're invisible. I knew that I couldn't discuss these different feelings I was having, especially not with the girls who were the object of my affection. At that point I didn't know what the word lesbian meant. I don't know when I figured that out. I think I just went along and kept my feelings to myself. But I just knew that that's who I was. It felt okay to me, but it didn't feel okay in the context of the larger society.



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!

