

The OLOHP Insider

November 2013

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 21



A Truly Amazing Event!

Words can hardly convey the overwhelming feelings of joy, pride and success that are still emanating from the women who were a part of the recent OLOHP event held in Houston. We chose to say “were a part of” intentionally. They didn’t just attend, they each played an essential role in the conference – it was about us, it was by us, and the result was amazing. This issue of *The Insider* is a departure in format because we’re bursting with stories and images we want to share with all of you. The weekend was literally filled with panels, discussions, films, presentations, entertainment, and more.

Above, on the left, are the featured speakers, historian/author Lillian Faderman and Houston Mayor Annise Parker. To the right are Connie Kurtz and Ruthie Berman, who talked with us about their award winning documentary, *Ruthie and Connie, In Every Room of the House*.

Lillian has undoubtedly spoken to dozens of groups in the past, but we’d be willing to bet this one will always stand out in her memory: after all, how often does one speak in a ballroom where the only power for lights, projectors, sound system and ventilation is coming from miles of extension cords! (More of that

story on a later page.) Seemingly unruffled by the unusual circumstances, Lillian gave a presentation that kept everyone enthralled, sharing tales and images of lesbians who were instrumental in the first wave of feminism, lesbians who contributed so much to the quality of everyone’s, especially every woman’s life today. On page 4, you’ll find more about Lillian’s presentation.

*It is better to be hated
for what you are than
to be loved for what
you are not.*

*Annise Parker quoting
André Gide*

Annise Parker was great as well. She generously shared stories with us about both her personal and professional life, and then, as if she didn’t have anything else pressing with an election less than a month away, she and her spouse, Kathy, stayed, ate with us, chatted, and posed for photos.

It’s hard not to call everything that happened over that weekend a highlight!

In keeping with the adage “we get by with a little help from our friends,” you can access video of Annise’s speech in its entirety online. Thank you to Sara Fernandez, from the Houston PFLAG chapter, who recorded the speech, and then spent considerable time getting it ready to go and posted online. Annise Parker’s speech can be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/lz66p3l>

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older

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Smiling is something that is understood by everyone, regardless of culture, race, or religion; it is universal.



Thanks to Dalton DeHart for taking our photos!

Unity is Strength...

There are dozens of essays, quotes and stories based on the idea that we are stronger together, but we especially like this version: *Unity is strength... when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved.* Every event, no matter the size, presents a series of challenges. We're here to tell you that not only did this group of women unite and step up to the challenge, they conquered each and every obstacle thrown in the pathway with style, ingenuity and humor. We'd love to share two examples here.

Over there on the right is Nancy Ford, a musician/comedian from Houston. Nancy loved the idea of what we were doing, gave up a paying gig elsewhere, and offered to perform and emcee on opening night. That was the plan, right up until a couple of days before the event started, when we found out that there had been a major miscommunication with the hotel so that our event wouldn't even have access to the spaces we needed until the very last minute. We regrouped, came up with a new plan, and emailed Nancy. "Any chance you'd be willing to do some readings for us?" So now, in addition to doing an abbreviated performance of her own material, she was being asked to read 35 excerpts from the stories of women in the Project. These excerpts ranged from a paragraph or two, to a full page, each featuring the woman's thoughts and feelings about first experiences and realizing that she was a lesbian. Nancy asked if we wanted her readings to be dramatic, or just read. She was concerned about the length, and offered to simply read them quickly, but we encouraged her to read them in the way she felt appropriate. Often struggling to keep her composure, Nancy proceeded to perform... not just read. You felt as if you were listening to the woman herself telling her story, not someone reading out loud. Nancy did an incredible job and then thanked us, and all the women whose excerpts she'd read, for the privilege!



Now, over on the left, you'll see Edie Daly and Susan Beckwith. These two women worked miracles! Edie had a little experience with sound equipment and when she heard none of us really knew what we were doing, offered not just to help, but to take over the sound, and any other staging needs. Susan heard about our event and wanted to attend, but thinking herself too young, and too broke, offered to help in anyway she could. She knew about computers and digital projectors, but nothing about sound and lighting. We said, "come on," and teamed her up with Edie.

Friday morning, by 9 am, we needed a mic for Lillian, another for the audience, two projector screens, power to a laptop and digital projector for Lillian's slides, and power for another set up with a digital projector, laptop and steno machine for the closed captioning. Looking ahead to later in the morning, the area also had to be ready to switch to a panel setup and to get us connected thru Skype with a panelist in San Francisco who couldn't travel to the event. That meant routing sound from the laptop into the sound system and the reverse as well. Thanks to Edie and Susan, we were good to go... until a nearby auto accident took out power to the whole hotel!



Within seconds, women in the room waiting to hear Lillian had out flashlights and lit up the area with their cell phones and such. Emergency lighting kicked in, but full power wasn't expected back on for several hours. The hotel sent a crew to start stringing extension cords from other areas being powered by their backup generator, and Edie, Susan, Mary, Margaret, and Susan P. (our CART provider) all regrouped, thought through how to adjust, and made it happen. All the while, everyone was patient, pitched in where they could, and stayed in good humor. What a testament to the power of the "We can do it. Yes we can." attitude of this group of old lesbians.

Excerpts From Lillian Faderman's Keynote Presentation

“Like the women that you’re going to be talking about for the rest of this conference, the women that I want to talk about were committed to two things. They were committed to each other and they were committed to women, to women in general. What the lesbians of the 1970s and ‘80s and ‘90s wanted to do was to create a women’s culture. And what these earlier lesbians – and I’m going to use the term “lesbians” as shorthand for them – what they wanted to do was to create a place for women that women had been denied in the world. So they fought for women to have the vote. They fought for women to have the right to go to college. They fought for women to be allowed into the professions. And they did that, generally, as couples, as long-term domestic couples.”

“This slide is Anna Howard Shaw and Lucy Anthony. Anna Shaw made her home from 1889 until her death in 1919 with Lucy Anthony. Lucy was a suffragist and she played a role in the movement by serving as a booking agent for suffrage speakers all over the country, but she wasn’t very much of a public figure. Her main interest was making Anna Howard Shaw’s work for women’s suffrage possible by giving Anna a home to come back to in between her huge lecture schedule on behalf of the cause that was so dear to both of them.



I think, as the slide shows, it was a bit of an early 20th century – late 19th-early 20th century butch-fem relationship. What Anna’s doing, of course, is serious intellectual work, reading a newspaper. And Lucy is – I think she’s embroidering there, but she’s really looking at Anna very lovingly. Lucy kept the home fires burning. And, of course, Anna couldn’t do her work without Lucy. There were very few husbands of the day that would have been willing to do for a wife what Lucy did for Anna.”

“This is Susan B. Anthony seated and the other woman is Emily Gross. Susan B. Anthony was, of course, you know, the driving force of the suffrage movement for 50 years. She really earned the right to have the 19th century -- the 19th Amendment -- called the Susan B. Anthony Amendment. And, as I said, she was the aunt of Lucy Anthony, Anna Howard Shaw’s partner. She acknowledged their relationship at one point in a very poignant letter to Lucy and Anna. She said, “I wish I had a relationship like the two of you have.” And she did have such relationships from time to time, as I’ll talk about. But Susan B. Anthony’s detractors called her “a grim old gal with a manly air.” And, of course, that was a code word for a sexual invert. But the women absolutely loved her and some she loved back in a very intimate way.”



Focusing in a New Way

Don't you love it when a plan comes together? Even with the huge logistic challenge of making it happen, the discussion groups worked... not just worked, but garnered tons of positive feedback and enthusiasm.

In keeping with efforts to make the OLOHP event as participatory as possible, we offered what we called Focused Discussion Groups. Small groups, ideally of ten or less, gathered and shared their thoughts and experiences on a very specific topic. Discussions were recorded and the transcripts will be added to the OLOHP archive at Smith College. We had some starter topics ready to go, then solicited suggestions from the group. The result was fascinating.



Examples of focused topics:

No (Wo)man is an Island: Who or what, helped you understand and accept your lesbian nature?

To Come Out, or Not: Do we all need to come out in all aspects of our lives, or not?

Girl Scouting: Share how Girl Scouting played an important role in your personal growth.

Coming Out of A Traditional Marriage: Share your experiences of coming out of marriage to a man.

Key to making this important element of the programming work was Deirdre Knowles, who helped develop the concept and guidelines for all those involved, and managed the logistics of getting everyone signed up and assigned to a space in which to meet.

Here are a few examples of the feedback:

I heard my own story told time and again by others. We all come from such different areas and cultures, yet we have so much in common.

I'd love to see these opportunities repeated in other venues, giving more women the chance to share ideas and stories in this way.

The best part was that the discussions didn't seem finished when the time was up--only started!

So Much More Went Into Making The Celebration a Huge Success...



We can't begin to tell you how many people, and things, contributed to the success of the event, ranging from a beautiful location and great food, to a cadre of volunteers, a hugely successful silent auction, knowledgeable and generous panelists, music that fed our souls, our own personal bookstore set up by Bookwoman, facilitators for all the discussion groups, an elaborate display about the OLOHP, the loan of a sound system, supporters buying ads in the program book, a skilled CART provider putting our words up on a screen, volunteers running a hospitality suite, women who decorated our tables, a personal pickup/drop off for those who couldn't manage the shuttles, and so much more. What a village!

Two Pieces of Poster Board, \$4.29. Comb Binding for the Program Books, \$17.55. Badges & Lanyards, \$57. A Weekend Celebrating Our Lesbian Legacies... Priceless.

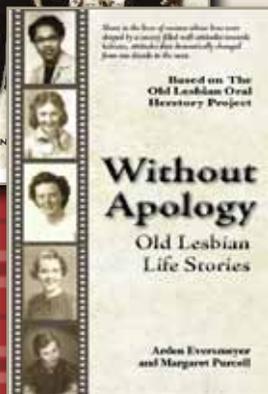
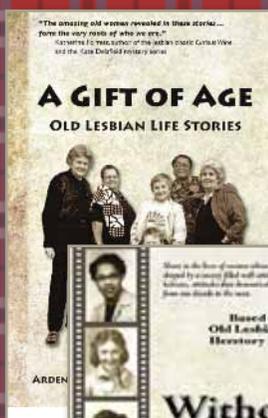
Too often, as the planners of a symposium like ours, you're so busy throughout the event that you feel as if you didn't even attend. We'll all readily admit to having been just plain worn out when it was over, but we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. It was a wonderful celebration, recognizing and honoring the determination, resilience and ingenuity of lesbians, not just of the OLOHP era, but those who had earlier paved the way as well.

We know it sounds trite to repeat it, but we really couldn't have done it without the help of dozens of women volunteering their time, talents and even financial support. One of the most gratifying elements of the weekend was the panel *The OLOHP: Where We Go From Here*. We'd made available, all weekend, an extensive display about the Project, its chronological history as well as the myriad steps involved – maybe that motivated women, or we just had the right group of people together at the right time – whatever the reason, the panel provided all sorts of useful feedback, brought out some important questions, and ideas were popping up as fast as we could take notes.

Occasionally, we talk about whether or not the Project has run its course, but the Celebration made it clear: It's not done yet, and the Project itself is part of the legacy of all the wonderful women involved.

Charlotte Avery and Arden Eversmeyer

Margaret Purcell and Mary Henry



How can you be involved in the OLOHP?

Lesbians 70 years of age and older can tell their own story. Contact us.

If you don't "qualify", encourage older lesbian friends to contact us.

Buy our books. *

Donate a copy of our book to your local library.

Make a tax-deductible donation to support the Project.**

Send us a note of encouragement!

* *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories* and *Without Apology: Old Lesbian Life Stories* can currently be ordered at www.alibris.com

** Tax-deductible donations can be made to The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project either by mailing a check (address on page 1) or going to our website and using the PayPal/Donate Now button.

A special thanks to OLOC, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, www.oloc.org, for their ongoing support.