

The OLOHP Insider

May 2014

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 23



Grandmothers & Grandchildren!

Arden's Musings

I know you have heard about the Domino Effect. That is what appears to be happening to me this year. In the last issue of *The Insider*, I mentioned that Diane Ste. Marie in Seattle submitted my name to be considered for inclusion in the National Women's History Project. She drew in some of the Washington gang to collaborate, and the end result was my being one of twelve honorees for this year. Next came a spin-off of that honor... since I was going to be in Washington, DC, would I speak at the monthly employee program at the Department of Energy (DOE)? Quite the honors and a whirlwind 48 hours.

Then, as if my head wasn't already spinning, I was asked if I'd allow my name to be put into consideration for an event being done by the FDIC... yes, that FDIC, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. They observe every June as Pride Month and, lo and behold, I was selected. So in early June, I'm Washington, DC bound once again.

As many of you could testify, I can talk ad-nauseum about the Oral Herstory Project! But this is a speech of 30 to 40 minutes. After worrying over it, I've decided to do what the Project does in its interviews. I'll tell them my story – not my OLOHP story, but my life

story. We make a point to explain to women who are being interviewed for the Project that we believe to fully understand the lives of lesbians of my era, it is important to know where we came from and the path we took to where we are now. It's not just about where we are now, but how we got here. So I plan to talk quite a bit about my life. But along with my own story, I will share about some of the other women in the Project.

I'd like to leave my FDIC audience with a better sense of what my life, and the lives of other OLOHP women, was like as young lesbians, and what it's like now, as we live our lives as old lesbians. Our culture has changed so quickly and come so far. It's important not to forget what it was like not all that long ago. As you'll see on the next page, us old lesbians aren't done yet... we have played, and are playing, a big part in changing our world for the better.

2014 has been an amazing year for me. Without the support of all of you, and the generosity and trust put in me by all the remarkable women who have shared their life stories, none of it would have happened. My heartfelt thanks to all of you for so enriching my life.

Arden

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Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older

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OLOHP Old Lesbians Making a Difference

Many of the women who have shared their stories with the OLOHP have made large and small efforts that have improved the quality of life for other lesbians, young and old, as well as for everyone else in our society. Some have gone about this quietly, and for some it's in their past. But not everyone. Case in point: Lennie Gerber and Pearl Berlin, pictured on the right as their story was recently featured on the Lawrence O'Donnell show, *The Last Word*, on MSNBC. Lennie and Pearl shared their stories with Arden in 2011. With support from the ACLU, Lennie and Pearl



are seeking full recognition of their rights as citizens of North Carolina. They have been together more than 47 years and were legally wed in Maine. You can watch the video of this interview by going to <http://tinyurl.com/mhmf5gy>.

Another woman from the Project, Jinx Beers, is also getting a bit of attention lately. In a public service announcement done by Union Bank in her home state, California, Jinx is being acknowledged for work towards achieving equal rights. Jinx has been an activist for decades, and founded the Los Angeles-based *Lesbian News*. The LN is North America's longest running lesbian publication, serving as the foremost voice for lesbians of all ages. The public service ad can be viewed at <http://tinyurl.com/pfqv2dz>.

Making a Difference in Less Visible Ways, As Well

The women with stories in our collections are many things... quiet, well-behaved old ladies, they're not! In interview after interview we learn about the myriad of ways these lesbians continue to work to improve not just their own lives, but everyone else's.

If it doesn't come up organically during an interview, we try to ask, "Have you ever been, or are you now, an activist? And if so, for what causes?" The breadth of replies is amazing. We'll share a few examples.

Gloria S., now 78, shared not just about past efforts, but her ongoing work with various peace and justice and LGBT efforts. Edie D., who is 77, has devoted much of her life to peace efforts, fighting for equal rights for LGBT people, and working with women in the prison system. In addition to many of those same causes, 70 year old Ruth D., who serves on the OLOC Steering Committee, works with several Democratic

groups, and also works with a group whose focus is making sure minority women, many undocumented workers, in her area have access to mammograms.

Kathy P., 71, continues to shepherd a coming out group to help women of all ages, but specifically those who are coming out late in life, deal with the issues they have to face. She's done this now for more than 15 years. 74 year old JoAnn F. spends much of her time working toward improving the services for people with various disabilities. Then there is Ellie S. At 97 years old, she still works as a volunteer drug and alcohol counselor!

We could go on, and on. These women are not the exception – they are the rule. Then there are those who quietly work behind the scenes. But, don't get us started or we'll need to add an extra page or two to this issue of *The Insider*.

Passings

We were sorry to hear that two of our friends, women who had shared their stories, recently died.



Age 18 in 1948



Age 68 in 1998

Fran Eaton

*Born 1930 in Dallas, Texas
Died 2014 in Houston, Texas
Interviewed in 2000*

I knew I was different and I knew I didn't want to get married and I didn't want to have children... and I wasn't going to "multiply and replenish the earth," like the Mormons say. I thought I'd rather live alone than live that way. I did go with a guy for a while and I just decided that was not my life.

All our friends were heterosexual and we didn't come out of the closet. Small towns, which we like, and our professions, didn't make it easy to be out. I see a few other lesbians in the grocery store and around, but they don't really want to give you eye contact. It's pretty hard. I have no doubt if I were out here, there would be repercussions. It's not safe. We've always, almost always, lived in small towns.

Jane Doe (anonymous)

*Born 1934
Died 2014
Interviewed in 2007*

Our Cadre of Interviewers and Transcribers Is Growing... and Working Hard

We started out thinking this would be a relatively slow year for the Project and that was okay with us. We needed some time to regroup after devoting so much time to our Legacies Conference last fall, some time to get caught up with all the tasks and transcriptions we'd set aside. The good news is we are getting caught up thanks to a couple of new transcribers diligently working their way through the backlog. But caught up is a relative term.

After a very slow January with only two interviews being done, and an even slower February, suddenly someone opened the flood gates. Since then, fourteen more were gathered and at least six more are set up to happen between now and mid-summer. If we can keep up the pace, we're looking at a possible all-time record for interviews conducted in



a calendar year. With an OLOC Gathering coming up in Oakland in late July, there is a chance we'll connect with quite a few more women.

While other interviewers are busily working on support documents and such for the interviews they've done, two honorable mentions are deserved for the recent surge in interviewers. First to Sherry Fulton who had already done some work in her home area this year, then traveled on our behalf and did six more interviews. The other kudo goes to the Puget Sound OLOC women lead by Gloria Stanchich. They've taken the OLOHP cause on as part of their mission and they've done five so far this year.

Lest you think we're whining that we have too many interviews, we'll be clear:
More, More, We Want More!

An excerpt from one of the 300 plus life stories the OLOHP has gathered.

- J: From the time I was really young, I didn't want to be married, didn't want to have kids. I wanted to go to college. I wanted to be a teacher. So I had a lot of so-called uppity ideas. My momma, she was pretty unhappy because I didn't want to be a secretary, I didn't want to take typing.
- I: Rebellious child.
- J: One of the things that happened when I was a junior in high school, was I had taken algebra for juniors and got straight As in it. Junior year was geometry year in our school and I wanted to take geometry in the worst way. That was the period the girls took typing and the new class advisor went to the Superintendent on my behalf to try to get me into the geometry class. Girls had never been in geometry and they wouldn't approve of me going in to take geometry. That was a big deal for me because I really wanted to take it. I had plans to go to school in my head, and I thought it would be good to have that kind of class. When I didn't get to take it, I was stuck in the typing class.
- Then when I was a senior I had to take a math proficiency test and I got the highest score in the class. It was just like a little feather in my cap because they wouldn't let me take geometry and the boys had had trigonometry and I got a higher score.
- [When I left home,] I stayed with this family in a little apartment over the cafe. I did meet the man that I married that first summer but it was toward the end of the summer. I started dating him some but I certainly wasn't falling in love with him. Not at that time, at least. I was still kind of carrying the torch for the boy in high school and pretty confused.
- It's very interesting in retrospect because my girlfriend's mother cautioned me before I started college to not get involved with lesbians. And she never said anything to her own daughter.
- I: She must have sensed something.
- J: I don't know what it could have been, but anyway.
- I: So you were alerted to lesbians, right?
- J: Yes. And the danger of lesbians. So of course, what happened to me when I go to college?
- I: You looked for the lesbians!

Joyce Pierson

*born in Oregon in 1933
interviewed at age 75*



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.