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#### OUT in the Mountains (ISSN 1081-5582)

is published on the last Wednesday of each month by Mountain Pride Media, Inc. It is printed by BD Press, Fairfax VT. The paper maintains offices at 39 Bridge Street in Richmond, Vermont. The bulk mail subscription rate is \$29 per year within the USA.

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www.mountainpridemediaweb.org is updated to include the current issue of OITM, generally by the 10th of each month, in our online archive. OITM is available in alternative formats upon request. OITM is printed on recycled newsprint containing 30% post-consumer and using 100% soy-based inks.

## editorial

# Reclaiming Herstory

If you were born before 1970, chances are the name Kitty Genovese rings a bell, however faintly. Her name became an emblem of urban indifference and prompted soul-searching on a national scale. Solemn sermons on the good Samaritan were preached; sociological studies were done; those who examined their consciences asked whether they would have done differently.

In 1964, Kitty Genovese was a 28-year-old bar manager in New York. On March 13, she was almost home — parked her car, walked toward her apartment building — when she saw a man approaching quickly. She walked faster, but he caught her from behind and stabbed her twice. She cried out for help. One man raised his window and yelled at her attacker. He moved away, but came back when the light went out in that window. She dragged herself around the back of the building, looking for an unlocked door. He stalked her like a wounded animal, stabbed her several more times, then raped her as she lay dying in a doorway. He took \$49 from her wallet and drove away.

The police investigation revealed that 38 people saw or heard the attack on Kitty Genovese. Not one called the police or attempted to intervene. Finally one neighbor called the police, but not until the attacker left.

Last month, a few mainstream national media outlets — and at least one Vermont paper — filled in a piece of the history missing for 40 years: Kitty Genovese was a lesbian.

Her lover in 1964, Mary Ann Zielonko, broke a 40-year silence to come out. She and Rebecca Jones, her current partner, live in Vermont.

Hearing that Genovese was a lesbian has shaken up my psyche. Genovese's name was always a cautionary tale — about being a woman alone in the city at night, about the need to care and take action in the face of assault. But now it's also somehow more about me as a lesbian, about our denied and undiscovered herstory, about the dangers we faced then — and now.

In 1964, it was not okay to be

queer. The only place to go to hold your lover's hand in semi-public was a bar. Mary Ann remembers the Swing Rendezvous on MacDougal St. and the Seven Steps on Houston. Police raids and being beaten up for wearing butch or femme drag were common events.

Until now we've never had the opportunity to ask whether the neighbors' indifference might have had an element of homophobia (not that the word existed then). Kitty and Mary Ann lived together in the apartment Kitty was so desperately trying to reach that March night. Mary Ann says some of the neighbors suspected they were lesbians, because they were always together. But we didn't look gay, whatever that means. Mary Ann got home from her own shift tending bar and went to sleep — until the police knocked at her door at 4 a.m. and drove her from the tree-lined streets of their Kew Gardens, Queens, neighborhood where Kitty died, to the hospital morgue to identify Kitty's body.

It was a time of such fear that none of Mary Ann's lesbian or gay friends would step forward to be with her in the months following Kitty's murder. They might have thought Mary Ann was too in the public eye, too big a target of police attention, especially during the trial. They turned away, Mary Ann remembers.

Throughout the week after the news report, a phrase kept insinuating itself in my mind: Kitty Genovese was our lesbian Matthew Shepard. Her murder had that kind of impact at the time, and reverberations for long afterward. Yeah, she was, says Mary Ann Zielonko when I relate my reaction, but it wasn't a hate crime. Or at least not because of her sexual orientation.

Winston Moseley, the man who murdered Genovese, apparently picked her at random, as a woman alone, not because he knew she was a lesbian.

But the end result — of Moseley's determination to murder and rape a woman, of the 38 witnessing neighbors' indifference — is the same. A woman of potential — who, it is reported, wanted to open a restaurant — a beloved daughter,

sister, and lover, died alone simply because she was a woman and her neighbors were too tired or too frightened or too uninvolved to take action.

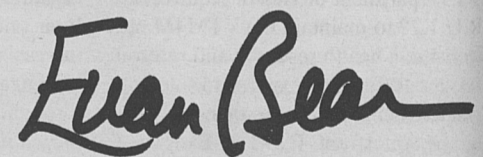
Winston Moseley was sentenced to death, later commuted to life in prison. He is a 69-year-old veteran of the Attica prison uprising, now an inmate at a maximum-security prison in upstate New York.

And Mary Ann Zielonko, whose memories include looking at the dead face of her lover Kitty and waking up screaming for a year after the murder, has a life here in Vermont. I was famous for a moment in time. This is the first time I've talked about it — in 40 years! I can't let her memory die. I've suffered through the last few days [of publicity over the anniversary of the assault] but I also feel acknowledged.

For the first time in 40 years, a member of the Genovese family has acknowledged Mary Ann's existence. She spoke to Kitty's brother Bill, an ex-Marine who lost both legs in Vietnam three years to the day after Kitty died. He has pictures of Kitty that I would love to see, she says. She dreams of a memorial to the lover she knew too briefly. I was 23 and we were happy.

Thank you, Mary Ann, for giving us one more piece of our herstory, and for being brave enough to come out about a painful part of the past.

We believe in our hearts that the community born of the Stonewall Rebellion still exists. We're certain Mary Ann and Rebecca have found a true community here, one that does not turn away from friends' tragedies. And no amount of assimilation can take that away. ▼



Euan Bear  
Editor