

Profile

Golden Threads: Reaching Out To Lesbians Over 50

by Lee Russell

No one can explain the origins of *Golden Threads* better than Christine Burton. After pouring her heart and soul into a business for eight years, she realized she was lonely. "In a lesbian/gay newspaper in a distant city I found an ad that promised to help lesbians make contact with lesbians. I mailed a self-description, as requested, enclosing a check to cover the required fee. Within a week my check and self-description were returned with an explanation: 'unless you made a mistake in your birth year, you are over fifty and we cannot help you. Women are not looking for someone as old as you.'

"I had made no mistake. I was 74 and nobody wanted me. They didn't even want to be friends. They didn't want to know anything about me. Silently, within myself, I shouted: 'Someday I'll start a contact service for lesbians over 50.'"

And so she did. The motto of *Golden Threads* is "You're never too old to love and be loved." In April 1985 Burton mailed the first issue, eight pages long, to 28 women. *Golden Threads* has grown steadily since its inception. The most recent issue of the newspaper was 34 pages long, contained the self-descriptions of 125 women, and was mailed to approximately 275 women in the U.S., Canada, and several other countries. (Over the five years of its existence, a total of about 1,000 women have belonged.) In addition to the self-descriptions, *Golden Threads* includes book reviews, editorials, a resource list, poetry and drawings.

Golden Threads works like this. A woman signs up to become a member for six months, or two issues of the quarterly publication, although she can renew as

often as she likes. She submits a self-description, which is published under a code number. A member writes the code number on the outside of the envelope and mails it to *Golden Threads*. There, the code number is erased, the correct name and address are written in, and the letter is sent on its way.

The typical *Golden Threader* is in her 50s or 60s, although older and younger women belong too. Currently, a handful of members are in their 80s, and Burton is still hoping for a member in her 90s. Most *Golden Threaders* are professionals or retired professionals, and most of them are closeted. Burton feels that being closeted is the greatest problem facing older lesbians.

Fortunately for these women, *Golden Threads* really works. *Golden Threaders* exchange letters, telephone calls, communicate by tape, and eventually many of them become friends and/or lovers. According to Burton, a woman "joined from a nursing home once. She said she was just so lonely in the nursing home, she wanted to be able to write letters. She didn't hope to ever be able to meet anybody, but if she just had penpals, that would be great."

Golden Threads is the only organization for older lesbians that's just for fun. Every year in June, Burton organizes a celebration of *Golden Threaders* in Provincetown. She is expecting 150 women this year. Her goal is to have every woman leave prouder of being a lesbian than she was before. The Celebration consists of rap sessions, a banquet, entertainment, and a dance with a lesbian DJ who plays the oldies. The Fifth Annual *Golden Threads* Celebration will take place on the weekend of June 28-30. (This year's entertainer? None other than Vermont's own Gal Perry. See story on p.1.) Membership is not re-

quired for attendance; lesbians of any age are welcome.

The extensive network operates out of what used to be a guest room in Christine Burton's home in Burlington. Aside from a paid assistant who works two days a week, Burton, now 85, does everything herself. In addition to doing all the writing, she takes care of the advertising and corresponds with many of the members.

Golden Threads is clearly a labor of love. Burton's own labor is unpaid, and although in most years *Golden Threads* does cover its expenses, she makes no money from it.

Burton, now 85, radiates energy, good humor and a keen interest in all this world contains. She is an ardent feminist, and has been out all her life. ("I'm not smart enough to be in the closet. I couldn't remember what I'd said to whom.") Because of *Golden Threads* she has friends everywhere she goes.

She retired nine years ago so that she could devote herself to writing. After retirement she studied fiction writing at Harvard for two years. She is currently working on her memoirs, and has a book on the origins and effects of patriarchy in the planning stages. Devoted as she is to *Golden Threads*, she sometimes wishes it took less time, so that she could spend more time on her writing. She moved to Burlington from the Boston area two years ago to be closer to her partner, who lives in Canada. And yes, they met through *Golden Threads*.

If you are interested in learning more about *Golden Threads*, you can write to P.O. Box 3177, Burlington, VT 05401. Send a self-addressed stamped envelope. Sample copies, mailed discreetly, are available for \$5.00.

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