

Living the Lesbian Activist Life: The OITM Interview with Peggy Luhrs and Oak Logalbo



Photo by Tom Aloisi
Partners in activism (and love) Peggy Luhrs and Oak Logalbo enjoy a quiet moment at home.

by Tom Aloisi

BURLINGTON -- Oak Logalbo and Peggy Luhrs have been among the leaders in the Vermont feminist and l/g/b movement for many years. They live in a small lavender-trimmed house in the Old North End of Burlington. OITM visited them at home this past winter for a discussion about their personal pasts and the current state of activism in Vermont.

OITM: How did you two meet?

Oak: We met at a woman's dance in Plainfield in 1982. I was on a political slide tour of Vermont. Peggy was there on a date with my first lover in Vermont.

Peggy: We knew each other for several years before coming lovers. We became lovers in 1986, almost ten years ago. We've lived here almost nine years. We actually got together during the whole Chernobyl thing.

OITM: Was that significant?

Oak: It is *very* significant. Chernobyl was exploding, and it didn't seem to be stopping. I was thinking it was the end of the world, and I really wanted to talk to someone, and that's where Peg came in. It was May eve, Beltane, an important pagan holiday. It's a day of passion. I felt on May Day it was time for change.

Peggy: She was at the bar putting out vibes for me and I was walking down the street thinking, "I have to talk to someone, maybe I'll go into Pearls." I usually don't go into Pearls after work; it wasn't something I normally did. I thought I wouldn't find anyone to talk to, but somehow I was drawn there.

OITM: Have you both always been politically active?

Oak: We were both active in high school. I refused to participate in the air raid drills in my school. I thought it was absurd to go into hallways! It was New York! We'd all be incinerated anyway! We also did some school boycotts because of de facto segregation in the NYC school system.

Peggy: I did a lunch room action. I just told everyone not to go back to class.

OITM: What are you both doing now for work?

Oak: I work at Channel 17, local community television. I started as a Field Producer four or five years ago, and then started doing some studio work as well.

Peggy: I'm the Project Director at the Old North End/Community Technology Center. I just started, after ten years at the Burlington Women's Council.

OITM: Why did you leave the Women's Council?

Peggy: Mostly, I needed new challenges, and I wanted to learn some new things. I'll always be involved in the Women's Council. It's still a major issue for me.

OITM: Oak, this is a question for you. Peggy has been described by some as being an institution. What's it like living with an institution?

Oak: (laughs) I don't think of her as an institution. First of all Peggy is too much of a radical and an anarchist to be that, and it seems like much too staid a word to describe her. I find her political activity and analysis really stimulating. It's good for my awareness!

OITM: Peggy, your name comes up often in the Barbara Snelling incident...

Peggy: (laughs) My involvement was really minimal. I voiced my feeling that I thought that no particular person should or should not come to gay pride. I feel that gay pride is not about getting the top politician. The reason I think that politicians should ever be at gay pride is if they put themselves out there on lesbian and gay right issues.

OITM: So you would have been supportive of Dean speaking?

Peg: I'm not thrilled with Howard Dean, but at least he has been consistently out there on our issues. Snelling never did that. She may not be bad about gay rights, but she never put herself out there. Howard has been consistently out there, along with Peter Clavelle, Ed Flanagan, and the Republican woman a few years ago...

Oak: Vi Luginbuhl.

Peg: Right! She put herself out there to get the gay rights bill passed. People like that should be there. That's when the politicians should be there. We do not need to get approval from society by having the highest-ranking politician there.

OITM: Please describe, in three words, the current state of the women's community in Vermont.

Peggy (pauses) "Tremendous latent power under-utilized." Well, that's four words! I think the power is there; it's tremendous! Everyone who did work in the 70's is still out there; they have more skills, but they are not coming together. People have gone into careers, and are exploring different things. I still think there is a strong need for a women's movement that is very inclusive of lesbians, as well as a strong l/g/b movement. I think we have gotten off the track. Post-modernism is wrong that we don't need unifying politics!

Oak: My three words are "strong, quiet, and unfocused." There are very good women in the community, but they are not speaking out. We are not focusing ourselves to respond to issues with a new vision.

OITM: So the recent political climate hasn't really mobilized people?

Peggy: It's mobilized low-income women, and that's been excellent. I know a ton of lesbians that are doing things in their own ways, but not together.

Oak: I think a lot of women are doing it (activism) in their work now [after saying] to hell with politics.

Peggy: We want to have an organizational summit of people working on women's issues. There are so many organizations out there, but we need to come together to fight those working against us. Also there is a drying-up of public space. There is so much less life on the street than there was only 15 years ago.

Oak: This is why I work at Channel 17, promoting public access to reach people inside their homes. Everyone is working more than ever, and many people are getting older and staying home. Often, people will go to meetings to meet other lesbians for dating. People might pull back if they're in a relationship.

OITM: Well, you two started dating at Pearls! I think that's a beautiful irony for two lesbian activists!

Peg: But we were drawn together by the Chernobyl explosion. We were active in anti-nuclear activities in the early 80's, and that's what pulled us together.

OITM: What would you consider to be a major turning point in your lives?

Peg: Coming out, definitely!

I was married, and I have a 26-year-old son who will be living here for the summer, which I am very happy about. My family was moving to Vermont and doing the whole back-to-nature thing. We built a house in Charlotte that I designed myself. We used salvaged materials that we got by tearing down the old Marble Island resort. We lived with a bunch of other people, it was almost like a commune. I started going to women's liberation meetings. As soon as I heard about lesbians I knew that lesbianism had been there [in me] for a long time. I wondered why [no one] told me about this before. I was about 26 at the time.

Oak: My turning point was also coming out. I came out thirty years ago, in March 1966. Within a couple of months of coming out, I got kicked out of my house by my father because I was spending time with "that girl." By the time summer rolled around I was living in the streets. In 1969 I got involved more with politics in New York City for a while, and then hooked up with a theater troupe.

Peg: She did the complete Woodstock thing!

Oak: Yeah! I hitchhiked up there, met a theater troupe and went with them in a converted school bus back to California. We didn't perform at Woodstock, we mainly fed people. (laughs) It was called the "Earthlight Theater Troupe."

OITM: Where do you think the Vermont g/l/b community will be in twenty years?

Oak: Well, I will be pretty old... I may be living in some warm place. The Greek Isles! I hope the community will keep going forward!

Peggy: I'd like to think it keeps going forward. It's clear that we will be much more diverse as new groups in our community gain strength. It's clear that just being gay won't cut it anymore as a single movement; people will separate themselves along other things like class, and style.

Oak: As Vermont becomes more diverse, the gay community will too, among race and class, and politically.

Hopefully there will still be unity in our community. I certainly hope people can be more out, especially in rural areas. Also there will be a lot more movies about us, which will be important for young people.

OITM: Any predictions for the November elections?

Peggy: I think Clinton will do it.

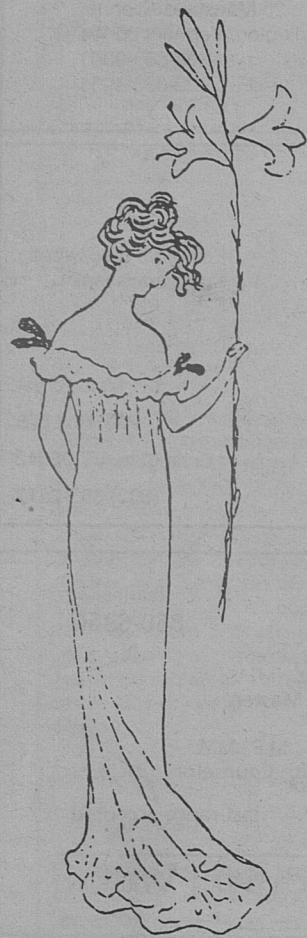
Oak: Anything but Dole! (makes snoring noises) I think Dole is their best shot, and no one really knows where he stands.

Peggy: I don't think Sweetser will beat Sanders, but she will give him a run for his money. Nationally, I think the liberal candidates will do much better than last time. A lot of the Republican victory in 1994 was based on very low voter turn-out, which is always higher during a presidential election. Regardless of who wins, I don't think anything [will] change until people stop buying the idea that there's no money out there. Until that time, the rich can run us all around! The corporations are having record profits! In the 50's, corporations paid 27% of taxes, and now they pay only 7%. The money is out there!

OITM: Any final comments?

Peg: To the gay Republicans out there: If you really think Barbara Snelling did more to advance gay rights in this city than I did over the past 25 years... where are you coming from? And getting back to the "twenty years" question, I hope in twenty years we will have had a real lesbian, gay bi, transgendered sexual revolution, since we were not part of what happened in the 60's!

Oak: As I reflect back on my thirty years of being a lesbian, I think that we have come a really long way! In terms of all this in-fighting the community, it's been going on for a loooong time. In 1970 we had a lot of in-fighting too, and we will always have it with us. It goes with the territory! ▼



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