

Old Lesbians Organizing For Change (OLOC)

BY JOY D. GRIFFITH

"When these changes are accomplished, all facets of society will benefit from the inclusion of currently marginalized people and from decreased negativity associated with a process every human must endure." (*OITM's "Lesbians Challenging Barriers"* April 1998 p. 24)

A small group of old lesbians recognized their invisibility and decided to organize and give voice to their grievances and gain empowerment. In April 1987, in Los Angeles 160 lesbians age 60 gathered to discuss the American society's ageist attitude. This meeting was followed by a conference in San Francisco resulting in representative groups meeting in Santa Barbara and San Diego thereby developing a network system to begin the work of eradicating ageism in our lesbian and feminist communities as well as society at large. Other issues included on the agenda affecting old lesbians are racism, sexism, poverty as well as health. They chose to use the phrase "old" lesbians in order to habitualize it back into its original meaning of "a biological stage of life" from our society's present day category of derogation.

By 1991, OLOC met in Albuquerque, NM with representation from Oregon, Texas, Arizona, Ohio, Illinois as well as New Mexico and Northern and Southern California. At this time, they had officers, a newsletter, and a Consciousness Raising packet. Shevy Healey, writer and supporter, gave a final response concerning the use of "old". "I have almost never used the term "old woman" or "old lesbian" without getting some response; a wince, a titter, a giggle, heavy silence or an argument. "Why should you put it that way? Isn't 'older' a better way to say it? To be an old woman means to be sexless, mindless, useless, invisible and powerless. We are taught that old age is tolerable only to the extent that it mimics youth. The message is reinforced for us over and over again. Young lesbians tend to look through us, dismiss us, speak for us, look up to us as role models, stances serving to provide distance between us rather than friendship and comradeship."

OLOC no longer will collaborate in age oppression by accommodating to language that implies in any way that "old" means inferior, ugly or awful. (The next time you go to a card shop, place all the over-the-hill hag, wrinkled crone, and other derogatory ageist birthday cards behind the complimentary cards!) For to the degree that lesbians deny their own aging, they cripple their ability to live. And live they do: Sara Davis won eight gold medals in the swimming competition at the National Gay and Lesbian Olympics; Shevy Healey, published an article "Growing Up to Be Old..." in an Amsterdam anthology; and Kate Rosenblatt had her play "Death is a Family Affair" produced in Tucson, Arizona. By using "old" OLOC gives up the attempt to pass (age pass) thereby breaking silence and empowering each other.

By 1992, OLOC produced its first edition of *The Facilitator's Handbook: Confronting Ageism for Lesbians 60 and Over!* ...a "how to" guide on educating about ageism, using the format of Consciousness Raising. OLOC's networking had expanded across America and entered its northern neighbor, Canada. Local OLOC groups would use the form: "OLOC-Phoenix" and reports of activities and activism could be sent to the main OLOC hub. Many old lesbians living in states where homophobic laws are still on the books or where there are pe-

riodic outbursts of homophobia could call itself Old Women Organizing for Change. Its name would then be of the form: "OWOC-Midland".

By 1993, OLOC was finally incorporated as a 501c3 entity with grants to pay a staff and an invitation to the NGLTF in Washington, DC to define their agenda. Old lesbians are different in who they are not, as well as in who they are. They are not docile and do not accept the orthodoxies that women are here to serve and rely upon men. They are specifically non-conformist having broken from the mold of main stream heterosexual relationships, thereby developing emotional, sexual and political commitments to women. They do not identify themselves as the "grandmothers" of the world for they have a broader vision of their lives. They have already paid a large price for being a woman and a lesbian and place high value on their independence and self-reliance. Past oppressions have taught them to be resourceful and to develop special survival strategies and courage has given them strength to grow and to love.

Not only is our society rooted with racism and sexism, but every level of the social and political structure nourishes ageism and heterosexism impacting "us" in terrible ways. Therefore, old lesbians expect to be full participants in everything that concerns them. They will be allies inside and outside the professions...to be accepted and acknowledged. Where there is research to be conducted or conferences and seminars held, when social service programs are structured, old lesbians will be included in the planning and design of such, not just as tokens or volunteers, but as fully paid staff. "Old lesbians are the only experts available on aging." For further information regarding the Vermont OLOC Chapter, phone: Joy, 848-7037 or Al, 863-4822

The Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force brings the topic of volunteering to this issue. Last months column ended with, "There is a lot of work to do to secure civil rights for all Vermonters. And there is no limit to the ways in which interested and energetic folks can join our efforts." Who is doing the work now? Why are they so committed? What are the needs and ways for others to join the effort? These are the questions to be addressed in this column.

Around the state we have a few regional coordinators. In the Windham County area Bari Shamas facilitates a growing an active group. Beth Robinson and Susan Murray, our co-founders, are working with folks in the Addison area. They also are working with Wendy Beininger who has recently revived organizing in the Chittenden area. In Bennington County, Sandi Cote and Bobbi Whitacre have begun forming an active group by organizing public forums. Efforts to get folks motivated and creative in: Franklin, Rutland, Washington and Windsor counties, have begun. Bari Shamas coordinates our various regional contacts around the state.

All these folks, and the many others working with them, know the importance for all gays and lesbian to have equal recognition under the law. At a recent discussion at the Unitarian Universalists Church of the Upper Valley, another VFMTF member, Lisa Nash, spoke of the constant erasure by society when our families are not recognized. There is no place or way for committed gay and lesbian couples to fill out simple registrations or information forms and be visible.

That invisibility is both a hurtful and an unnecessary burden which we bear. John Calvi is a longtime out spoken activist in the need of recognizing our families. He continues working towards the goal of civil marriage being available to same gender couples. When asked why, he said, "for justice and to work against a nasty rumor that gay people do not love each

Notes From the Freedom to Marry Task Force

by Bari Shamas

other."

There was an older woman at the UUCUV discussion. She shared that as a lesbian with a partner of over twenty years she has seen a lot of change. Twenty years ago their concerns were in keeping their jobs and protecting themselves from violence. From her perspective much has changed. (Which is true. In Vermont, laws have been enacted since the mid eighties, protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination in the workplace, in housing and against violence.) But, she added, she could now see that these welcome changes are not enough. The struggle for equal rights continues and marriage rights are the next logical step.

The Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force is committed to gaining marriage civil rights for all Vermonters. As one volunteer recently noted, "we encounter

a lot of folks who never thought about marriage between same sex partners, or whose initial instinct was to oppose our freedom to marry. It's been tremendously gratifying to watch their views evolve as they have come to understand how the state's discriminatory laws undermine valuable family relationships."

Our experience confirms that personal non-threatening contacts with our friends, neighbors, co-workers and extended families shifts their awareness to an understanding of how important it is to value and support all families. We are continuing our work in holding public forums, staffing information tables, hosting fund raisers and encouraging others to participate in this historic process of change. (See the calendar for a listing of where we will be in May and June).

To meet our goal we need show our commitment. We face a well funded and highly committed opposition to any advancement of civil rights for gays and lesbians or recognition of our valued place in society. They have "fire-in-the-belly" motivation for their cause. We have to match that. Working for equal rights is challenging and exciting work.

Without joining any organized effort anybody can participate in this effort by sharing thoughts, by coming out, and making space for dialog about what same gender civil marriage is all about.

If you are interested in working with the Task force there are many ways to be a part of VFMTF. We need to broaden our regional presence. Opportunities exist for

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