

# Bring Your Story To Life

stories from LGBTQ older adults



2018  
Tucson







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# The Kiss That Changed My Life

Robert Bell

I have been an LGBTQ activist for nearly 50 years— for 12 years here in Tucson and before that in Chicago....

And it all started with a kiss— but not the kind you think. Let me back up.

My father died in one of the last polio epidemics when I was two. Growing up in Boston, money was tight— we lived on welfare. But while money was tight, liquor flowed freely. I was a 16-year-old alcoholic whose only direction was downhill. I had also been in trouble with the police— being wanted in three states for a stolen car. With no money and terrible grades, college was no more than a pipe dream.

My best, maybe my only, option was the military, and of course, there was the draft. So from high school I went into the Army as a grunt and served from 1966 to 1969. Upon my discharge, I moved to Chicago and started school at the only junior college that accepted me— and I had applied at many. I was older than most of the students and felt totally disconnected. I was a Vietnam vet at a school where anti-war sentiment was widespread. I was quiet, didn't socialize, and had no friends. I just wanted to get my degree and move on with my life.

I also was beginning to understand that I had to con-



front this “gay” thing. It was 1972. Homosexuality was still listed as a disease by the American Psychiatric Association. As you know, there were no gay role models— all that anyone heard was negative. If I was gay, I was a “sissy” or a “faggot.” I would be shunned by my family and friends. I did not know any gay people. I bought into that negative stereotype.

I got up my courage to call the Chicago chapter of Mattachine Society, an early gay-lesbian organization. The guy I talked on the phone seemed OK. He and another Mattachine member agreed to meet me and talk. I was a wreck, thinking there was a good chance they both would be wearing make-up and women’s clothing and just wanted sex. None of that happened. It was a positive experience. They were “regular” guys who wanted to help others deal with their sexuality and coming out. My old stereotypes were somewhat debunked, but not so easily erased. I emotionally took a tentative step out of the closet.

And that brings me to the kiss.

I was attending an on-campus movie. I don’t recall whether I had to see it because of a class I was taking or not. I don’t even remember the name of the movie or what it was about. I do know it was a large, cavernous auditorium and it was filled with hundreds of students.

About half way through the film the two lead male actors looked at each other tentatively, but longingly. I had never seen anything like it, and I don’t think anyone else in the theater had either. As their lips slowly got clos-

er and closer to one another, their two faces filled this big screen. A murmur was building in the audience. Remember this was 1972! Their lips met. And the audience murmur escalated into “BOOS” as they kissed!

At that same, exact moment, something inside me shifted. It was like an out-of-body experience over which I had no control. It was as if they were booing at me, chiding me, diminishing me. My mouth opened seemingly involuntarily, and I loudly yelled, “YAY!”

The “boos” were suddenly drowned out as the auditorium filled with equal parts good-natured laughing and applause. I was dazed. Had I really done that? I just sat there stunned and bewildered as the movie continued.

But something in me had changed! I had begun to finally take ownership of who and what I was.

I realized I could stand up - even speak out, with pride, for myself as a gay man and for the larger gay community. I’ve never looked back.

And it all started with that wonderful kiss.



# Shameless

Lori Boston

The closet door cracked open with these words... “I can’t support your weakness.” Crushing words. Words uttered by my husband of 25 years in response to me entering into therapy to heal from years of unspeakable abuse that fostered a lifetime of living in shame. Those words from my husband proved to be an ending and a beginning.

The closet door flew open with my first oh, oh, oh, OH! moment when I was at a play written and performed by a local actor whom I admire. I felt comfortable with the queer audience and in sharing memories of childhood experiences with friends afterwards. Our chatter filled the air with mutual acknowledgements of “I used to dress in my mom’s clothes,” “I used to play cowboy,” and me... “I had a crush on my first grade teacher.” Then came the internal dialogue, “Wait, what, what the fuck?”

More memories. Wondering if and when I was going to grow boy parts so I could date girls. Playing football at the gun club with the boys and glancing at the sideline to see if any of the girls were watching me. My first grade teacher, Miss McKay, with her long shimmering hair and twinkling eyes to match. I would do anything for her, for her to notice me....

The “ah ha” bits and understandings kept flooding in.

Going to WNBA games and finding myself more interested in watching the lesbian couples than the game. Driving a Subaru. Quietly supporting a closeted coworker who let me see subtle signs of her orientation, and me fascinated. I didn't dare explore. The "stop me in my tracks moment" when I first heard Tracy Chapman's soulful voice on some late night talk show, running into the living room to find out who that was. I was mesmerized. Every cell in my body vibrated in a way that I have never felt before as I watched her perform in her torn jeans and drab olive t-shirt. I think I was in love and didn't know it. I'm sure she is in a relationship now and I don't stand a chance. Sigh.

Once the door was flung open, I put myself through a rigorous self-examination for the next several months. My husband was the first person I told, officially. We are friends now and support each other the best we can, without expectations. I came out to my graduate school classmates during a class. That was great because it was unplanned, so I didn't have time to talk myself out of it. Some classmates approached me afterward and came out as straight. I assured them they had my full support. My lesbian friends said, "It's about time!" and, "I get a toaster!" They knew, but lovingly let me find my way.

Coming out was life changing. I wanted to run up and down the street shouting, "I like girls! I'm a lesbian! Woohoo!" I thought every woman was a lesbian and they would all want to have sex with me! Well... after a few attempts at dating, I have decided that I want relationships that can develop in a slow cooker sort of way. I'm sure that

a relationship like that will happen one day. For now I am content with searching for single older women at college basketball games and holding on to hope.

There has been a lot more story since coming out, but it was the first time in my life I felt like I had a story.

The first time in my life I felt like me.

It was the first moment in my life where I felt no shame.



# Coming Out

Matthew Cokor

When I think of all the times I have come out to co-workers and friends, I can only remember the difficulty I had finding the right time and place, the words came out rather slowly and with some difficulty. I think the most difficult conversation was convincing my older sister of my sexuality and have her try and tell me that maybe I was bi-sexual. My response was “I am gay!” There was no wavering.

1978 was a time for me to be proud, my lover and I would march in some of the first gay protests in Sacramento. It was at times scary waiting for someone to become confrontational or physical. It was at one of these protests that a photographer came up to Keith and I and asked if he could publish a photograph of us. We both thought it would be a crowd picture, something from a distance, where we would not be recognized. We gave our consent without further thought or question.

The next morning Mary Anne, a lesbian from next door, came knocking at our door and asked breathlessly, “Have you seen today’s newspaper?” and promptly showed us the front page of the Northern California Sacramento Bee.

Keith and I looked closely, and both of us realized we needed to call our parents, letting them know that they needed to be prepared for some kind of reaction. The Sac-



ramento Bee was what my parents read from front to back. I looked closely to see if there was some story that could explain what they would see.

There I was, sitting on the lawn outside the state capital building. A beautiful, sunny Sacramento day with Keith sitting between my legs, his head resting on my chest, listening to Leonard Matlovich. There was no crowd picture, it was just us. Anyone looking at the picture would see two men who were more than just friends.

I couldn't wait any longer. I had to call my parents before they had time to read the paper. I called home and my dad answered.

“Hello?”

“This is Matthew,” and before I could say more, “Well how's the star this morning?” he exclaimed with some laughter.

I knew in that moment it was too late to explain or spin a story. I knew I was already out to my dad but not to the entire community of Quincy.

My mother was assistant head of the welfare department, and my dad was a high school teacher. My sister-in-law was the county tax collector. They were very well known within the community, as were my sister-in-law's kids. The rest of the conversation was a blur, but what I took away from our conversation was his pride. Gay pride in Quincy seemed to have started with my dad.

The battle was engaged, not in Sacramento, but in the

little town of Quincy. My family would be the ones to deal with an entire community.

My dad played poker with some of his Quincy big-wig friends. When asked by one of the other poker players if the person in the newspaper was his son, he defended me and expressed his pride.

This was how my entire family reacted, my defenders were unwavering in their support for the young man I had become. I was already out to most of my coworkers. In 1978 what more could I do to proclaim to the world that I was gay? It's easy to pick and choose who to tell a secret to but to tell a secret in a way that you would have no control over who hears it, well that's a different thing.

The fact that I had my picture in the newspaper was not an issue for those who lived in Sacramento. Not many people knew me. The true issue of coming out would impact me when I made my return trips to Quincy to face all the stares and silence from the people I once called friends. With Keith by my side, I could withstand it all. I was in love with another man, and everyone would know it.



# In The Out Door

Felicitas

Doors. Doorways. Portals. Conjurors of curiosities. Alchemists possessing the power to transmute and transport one to worlds unknown. Coming Out has been referred to as “kicking open the closet door.” Kicking open the closet door never ever involves a singular door; it’s a domino effect, kicking open many other doors.

1982. I was 25 years old. That was the year I divorced my husband, moved, quit my job, signed up for school, cut my hair, single-mom-ed it, quit church and got a girlfriend. Not necessarily in that order. It’s said that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. My doors snapped open and shut so fast I got mental whiplash. The whiplash somaticized into full-blown appendicitis. Rushing on a gurney through the double doors of surgery, I was really upset. Why now? Can’t this wait? So inconvenient; I have a mid-term paper due. Psychologists advise that you ought not have more than one or two of your major life categories simultaneously in an uproar. What do they know? I was cleaning house with an industrial-size broom.

I love doors. Always have. I photograph them and wonder what’s beyond. Sometimes I walk through them. Like the blacked-out glass doors of my first gay bar in Springfield, MA back in 1974 when I was only 17 years old. Don’t ask what I was doing there; that’s another story. I

had just stepped through the magic mirror. No guys trying to hustle me; they were hustling each other. Womyn dancing with womyn. I felt at home. I wasn't sure why. It was a subtle inner nudge. I hadn't come out to myself yet.

Two years flowed by from that initial inner nudge. I had a baby, then a husband. In that order. 1978. I was 21 years old. We moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota for his job. We arrived on April Fool's Day. Minnesota. Blinding, snow white Minnesota. Blonde-hair-blue-eyed Minnesota. Milk-is-a-spice Minnesota. Farmland-in-the-heartland Minnesota. Walking through the automated doors of the Ridgedale mall nestled in the woodsy, affluent suburb of Minnetonka, I stood in the middle and asked where everyone else was. I had culture shock. I was an innocent, never imagining a place like this. My entire young life had been lived as one of many colorful threads weaving the vibrant fabric of the east coast rainbow. I suddenly found myself exiled to this monochromatic, flat, frozen never-never land; a piece of collateral damage to my husband's choice of job.

Every cloud has a silver lining, I'm told. Mine lay smack in the middle of downtown Minneapolis. I could almost see a warm glow emanating on the horizon from my first-ring suburban family apartment in St. Louis Park. As I walked along the sidewalk towards the ornate doors of the Gay 90's on Hennepin Avenue for the first time, I could feel the driving rhythm of the music inside, mirroring my own heartbeat. Faster and faster, my heart sped as my hand reached for the door; I thought I would faint. Step-

ping inside, a tidal wave of joyful sounds, delicious smells, colorful colors, and extraordinary people washed over me; the antithesis to my gray-scale existence. Had I drowned in that moment, I would have died in exultation.

I was addicted; I couldn't stay away. One visit, I finally summed up the courage to ask the bartender if there were any bars "just for womyn." He was only too happy to give directions to Foxy's across the Mississippi River in St. Paul. Walking up to the front doors, my heart pounding several decibels higher than a disco, I became aware of an odd silence unlike the exterior of the 90's. A warm glow, soft music and womyn's voices greeted me through the open door. Adjusting my eyes as I sat down at the bar, I became aware of womyn in plaid flannel shirts, jeans, orange work boots, and mullet haircuts (the uniform of the day), all eyeing me curiously. They were called Butches. Not a single womyn who looked like me anywhere in sight. My manner, clothes, and make-up must have screamed "hetero." Eventually, a womyn came up and inquired if I knew I was in a gay bar. Sure, I did! Although I had found my tribe, I was still a stranger in a strange land. No lesbian would talk to me. Not only was I out of place in Minnesota, I was out of place in my suburban hetero marriage and now in this lesbian community, too.

The countless times of walking through rainbow doors began to take their toll; it became increasingly more painful to walk through the gray-scale door I called home. I began to feel crazy; my insides didn't match my outsides. Unbeknownst to him, I began pretending my

husband was a womyn just to make it through the marriage-bed nights. One day, I met “HER” in a marketing class at Hennepin Vo-Tech in Brooklyn Center. Our eyes met. She wore the uniform of the day, right down to the haircut. My heart palpitated. I was filled with an odd excitement. We chatted, we met for coffee; we talked about our current dismal relationships; we fell in love. We met some more. We shared our first guilt-laced kiss. The subtle inner nudge of eight years ago became a full-throttled, one hundred horsepower thrust. Standing in my suburban gray-scale kitchen, I told myself I needed to either walk through that rainbow door completely or never think about this again. The fires of initiation burned hot over the following year as I fought for a fair divorce settlement and custody. It helped that he was alcoholic and abusive; it balanced the guilt of breaking up a “family” and the shame of being a lesbian. It also helped that I had engaged a fierce lesbian lawyer who taught me my rights, fought for my rights, and showed me how to stand up to the bully.

The first few years following my divorce were loaded with figuring out how to be a lesbian and how to fit into the community. Although I was still with my First Love, Kathy-from-Marketing-Class and continued to be with her for two years, it was an awkward time. It seemed that in Minnesota there were only butches, and they always eyed me with suspicion. I also discovered that there were womyn that looked and acted like butches, but were actually married to men.... This phenomenon increased the further north one went up toward the North Woods of



Minnesota. It was all very confusing. As a couple, Kathy and I were fairly isolated. This was the early to mid-80s, pre-internet information searches, pre-social media. Although there were some minor queer support things in place, there was nothing like there is now... and certainly none that I bumped up against. I literally had no point of reference showing me that being a femme was another type of lesbian. Isolation seemed to be a recurring theme. Since I had no role models other than the butch, I decided to try the uniform, right down to the haircut. I even cut back on the make-up. I don't think Kathy was all that thrilled about this development. Although I was received more warmly by the Minnesota lesbian community for wearing the uniform, I was still not my true authentic self. This felt no less crazy-making than when I was living as a hetero. Once again, my insides didn't match my outsides. After a year, I couldn't stand the split duality anymore and went back to my "Femmie" ways. I wasn't alone for long, however, because Femmes started appearing on the scene from other, more enlightened places like Chicago and L.A. Gradually, butch-femme couple sightings were made at bars, events, and grocery stores. The Femme Lesbian door had magically appeared on my horizon, and I joyfully danced through it, finally belonging just the way I was.





# Immune

Ruth Nentwig

My story begins in 1962 when I was a sophomore at a small church-affiliated college in Oklahoma. It was summer time, and I was hanging out with my friends, and one of them told me she was concerned because I had several classes with her boyfriend, and she had seen me talking and laughing with him, and she said, “I don’t like it because I don’t want you to try to take him away from me.” I reared back in surprise and suddenly blurted out with no thought beforehand, “Don’t worry, I’m immune!” No one said anything, and I wondered where that comment came from and what it meant. It seemed out of character for me and much too revealing. I thought about this for some time.

I had always known I was “different” from other girls. I played baseball and marbles instead of jacks and dress up. I wanted to have a career and independence when I grew up, so no one could tell me what to do. I didn’t think boys were better than girls, and I certainly did not want to get married and have kids. My parents used to call me an “old maid” because I was so neat and tidy around the house. They thought that calling me an old maid would shame me into being more like other little girls, but I thought being an old maid would be just fine for me!

As I continued anguishing over the idea of being “im-

mune,” I started wondering if it meant I was abnormal, queer, or maybe even a lesbian? I didn’t know much about gay people, but what I had read and heard was very negative. I had always had crushes on my female teachers, which seemed like an ominous sign. Did that mean I was gay?

Things got more complicated several weeks later when I got acquainted with Norma, a nurse at the hospital where I worked in the laboratory. She intrigued me with her dark eyes and mysterious demeanor, but I was very tense and anxious around her. She would stand in the doorway of the lab and watch me work, not saying anything and not coming in... just watching me. That went on for awhile until several weeks later she was admitted to the hospital psychiatric ward where I worked at night. She had tried to commit suicide by driving off a bridge after her partner left her for another woman. This was all very frightening and serious to me, but I summoned all my courage and went to see her the next day.

She was happy to see a familiar face and clearly was eager to talk. After she had told me all about her life and the breakup she had gone through, she asked me if I was gay too and I told her, “No, I don’t think so.” She said some people at the hospital where we both worked had told her I was a lesbian. There was an awkward pause at that point and I said, “Well, I’m trying to figure all that out.” During our visit she talked a great deal about lesbian life and all the heartache and pain she had gone through in her various relationships. I wondered why anyone

would voluntarily choose that kind of life. It seemed very sad and scary to me, yet I was wondering about that kind of life for myself. What was I thinking of?

Jumping ahead... throwing caution and good sense to the winds, Norma and I became lovers soon after she left the hospital and we moved in together. This was my first coming out... acknowledging to myself and another person that I was gay. However, I was terrified about being found out. I abandoned my college friends, knowing they would reject me if they found out my secret, just like they had rejected a friend in our group, Judy, who became involved with another woman in our dorm. As word spread about Judy, friends that she had known her entire life gossiped about her and her girlfriend, calling them “bosom buddies” and shunning them to their faces. Judy became quite depressed and nearly dropped out of college.

At that time there was no lesbian community, no acceptance, and no talking about being gay, even with other lesbians. Everyone was in hiding, and I was no exception. I should have come out to Judy and supported her. Instead I said nothing and have always felt guilty and disappointed in myself for not stepping up. I believed I was destined to live a life of shame and fear. Why was I drawn to a life potentially so full of sadness and despair? Why was I so afraid?

My relationship with Norma ended after a few months when she proved to be unfaithful, and I realized I had never really loved her or even felt close to her. What followed were years of relationships with other women,

mostly short term and often disappointing because it was so difficult for me to reveal myself fully to another person and to feel accepted and understood. I returned to the fear that maybe I was “immune” even to all those women I had known. All those years of parental disapproval and rejection of my basic self-identity, being told I was not feminine enough, not liking boys enough, being too particular, being a “bookworm,” etc., etc., had caused me to doubt my worthiness and capacity to love or be loved in turn. I believed I was too different and I had to protect others from me.

Just as I was about to give up on finding the kind of love I searched for, there she was! I had just arrived in Los Angeles the week before and saw an ad for a “Lesbians over 40” group meeting at the Gay and Lesbian Center in downtown LA. I nervously drove all the way across the San Fernando valley to join the over 40s group. There were about 8 women in the room and I noticed HER right away. She was attractive, neat, well dressed, and had a wonderful smile I was sure was meant just for me. She had recently come out and was finding her way in this new lifestyle. After talking awhile in the group, we made plans to get together the following weekend. I was excited and happy all week long, wanting to see her again. Our time together went very well, and we talked to each other for over 3 hours in the parking lot before even getting to the date itself. We shared our stories so freely and so honestly that I felt like I had come home to the kindred spirit I had always longed for. We never did get to the museum!

To make a long story short, I brought a U-Haul trailer to the second date, just like the good lesbian in the joke. For those who haven't heard it before, "What does a lesbian bring to the second date? A U-Haul!"

Now for the happy ending! We have been lovingly together 32 ½ years and just celebrated our 4 year anniversary. In addition, the acceptance of LGBT people has slowly increased over the years, and we are able to openly gather in a venue such as this one and enjoy being proud together without fear. Also, I have finally learned that I'm not "immune" to love and involvement with another person; I just needed to be with the right woman!



# Coming Out Was Hard To Do

Colleen M. Skiles

I was a young child when I realized I was “different,” and of course, not knowing what that even meant, there was no way I was going to ask!

As a young child, I was molested by four different men before I was ten years old, so after those terrible experiences, I was not only afraid of men, I hated them. Those experiences devastated me!

Growing up into my teen years, I tried to live the “straight life” and have a boyfriend.... I actually all together had three boyfriends, and as soon as they began getting “grabby” and I said “NO,” they broke up with me.

I had pretty much nothing going on in High School except D’s and F’s, so I took my GED and then begged my mother to sign a waiver so I could join the Women’s Army Corps. I was 18 years old, and it was something I had wanted to do ever since my family was stationed in West Germany in 1960.

I will tell you this... I heard a rumor about there being “lesbians” there, and I wanted to be where the “lesbians” were! So off I went to enlist in the WAC’s. By the way, this was during the Vietnam War. Oh, and I did find the lesbians! Lots and lots of lesbians!

The first lesbians I met were in boot camp, including



my 1st Sergeant (couldn't ever get her to admit it, but it takes one to know one).

So, after Eight weeks of boot camp, we had our Graduation Ceremony.

I was asked to sing and play guitar for our graduation, so I sang a song all too familiar at that time called "Leaving on a Jet Plane." And that's where I met my first love! She was "hot!" I was in love!

Her name is Judy. She was in the WAC Band. I couldn't believe she wanted to spend time with me, but she did.

You know, I was 18 years old, and I didn't have a clue what to do with this woman! She was like a dream come true for me. She was beautiful, talented, smart, and most of all she was a lesbian! My kind of womyn.

We hung out as long as time would permit. I was in school, and she was in the WAC Band, so we didn't really have much time together. Of course, we had to sneak around because there were constant witch-hunts trying to catch us in the act and remove us from the military. After I finished school, I got orders for Ft Knox, KY. I didn't want to leave Judy because we were just getting to know each other, but to be honest with you, as much as I wanted to be with her, I was convinced I would be a disappointment. So, I made some sort of excuse, and we parted ways. Nothing like you were expecting is it?

Something I feel I need to preface my story with is this: I had my first alcohol at the age of 2.

By the time I was 18 I was already black-out drinking.

I drank for courage, I drank for sociability, I drank to fit in.

I drank to succeed. I drank to be whoever I thought you wanted me to be.

I became clean and sober on 17 December 1986 at the age of 35.

So, I have spent these past 31 years getting to know myself without using any alcohol or drugs, and I can tell you one thing I'm most certain of...I'm definitely grateful to be a LESBIAN!



# In the Beginning, Long Ago

Kay Smith

My “coming out” began when I was 21. A woman I worked with, Maria, wrote poetry and we began meeting to share our writing. One day Maria told me she was a lesbian. I thought, “Oh, how interesting, that’s nice.”

We kept meeting more frequently. She had no car; I had a motorcycle. We started riding together on my blue Yamaha with a high back seat. I wore a helmet with painted zodiac signs; she let her long dark hair fly. She held on to me very tightly as we rode through the winding mountain roads. We went on longer rides, more often. It wasn’t long before we were at her house, entangled in arms of first love’s passion.

We never felt any shame or guilt. We were lesbian feminists, and it was the sixties! It all seemed so natural, open hearted, loving, and passionate. She was a poet and an artist. She took photos of me naked wrapped in a lace curtain. We thought our love would never end. We laughed about being little old ladies together in our rocking chairs on the porch. We read Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson, listened to Janis Joplin, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and told each other bedtime stories about dragons and brave little girls.

Moving in very different directions, we separated af-

ter 5 years but remained friends. Through time and other relationships, the course of our lives changed, we became more separate, seeing each other less and less. Time and life were like a deep river running in a canyon, separating the beginning edges of the canyon sides. And yet, as water holds, touches, and remembers both sides, this first love with Maria was forever held sacred in a time all its own.

Forty years later, after no contact for years, a mutual friend called to say that Maria, this first woman who shared that sacred space in my heart, was dying in hospice and wanted to see me. I went to her bedside. We held hands as I sat on the bed and I told her friends, standing by, women I had never met, that she had been my first lover and rode on the back of my motorcycle, our bodies pressed passionately. We all laughed. I told them she was a wonderful poet, artist, and photographer. I joked with Maria about her new butch look from the chemo haircut. She smiled for the last time in her life. I felt her warm grasp tighten.

Her friends left one by one; an older woman with a foreign accent, a short gal with curly hair, another with rainbow tattoos, and a young Hispanic neighbor the last to go. She kept holding my hand as she wavered between this world and whatever awaits us all. We were like old lovers arm in arm, walking alone into the dark woods together heading home. I reassured her she was going to see Maryanne (her first lover) and her mother—the dead ones she loved most who wait for us always. At 10 pm, she released her grip. I kissed her forehead and said, “I have to go now

Maria, be good.” I left; she took her last breath five minutes later.

After her burial, friends sorted her belongings and called to say they had an envelope with some things set aside for me. I picked it up and drove home crying with the past memories beside me calling to be released. At home alone in a quiet room, I opened it. Inside, the photo of me naked, young, wrapped in the lace curtain. I wept, and it was then that I felt the river in the canyon touch both sides of my first love, Maria and me, held sacred in a time all its own.



# Hard Questions

By Linda Stewart

As a child, I was raised in a conservative Christian home with two parents. We ate dinner together every night for the 17 years I lived at home. We went camping and spent weekends together. The only time I ever heard mom and dad argue, it was about whether to let me go out with friends or not. I guess you could say I was sheltered from the evils of society that included drugs, sex, and alcohol, until I wasn't.

The 70s were a time of turmoil and unrest for social, educational and political views. I found myself questioning war, drugs, and sexual identity. There were riots happening in our parks and streets across America. I watched it on our black and white T.V. and asked my mom the hard questions: What are Civil Rights? Why are the people so upset about this war in Vietnam? Why don't people want black and white people to marry each other? Why isn't it ok for a woman and another woman to be together if they love each other? (I didn't ask about men with men at the time.)

My hormones were raging and sexuality was now emerging. My body was taking on shape. The neighbor down the road was a couple of years older than me, and I liked being at Tami's house. We had sleepovers and sneak-touches, and we found ourselves "acting on our de-



sires.” Then she moved away. Somehow, I knew one day I would find someone to love me. Later, I met a friend’s brother, and in the backseat of a car, my virginity was taken. It was nothing like I imagined. I felt shame, anger, and stripped of myself. I cried. It was nothing like the tender touch of the girl across the road. I pushed the feelings for her aside and focused on boys.

At 15, I was pregnant and my childhood gone. I had a child within me. I was convinced that he would love me through eternity (little did I know). A high school boyfriend who had recently gone into the Marine Corps offered to marry me. I wanted to simply get out of the house. I accepted his invitation. It was far from a love affair and turned into what would be one of the breaking points in my life. By the time I was 18, I had two babies, and we had been belittled and beaten to the point that I considered death a better option than continuing with the abuse. I went home to my parents feeling as though I would never see blue in the sky again. After my divorce, I vowed to not ever allow another person tear me down. (Slightly unrealistic, since human relationships are hard.)

I got my own place with my kids, and life continued along, I got my GED and went into the Job Corps, meeting a few women along the way but pushing aside the feelings. I started working at a local dentist’s office. Single parenting and dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder for my older son and I became the focus of my life.

I moved to Washington State a couple of years later, attending a Christian college and re-establishing my life

with the boys, now 7 and 4 years old. Again, I found myself questioning social maladies of poverty, education, political correctness, and sexuality. I had explored relationships with women and men, finding that I got along much better with women. I resolved to find a soulmate and give it over to the God of my understanding. The God I knew did not stand on the corner of a Pride Parade with signs belittling others, and I refused be a part of such antics. This did not go over well with the Elders of the church I had been a part of for 10 years. It was at this church I met my soulmate, Tracy. We spent hours and hours together talking, praying and falling in love. We kept silent in order to avoid judgment of others.

Three years later, we both knew that living in the closet was going to put us both in the hospital. We struggled with the intense and passionate love we had for each other and with societal “norms.” By this time, both of us had been asked to step down from the leadership roles we had in the church. We did. Seeking to find acceptance, we found a counselor and a church that would help each of us find comfort and understanding of who we were. Together, we pursued our goals to be authentic and true to ourselves. By this time, my boys were both legal age and had moved out of the house to find their own soulmates.

The hard conversations still arose from the depths of my soul, but they were different: Why can't people marry who ever they want? What right does the government have to dictate who I love? What is the American Dream? Is there equity for ALL? Tracy crossed the Rainbow Bridge

in 2008. The doctors did not honor our power of attorney and said she had taken her own life. Torn by conflict, I stepped aside, only to assist her family with the final arrangements. She flies with the angels over the Cascade Mountains and the Pacific Ocean.

I hear her words in Sign Language, “You can do this, Linda, I am here for you.” We have a story of love, passion and pain that needs to continue in order for change to happen. Now my difficult questions have expanded to: When can I retire? Will I have Social Security that I have paid into for 50+ years when I retire? Will I be able to have healthcare I can afford? Will I ever have the American Dream?

Change has occurred. I have married my soulmate, and love what I do. A story of human kindness, love, passion, and even pain resonates. Living life on life’s terms has made me who I am, a Lesbian grandma who is happy, relatively healthy, and actively looking forward to seeking answers that promote change in a society that continues to be faced with disease. Most importantly I look forward to telling my story and continuing to ask questions.

## **Out , Out, Out**

Lavina E. Tomer

Driving from small town Danbury, CT to Tucson, AZ by myself in 1972, I cried all the way grieving the loss of my hometown, friends and relatives and scared silly about what was coming next. I could never have imagined what that giant leap of faith would lead me to. My older sister lived here, and a man I loved was waiting for me. It was good. But it seems I was going in the wrong direction. I became disillusioned with married life and with pleasing my family. I was a budding feminist and found fascinating and frightening philosophies and politics in the books I checked out from the Himmel Park Library written by Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan. Society was experiencing a major shift in second wave feminism, and I was being carried along on that thrilling surge.

I was exposed to lesbianism on the way to feminism. I would see a sign on Fourth Ave. that read, “ Lesbian Coffeehouse, All Women Welcome.” I did not want to start there. It was too anxiety provoking. Again, my curiosity was nurtured by great library books like “Sisterhood Is Powerful,” and “Sappho Was A Right On Woman.” There was a Southwest Feminist Festival advertised in 1973. I was too scared to attend.

One day while shopping at the Food Conspiracy Co-Op, I saw a huge sign: “Women’s Mental Health Collective

Meeting,” held at the newly opened Women’s Center on Sixth St. Now that was a topic that I was interested in as I had an older sister with schizophrenia. I called a friend and she and I made our way to that life-changing meeting. For the first time in my life, I met lesbian feminists. Women loving women who had a profound sense of social change, injustice, women’s lives and lesbians’ lives, and were brilliant activists.

I was encouraged to have a women’s consciousness raising group at the apartment where my husband and I lived. I learned concepts like classism, racism, and homophobia. And, I witnessed and participated as women established resources for rape survivors, childcare, domestic violence survivors, legal aid, mental health, education about the lesbian and gay community, medical care, spirituality, and social events. I was being strengthened and radicalized from deep within. Walls were crumbling, chains were breaking, Lavina was coming out!

I volunteered on the phones at the Women’s Center, attended meetings and workshops there, met new friends there, loved being there. I still did not go to the Lesbian Coffeehouses.

My husband commented, “I am worried about you being around all those lesbians. I am worried you will become one.” My sister called my Mother to report that she was worried because I was going to a Women’s Center where there were lots of lesbians. I was worried because I did not know what my next step would be.

One day, after yet another boring argument with my husband, I furiously packed my red suitcase, went to work, and ended up at that Women's Center asking to rent a room. I lived there nearly a year with dyke separatists who raised my consciousness in some very extreme and wonderful ways. Our home was the center of activity for lesbians who always worked on behalf of women's issues. I happily danced for hours at the coffeehouses and bars and house parties. We knew how to organize, and we knew how to party!

Well, I sure did come out to myself, a few friends, and family members. A picture of me was in the newspaper with an article about the Women's Center. I guess that left my work place wondering. Although my coming out felt necessary and courageous, it was terrifying and difficult.

My sexual being was free in a way that was brand new. I wanted to have sex with women, lots of women! "An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail." My friends were my first sexual partners. I got caught in the unrequited love trap for way too long. I fell in love with some beautiful, different, hot lesbians who broke my tender heart. I wanted a long-time partner but in the mean time, I made love to such silky, soft, wet and sweet, sweet women. I wouldn't have done it any other way.

I am still in awe of the profound and revolutionary path I am traveling. I could have never imagined the women who I am honored to call friends and colleagues, being supported in every way by women from all walks of life or, being the activist that I have sustained since coming out. I

just never could have imagined.



# Closet With A Revolving Door

FM Westra

It was the 80's, a time when you could be fired for being Gay. I worked at a Bank in East Lansing, Michigan, just across the street from Michigan State University. I had signed a Morals Clause, but I also ran a Lesbian Boarding House.

And I wasn't just a bank employee; I was part of the Bank Elite, a Bank Officer, and the Assistant Vice President in charge of Bank Operations. I wore Power Suits, the kind with skirts and beautiful four-inch heels. I sat next to the President during meetings, so I could answer questions for him.

It's amazing what you can get away with when your value as an underpaid female is greater than enforcing the morals clause. They knew I would settle for less money and I knew they would not ask if I was Gay.

I was very careful at the Bank. As an Officer, I was required to attend Officer Social Gatherings.

I would show up on the arm of the most gorgeous man. He was blond and blue-eyed and filled out a suit nicely, very macho, and very hetero. He was a vet student at the University, brains but no money. So he feasted on steak and lobster, danced with the President's wife, and gave me the proper look for my position.



At the same time the Boarding House I ran was just a mile from campus, in a neighborhood of Professors, Lawyers, and other professionals. Five bedrooms and one bath— Yes, just one bath, but somehow the schedules worked. For \$165 you got a room of your own, you could have an overnight guest, but they could only stay three nights. Phone, but not long-distance, MTV, housekeeping of the kitchen, bath, and other shared spaces included, as well as cabinet and refrigerator space in the kitchen.

It was a wonderful place to be: the Living Room always had a meeting, study group, or protest planning session going on. At one of the Wine & Cheese gatherings, I met the woman who later became my partner.

Sunday mornings were a treat as 10 of us would sit around the farm-size kitchen table, laughing and getting to know the stay-over guests from the Saturday night party.

The parties were “OUT OF THE CLOSET” parties. We had found a sign about three feet high and five feet long that when you put a light behind it said “CLOSET.” It came from a Car Wash that had closed. Not sure why they had it but in any case we found it useful. We would put it in the front Living Room window and then hold the party in the backyard.

Meanwhile, back at the bank, although I was careful, I did like to push the envelope: I had a Labrys, made of Ironwood that I wore on a gold chain around my neck. One of the Branch Managers once asked about it and I

said it was a Labrys; it came from the Greeks and stood for Women in Power. She said that was appropriate for me.

However, when I was called to handle a problem at the Customer Service Desk, if a woman customer stared a little too long at the necklace and my open shirt, I would look her in the eye and smile. Things just seemed to go much better after that.

Of course mixing the two worlds could sometimes be a problem. Pronouns had to be used in telling of camping trips, parties, weekend activities: “We, They, Us.”

But my Bank Assistants were wonderful— someone once asked my Bookkeeping Manager about my being at a softball game (mostly Lesbian players)— without blinking she asked why the person had not gone up and said “Hi” when she saw me.

And then on the other side of the coin, every once in awhile I would be meeting someone at the bar, and because of working late, did not stop home to change: so, I’m sitting at the bar, power suit, heels... when this woman sits next to me, stares at me, and taps me on the arm. “Ah, did you know this is a Gay Bar?” And I look straight at her, smile and say, “Yes, everyone here looks very happy.” It took her a minute, but then we both laughed and had a nice visit while I waited for my friends.

It was a great time in my life, I was in my 30s, I had loving, wonderful women around me at home, the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, “Dykes on Bikes” for midnight gatherings on my front lawn. (Believe it or not, the

neighbors never asked.) I had work I loved, enough money to buy scotch instead of beer, the whole 3rd floor of the bank, almost entirely staffed by women. Women that I could help advance, able to fight for higher pay for them and shared work hours so they could see their kids off to school, or go home in time to be there when they got off the bus.

I feel I made a difference in both worlds, and all it took was remembering which side of the door I was on at any given moment.

# First Love

Kermie Wohlenhaus

I hadn't dated much in high school. Boys weren't a particular draw for me like they were for my straight girlfriends. They always wanted to find where the boys were, and I was much more interested in sports, being outdoors and other adventures. Being quite shy, I didn't socialize too much, but was in a few organizations like Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls. I loved the company of other girls much more than with the boys.

To be in college and on my own was always my dream. Finally, it was time to go to the University, move into a dorm, and attend classes. My first year was exciting with all the activities on campus: hippies, protests, feminism, and football games. I worked throughout school, found my career choice, and focused on academics. I dated a few men in college, but never wanted to sleep with any of them, even though it was the sexual revolution at the time. I was finding my voice and freedom now that I was away from the supervision of my parents. It was all so exciting.

In my sophomore year new adventures and a different part of me emerged. The dorm where I lived was made up of two tiny rooms connected by a bathroom. I had a roommate, as did most of my hall. Our suite mate was a senior and the hall leader, giving her the luxury of her own room.

Her good friend, Laura, visited often and befriended my roommate and me. Laura had a car, and we would all go to the store, about town, and to the mountains with her. It was fun, but it seemed that Laura and I liked doing things together much more than with the other women. Finally, it was just Laura and me.

Laura was older and lived off campus in a cute, cozy mobile home she rented. Often, we would go to her house and play cards and talk. It was a cold night at her house February 11th, 1971 when Laura's and my hand touched while we were playing cards. It was as if electricity shot through me. She asked me to spend the night, and it was blissful exploring each other's kisses and bodies. Neither one of us had been with a woman before, so it was all new and unexplored territory. We were hopelessly in love.

We woke up the next snowy day and I turned to her and said, "I think we are lesbians!" She agreed and there was no angst about it, only love and knowing it felt "right." I then said, "There has to be more of us."

We had a dreamy relationship and found "Gay Liberation" in the dark basement of a liberal church. All hidden from the outside world, there was nothing available yet on campus. We attended their meetings and activities with lots of gay men and the two of us. The men said they knew a couple of lesbians, but most were in the closet and did not participate out of fear. The men loved that they now had a couple of lesbians to play with.

We did meet with those two other women and they

talked to us about being gay. They were a bit stodgy. It was the gay men that most influenced us. They were fun, talked about gay male sex, styled our hair, and went shopping with us. They just took us two fledgling lesbians under their flamboyant, rainbow wings, and we loved them.

Later that year, a gay dance happened on the outskirts of a nearby town at Hidden Valley Ranch, and the boys invited us along. We were so excited to finally meet other lesbians and surprised when there were so many beautiful women there. It was curious, though, that these beauties seemed to be going into the men's room. We finally realized they were men dressed in drag, and the lesbians were the flannel, jean and boot group in the corner. Excitedly, off we went to the corner to meet our tribe.

We didn't know the lesbian culture so didn't want to make a mistake and get ostracized. So, Laura and I made a plan. We would ask two girls, who were friendly to us, to dance at the exact same time. We didn't know if they were a couple or not. Luckily, they both said yes, and we danced the night away and got to know them and much about lesbian culture.

Laura and I did, eventually, break up and continued to live together. It was a hard time for Laura and I, not knowing how to have a loving ending to our relationship, but we did the best we could. As it turned out, it was the best thing for us as we learned to respect and nurture each other through this trying time. We did graduate and move on with our lives.

After all these years, Laura and I are still friends and have kept in contact. Every Feb 11th, we send each other cards or a phone call wishing each other and ourselves a Happy Anniversary in celebration of our first lesbian love and coming out.

Laura lives in Flagstaff now, me in Tucson, and when we are in each other's vicinity, we have a meal and catch up. I will always be grateful to Laura that we first explored our lesbian natures together in such love and respect.

