

## Wanderground: Archiving Lesbian Legacies, Words, Creativity in Rhode Island

Research Summary – Installment #3

Blog Post – February 18, 2022

### Creating Communities & Activisms

*Beyond publications, where else did we find other Lesbians? Where did we go to find ourselves and each other? How was Lesbian/feminist organizing impacted by Lesbian artistic expression?*

*“You feel your lesbian power standing in a group of sisters, united against the tide.”*

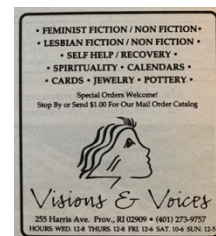
During the 1970s through 2000 (and to a lesser extent since then), Lesbians found their way to themselves and each other in many ways beyond written words (Installment #2). Herstorically, these were years (especially through the 1980s) when it was definitely not acceptable to be Lesbian or safe to come out. Lesbians who responded to the survey offered numerous examples of the places and organizations where they could relax into their identities. For many, it was risky to be “out,” but this did not stop them from seeking community. As one Lesbian stated: “I could be in public with my partner comfortably and without fear.” Another shared this: “The more there is to see out in the public, the more we get to see each other in real life and make it normal for us.”

These are the many places mentioned in the responses.

#### Bookstores

In “Little Rhody,” it was easy to be informed. Bookstores provided not only reading materials but also places for community gatherings with bulletin boards, a variety of events, and space to meet or gather. Key among them were:

- Dorrwart Leftist bookstore
- Vision and Voices (only for a few short years)



#### Bars / Restaurants

*\*not all were Lesbian – many also gay as well as lesbian*

- Cabana
- Mardi’s Lounge (CF/Pawtucket)
- Deville’s
- G-Spot
- Pulse
- Mirabar
- The Gallery
- The Homestead
- David’s in Newport
- Kings and Queens in Woonsocket – well-known Lesbian bartender, Kim Deacon
- Pot au Feu – (comfortable to be there)
- Rue de l’espoir



## Music / Theater / Art

Music and theater provided not only entertainment but very often visibility and consciousness-raising for Lesbian lives and experience. Performers and actors sang and voiced positive encouragement, hope, political ideas, and support. As a performer or audience member, these opportunities offered connection. As one Lesbian answered: “Art and music are some of the great vehicles for recognition, unity, and organizing.” Venues in Rhode Island included:

- RI Feminist Chorus
- RI Feminist Theater
- Posters & flyers created by RISD students
- The Goddess Show
- The HighHat
- Concerts produced here included Holly Near, Sweet Honey in the Rock, among others
- Voices of Women radio program from URI
- Hera Art Gallery

## Organizations

During these earlier years, many organizations focused on women’s/feminist organizing – though they were started, organized, and/or run by large numbers of Lesbians. With that, many did not specifically focus on Lesbians issues per se, but organized generally for women’s rights, especially stopping sexual violence and harassment, rape, domestic violence, reproductive rights, and so on. Organizations that addressed gay rights included many Lesbians, but focused largely on the array of issues for LGBT peoples. For many of those years, activism and organization centered around AIDS activism. One comment made this evident: “I think you need to be clear on whether you're asking "lesbian feminist" or "lesbian" or "feminist.”

RIWA  
A Community of Women



One organization serving Lesbians was (and still is) RIWA – Rhode Island Women’s Association. Initially, this group provided social activities for women generally, but Lesbians primarily, AND were careful not to be too open about this. When founded in the early 1980s, Lesbians were scared to lose their jobs/professions, housing, children, families, friends and so on, so great care was taken not to use the words Lesbian, gay, or any other language that would obviously “out” its members. An off-shoot of that organization was the ORIELs, a group of older Lesbians who dined out together regularly (every 6 weeks).

One or two respondents did mention the Lesbian Feminist Union, but its existence seems short-lived.

These are many of the organizations mentioned, many more than once!

- Feminist Resources Unlimited
- Women’s Liberation Union
- RI Clothesline Project
- Take Back the Night Marches
- Rape Crisis Center

- NOW (National Organization for Women) - CR (consciousness-raising) groups
- Equity Action (through the Rhode Island Foundation)
- Homophile Center (1970s)
- RI Alliance for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights (started 1983)
- SAGE-RI (Advocacy & Services for LGBTQ Elders)
- Pride committee in the early 90s. There were many talented Lesbians working on the graphics and posters.
- PFLAG
- RI affiliate of the ACLU
- Sarah Doyle Center at Brown University
- MERI (Marriage Equality RI)

## Activities in RI

- Softball – both players & spectators / Team: Lightning Painting
- Women Outdoors (not only for Lesbians, but in RI was predominately Lesbians!)
- Gay Pride marches
- Dignity Catholic masses
- Gay Bingo
- Potlucks! “Lots of Lesbian potlucks in the 70s and 80s!”
- Events at Bell Street Chapel
- Gender-free Contra Dancing in church basement downtown near Providence Public Library
- Cable Car & Avon cinemas played indie films with Lesbian content
- Lavender Thumbs in South County (social group that started as a gardening group)
- In more recent years....Facebook and MeetUp groups

It was clear from many of the comments that these questions offered a walk down memory lane. Some answers were lengthy (paragraphs even!) and exuberant with lists of national names and places well beyond the borders of Rhode Island. National resources such as concerts, festivals, marches, musicians, authors, movies, sports teams, and bookstores from all over the U.S. were mentioned.

## IMPACT

Many Lesbians responding to the survey did not live or come out in Rhode Island during the 1970s – 2000. So, the question about whether “*Lesbian artistic expressions had an impact on Lesbian/Feminist organizing in Rhode Island*” was not an easy question for everyone who answered it. Regardless of where one lived during those times, it’s clear the cultural expressions gave strength, meaning, joy, and confidence to those who found them.

- “How could the foundations of feminist thought (read lesbian) not have an impact? We were hungry for sisterhood, hungry for recognition and equality. We were angry. And the brilliant ideas of lesbian feminist thinkers, writers, polemicists gave us signposts for our journey.”

- “It's hard to tease out the threads (between feminist & Lesbian), but overall, art and music made specifically for the lesbian and feminist communities played an important part.”
- “I've been in Rhode Island for about 16 years but the music and literature definitely had an impact on lesbian and feminist community building and organizing where I was in Western Massachusetts through the 1980's and 1990's.”

However, it's also clear that since the early 2000s, many of these Lesbian places and spaces have all but disappeared, a phenomenon not unique to Rhode Island. The surveys and interviews expressed the value of those spaces and how much they are missed. “I've been here for 20 years and find it difficult to connect with the lesbian community.” Two lesbians in their early 20s expressed regret (and some jealous/anger) that Lesbian community, herstory, connections, activism are so hard to find. They long for that connection.

Finally, this comment: “OMG do I miss Lesbian specific place 😞”

## Next Week

Be sure to come back next week for **Installment #4: Sisters Are Doing It for Themselves**  
*What did we create here in Rhode Island? Introducing RI authors, musicians, and some others....*