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Sharing Her Stories

LESBIAN ARCHIVE PRESERVES & AMPLIFIES HERSTORIES OF NEW ENGLAND

Mev Miller has been amassing books for decades. It's a passion she inherited, at least in part, from her grandfather, a former university professor who lined a studio in his house with hard-covers. Even when she was a child, having access to all that knowledge made an impression on Miller. "I thought," she says, "it was the most fabulous thing in the world."

By the time she was old enough to turn her own home into a library, though, it was stories by and about women that dominated her shelves. Miller started collecting them during the 10 years she managed an East Haven, Connecticut-based wholesaler of books from indie publishers. In distributing works mainly to literary, leftist and feminist bookshops, Miller found herself a part of a flourishing community of women—scholars, activists and everyday bookworms alike—for whom lesbian identity and the liberation movement were two sides of the very same page.

"Just before COVID, I started thinking about how I was going to retire, and needed to figure out what to do with all this stuff," says Miller, whose collections now include t-shirts, pins and various other ephemera representing lesbian communities. "I realized I wanted to create a lesbian archive. I think a lot of lesbians are unfamiliar with



the things in my collection, and I want to share them."

With that goal in mind, Miller and a small team of volunteer stewards have organized the Wanderground Lesbian Archive/
Library, a new nonprofit that is committed to amplifying the collective herstories of lesbians in New England and a still-growing repository of artifacts. In addition to Miller's personal holdings, Wanderground accepts community donations of everything from political pamphlets to personal photo albums, catalogs them, and shares its collection with the public through pop-up showcases and curator talks at libraries, churches, Pride centers and more.

And what a collection it is. Items really run the gamut, from a vintage t-shirt that proudly declares "100% Dyke" to historic records from singer-songwriters popular on the women's music fest circuit. There are countless books too—including, of course, The Wanderground, activist Sally Miller Gearheart's classic separatist feminist novel

In bringing all these to a broader audience, the goal is simple: to reclaim the importance of L-specific space in a crowded alphabet.

"I've had an archivist say to me, 'We're an LGBTQ library. We have a lot of everything



PHOTO Mev Miller/Wanderground Lesbian Archive/Library

but we don't have a lot of L," Miller says. "We've been challenged by some who say, 'Why do you need your own? You don't need a separate space. You don't need to duplicate what's being done.'

"But they don't get it. What we're doing is not being done."

"Lesbians get erased," agrees M'Lyn Hines, whose long career as an activist includes cofounding the Rhode Island Alliance for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights. Today she's a member of Wanderground's Amazon Steward Council, the organization's untraditional answer to a board of directors and part of its mission to reimagine historically patriarchal institutional frameworks. (Miller's title, for instance, is Instigator/Lesbrarian.)

Why is lesbian identity and culture so often overlooked, even within queer institutions? It's just one more symptom of pervasive misogyny, including the internalized variety, says Hines, who believes that the word lesbian—much like its philosophical sister, feminism—has become so loaded with meaning that many women may hesitate to wear it, never mind celebrate it.

"At a core level, in our culture we cannot accept a woman without a man," Hines says. "So people will say 'gay woman' but they won't say 'lesbian.' Because that brings that home."

April is Lesbian Visibility Month, which makes it a perfect time for Wanderground to make a few appearances around New England. So far, that includes a fundraising event and archive display at woman-owned Rhode Island Spirits in Pawtucket on Sunday, April 21, as well as a pop-up showcase and community conversation at the New Haven Pride Center in Connecticut on Saturday, April 27.

In time, the team intends to open a permanent space for Wanderground so that its collection can be accessed by anyone who wants to learn more about lesbian herstories in the region. But first, Miller says, the still-young organization needs to raise capital and shore up its team of stewards. In fact, right now Wanderground is recruiting Regional Scouts from all six New England states—volunteers who will help collect information on LGBTQ resources in their area, research local grant opportunities, host house parties and represent Wanderground at community events, and more.

The more people to spread the word, after all, the better. Because more and more women are listening—eager to hear their herstory and find community.

"A lot of the younger lesbians I know, they're hungry for this," Miller says. "They feel like they missed out on something." [x]

wanderground.org