

Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives
Life Membership Induction of Helen Pausacker and Liz Ross
27 May 2012

Speech by Daniel Marshall

Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to our very special Open Day today. In the decade that I've been involved with the Archives I have never seen a day like it – in fact, the Archives has only publicly inducted a Life Member to the Archives once before, and that was Graham Carbery on our 20th anniversary in 1998. Counting Gary Jaynes and Rob Thurling, who were inducted as Life Members without public ceremony several years later, the Archives to date has only had three Life Members. That changes today as we induct two new people who have helped to build the Archives since its earliest days: Helen Pausacker and Liz Ross.

Before I continue I want to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land that supports the Archives and I acknowledge that reconciliation is unfinished business and the Archives is committed to playing our role in acknowledging the past and in reconciliation.

I want to welcome you all here. I want to pass on an apology from our patron Joan Nestle who had wanted to be here – the Archives shows us how inspirational Joan and the Lesbian Herstory Archives were to both Helen and Liz, with Helen writing a profile piece on LHA in the first Archives newsletter in 1983, and Liz quoting Joan in a Gay Community News feature on the Australian Archives in 1980. “The Archives must never be a dead place, a worshipping of the past,” says Joan quoted in Liz’s piece, “but [the Archives] must show its connection with the Lesbian present, and with the struggles and glories of each Lesbian generation. The archives in the deepest sense is a political act” (Nestle cited in Ross, *Gay Community News*, June 1980, p 17). And so today as we honour Helen and Liz we do it not only in celebration of all of their work building the Archives in the past, but we also celebrate all of the things that their labour and vision enables the Archives to do today and tomorrow.

As we have prepared for today, pulling out the files, the periodicals, the correspondence and the old card indexes I have been so overwhelmed by all of the years of your work, and I am so humbled and grateful to be here. I can't possibly mention all of the ways you have contributed to the Archives but I'd like to just share a few.

On Helen Pausacker

When we sent out the publicity for these inductions it was touching to receive notes from people sharing their reflections. Kendall Lovett remembers taking this picture of Helen in 1983:

“I have a photograph that I took outside a café where I think those of us who had come down from Sydney had met up with the Melburnians for breakfast. Afterwards we had all come out on to the footpath to watch Mother Inferior from the Sydney chapter of the Order of Perpetual Indulgence being welcomed by the gay male nuns of the Melbourne Order. Among the onlookers was Helen who happened to look straight at the camera just as I snapped the scene. So began another very long friendship and correspondence during her involvement with the first to the last issue of the long-running Gayzette publication.”

When we turn to the archive, we can find ready traces of Helen's longstanding work building the Archives. Helen was involved in early work in the Archives in accessioning and cataloguing. We find an early task list for a working meeting for 3 January 1982 that Helen wrote up listing tasks for herself and a “Gary James”. Helen and Gary would also do early work throughout 1981-82 on an early indexing project which sought to index the history of the early gay movement. Helen's key work in this area is also reflected in work she did in the middle of the 1980s preparing a card file thesaurus of terms when the Archives began indexing its articles collection.

With Gary, Helen helped prepare the first Archives newsletter in April 1983, in which she mapped out the Archives' developing filing and keyword systems and wrote a profile of New York's Lesbian Herstory Archives.

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Helen was heavily involved in conducting, logging and transcribing scores of oral history interviews. The idea for the Archives' history walks was Helen's (growing out of her work on the oral histories) and she prepared the program for the first walk in 1985, and many of the rest since then, speaking at several of them.

Helen has taken on other special projects for the Archives, including the Photo History Project in 2001 that was designed to get people to contribute photos of special significance to them. Helen's intimate working knowledge of so many aspects of the gay movement and its history, especially through her own experience working for *Gay Community News*, meant that she has been able to bring her expert knowledge to the work of the Archives in many valuable ways. One example of this is the curatorial work she did for a retrospective display of James Spence's photographs for an Archives Open Day in 2010.

Helen was also an early historical researcher, writing an article on Edward de Lacy Evans entitled "A Hundred Years of Male Impersonation" in the February 1980 issue of *Gay Community News* (28-29). In the April issue, Helen wrote a GCN Special Report on "The Gay Disabled" (8) in which she movingly writes about the paucity of awareness of or resources for homosexuals with disabilities. More recently, as you will be aware, Helen has written about her friend Monte Punshon.

A key feature of Helen's work over the years has been her commitment to an anti-racist and internationalist politics. The Archives holds copies of the pioneering 1984 *Gays in Indonesia* book that featured translations of gay-themed stories in the Indonesian press from the early 1980s. Profits from the sale of the book were directed to support the work of Indonesia's first gay organisation, Lambda Indonesia. Helen coordinated the book project, and worked on translation and production, depositing the papers of the project with the Archives.

A key part of Helen's contribution to the Archives has been all of the work she has done arranging and donating collections of groups in which she was involved such as the *Gayzette* indexes she developed. Helen has also worked on materials from *Gay Community News* and the 9th National Homosexual Conference in 1983, among others, and she has donated personal correspondence that will be of interest and value to future generations.

On Liz Ross

As a founding member in 1978, Liz has made a remarkable contribution to the collection. The Archives' organizational files include her draft "Proposal for National Gay Archives – Australia", circulated in response to a proposal circulated by Graham Carbery in February 1980. Under the heading of "Availability" Liz writes that the Archives should be available to "all gay people for whatever reason (some 'straight' researchers???)". Liz dot points the various tasks involved with the Archives, such as indexing and filing, stipulating that "all the shitwork should be divided evenly"! Sound advice for today! On the back of her proposal, Liz has made some notes in pen listing tasks for the Archives in 1980, including writing a Procedures Manual. I am happy to advise that work continues on this project, although we're not quite finished yet...

Liz led the way in forging links with other organisations as demonstrated by correspondence we have in our collection from Liz to the Australian Society of Archivists (c1980) and to various Women's Liberation Newsletter Collectives around the country (1980).

In the mid-1970s, Liz conducted wide-ranging bibliographical research on gay/lesbian titles that were then available in Australian libraries, and we have on display today copies of two bibliographies – *The Lesbian in Literature* and *Women Loving Women* – both carefully marked up by Liz in pencil with the codes of the Australian libraries in which they were held. In particular, Liz's early work focused on the treatment of homosexuality in scientific and medical literature of the time, as demonstrated by one of her 1980 print-outs that the Archives holds, listing 171 citations from the National Library of Medicine sent to her School of Nursing address at Prince Henry's Hospital on St Kilda Road. The Archives is also the beneficiary of Liz' generous donation of personal correspondence from the early 1970s with organisations such as the Psychiatric Hospital in Royal Park, the Australian Medical Association and the NSW Institute of Psychiatry.

In 1976, Liz was part of the collective that started the *Lesbian Newsletter*, which the Archives holds and through those pages they tell a story of the possibilities, pressures and frustrations of radical politics of the time. For example, the whole second issue

of the Newsletter is almost entirely one single blank page, which Liz says was “a tribute to the lack of contributions since the first lesbian newsletter”.

In the June 1980 issue of *Gay Community News*, Liz wrote a feature on the National Gay Archives:

“A glance through Australia’s libraries could easily confirm an impression that homosexuality has had no part in the country’s history. Our herstory-history is not to be found in established institutions and we are therefore responsible for developing our own herstory-history...The archives are the property and herstorical-historical heart of the lesbian and male homosexual movement in Australia and the Archives Collective is committed to sharing and opening up the collection to the community and the movement. We ask you to support us by giving us everything you’ve got (including money) or at least a copy of it.”

Again, sound advice for today from Liz! Liz has also generously shared with the Archives the fruits of her research into the history of the left and Gay Liberation, depositing a large amount of digitized and indexed material. Her recent work on the Australasian Lesbian Movement is one notable case. Through her research, Liz interviewed two ALM figures – Francesca Curtis and Phyllis Papps – and they send their apologies for not being able to be here today: “We are absolutely delighted that Liz Ross will be receiving Life Membership of the ALGA because of her tireless and selfless energy that she has devoted to the gay movement and to ALGA over so many decades. We both salute you!” Phyllis also sent through a profile piece that she wrote on Liz, entitled “A Lesbian Tapestry”, in which she refers to the tapestry here which Liz designed and stitched entitled “Lesbians are Everywhere.” The tapestry’s themes of an anti-racist and internationalist feminist politics draw together I think some of the similarities between our two inductees today.

Liz worked on the Archives’ first cataloguing system in the early 1980s and she has built on that work over the last decade by listing the Archives’ collections of articles and pamphlets and the files of various activist groups (e.g. Radicalesbians, the Campaign Against Repression, the Anita Bryant and Anti-Festival of Light campaigns, etc). Significantly, Liz has also listed major collections at the document level such as all the national homosexual conferences 1975-86. And to give you some

indication of the volume of work involved in listing the conference papers, the print-out of her index runs to 100 pages.

Over the past decade, too, Liz has helped welcome visiting researchers into the Archives, and contributed to our open days, history walks, conferences and publications. In particular, the Archives will forever be grateful for Liz's volunteering to house the Archives' book collection – nigh on 4000 volumes - for four years before we obtained additional space at the Victorian AIDS Council.

Kendall Lovett was also kind enough to send through a note recounting his friendship with Liz:

“My first contact with ‘Liz was back in March 1979 when I received a letter from her enclosing a copy of the anonymous obscene letter she had received following her arrest at a protest march from the 4th National Homosexual Conference in Sydney on Sunday, 27th August 1978. The *Sydney Morning Herald* twice published the names of the 103 of us who had been arrested, our ages, our occupations and where we came from. The first time the long list appeared immediately after the police released our details and then again when the charges against us were withdrawn on Friday, 26 January 1979. This prompted a person or persons to send out a spate of crude obscene letters anonymously to many of us and ‘Liz was one. The reason she sent a copy to me was simply because I was the Gay Solidarity Group’s contact for those who had been arrested at either the first Gay Mardi Gras parade in June, the Protest March against police brutality in July and the Conference March in August. Since then, not surprisingly, ours has been a long-standing friendship.”

A miracle of the Archive is that it gives you the power to follow traces. Reading Ken’s reflections, we turned to our ephemera files and, in fact, found the obscene letter sent to Liz in the wake of the Mardi Gras solidarity arrests. In an envelope decorated with the word TARTS cut from a newspaper, the letter only partly gets Liz’ address right, with the post office usefully redirecting it. Scrawling the word “shit” in blue biro across the face of a pro-gay leaflet protesting the arrests, the letter-writer hurls abuse: “Youse never learn!”, it screams, “serves you right!” and “NEXT

TIME...Just wait [to] see what [Wran's cops have] in store [for you] – AFTER THE ELECTIONS”.

30-odd years on we are here to celebrate the fact that we did never learn. We are here to celebrate the life and work of two remarkable people who have helped give Australia something that it has never had before – an archive of queer history. Despite the brickbats, the insults, the setbacks, the material hardships and the lack of professional recognition attending this work – Helen and Liz have been foundational in building the Archives that we have today, the Archives that tomorrow inherits. For that, we owe you our endless gratitude. To Helen and Liz!

I have received one other note from Jean Taylor and Ardy Tibby who are also sorry that they could not be here today. Jean writes:

“I just wanted to pass on my congratulations to both Liz Ross and Helen Pausacker for gaining their well-deserved Life Memberships of ALGA. Their activist work over many decades both with ALGA and other L&G community groups has been much appreciated and I have many memories of their tireless efforts on our behalf in so many ways. Please pass on my thanks for their efforts and also my congratulations for their Life Memberships which I hope come with some benefits as well as well-deserved honour.”

So it gives me great pleasure to present you with these gifts to mark your life membership, Helen and Liz.

Just in closing, I'd like to thank all of the Archives Committee for their work getting ready for today, in particular I would like to thank Gary, Nick and Graham for their help researching for today's presentation and putting the displays together. As always, we thank Victorian AIDS Council who continue to provide us with a home and we thank you all for supporting the Archives – you are our lifeblood! Please, get another drink, check out the displays – there will be a Show and Tell session at 3 where you can hear about recent acquisitions and share your own stories, and there will be a tour of the Archives after that for those who are interested.

Thank you and enjoy.