

Grapevine, and the local feminist newsletter *Up and Coming*. The only writing I was actually paid for was for *The Grapevine*, and some writing and research I did for Shiloh Museum in Northwest Arkansas.

As I approached my fortieth birthday, the “biological clock” I heard ticking had nothing to do with children, but what I was going to do with my “one wild and precious life” (Mary Oliver). I had always done physical work, cleaning, house painting, some carpentry. I took my first yoga class in 1985, and from that my interest grew until I left Fayetteville to get more training. I am now a yoga teacher with a strong interest in activism. Or maybe I am an activist with a strong interest in yoga.

I miss women-only spaces. LGBTQ spaces are not the same.

My own activism has shifted to environmental issues, especially

to opposing proposed fracked gas pipelines in Virginia, where I live now. I was also an early advocate of the San Antonio Four, four Latina lesbians who were unjustly imprisoned for fifteen-plus years but who have since been fully exonerated. That work taught me to never give up, no matter how bleak the situation seems to be in a given moment, and that one person can make a difference in the lives of others.



Courtesy of Diana Woodall

Diana Woodall in January 1987 protesting when a local bank refused to close on the first Martin Luther King holiday. Diana is still carrying signs and marching when she can.

ROOTS AND BRANCHES: MIAMI'S LESBIAN CULTURE

Barbara Ester

Branching out from the Lesbian Task Force of NOW, Rexine Pippenger asked, “Why were there were no open Lesbian groups in the Miami area in 1979? A few women met later to discuss what we could do to start a group. When it first started it was held at my house, then grew from there to the Unitarian Church meeting room. A lot of women put it together and worked very hard keeping it going.”¹

Becky Anderson, cofounder of what became the Friday Night Womyn’s Group (FNWG), also noted that it started in the home she shared with Rexine. “It was a wonderful adventure! We had some challenges in trying to come to consensus on all the different topics, to do some consciousness ‘raising’ and have a good time all at the same time. We had some wonderful dances and raised enough money to keep the group together and keep the newsletter, the *InformHer*, going.”²

Groups and activities sprouted all over the South Florida area from Fort Lauderdale to the Keys in the 1980s. Amani had Our Place, Louise and Maryanne had Something Special, and the FNWG all were active into the 1990s and beyond. They were essential in creating a vibrant, out, proud Lesbian community. There were discussion groups, concerts, dances, women’s bars, softball games, and a womyn’s radio show called *Bloomers!* Rooted deeply in the movement of Lesbian feminism, each place and group had its own vision and life. MCM productions, the Lesbian video archives, presented showings of all their dyke videos at

1 From an email conversation between Ester and Pippenger on January 30, 2014.

2 From an email conversation between Ester and Anderson on January 24, 2014. The Friday Night Womyn’s Group has placed *InformHer* issues in the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY.

Something Special. Documentation of local artists and events kept everyone engaged in the creative process.

The following articles provide a brief look at these branches. These are the memories that stand strong in my mind and established my roots, my home in South Florida for twenty years.

THE FRIDAY NIGHT WOMYN'S GROUP AND THE WOMEN'S PRESERVATION SOCIETY

*Charlotte Brewer, from an interview
with Barbara Ester, November 16, 2015*

I was born in Miami [1935] and lived on 84th Street and Bird Road. I found lesbianism in reading *The Well of Loneliness* in the late 1940s. I spent some time in Oregon, got married, had two children, and lived in an ashram before returning to Miami. I was fresh from a yoga retreat and into that pure living, basic stuff, vegetarian food, and walking everywhere. At a college workshop I discovered the Lesbian Task Force of NOW and began to attend meetings downtown. That was it. I had found my home, I had found my sisters!

That's when I met Mindy from New York City! What a character she was, almost overwhelming. We became lovers. Mindy took me to all these gay places. That's when we had all that fun with Anita Bryant. We took part in the phone banks and went out at midnight hanging up banners and posters along the expressway on Coral Way and the Palmetto. I loved it. The Lesbian Task Force evolved into the Friday Night Womyn's Group (FNWG) in 1981. Rexine had the FNWG meet at her house. Later, I provided a space to meet, and we called that the Women's Preservation Society.

My partner Eli had the restaurant, Zum Alten Fritz downtown in Miami in one of those old houses. They had a space upstairs where women could meet on Sundays. We had dances there, like the winter solstice dance. It was for the Friday Night Womyn's Group or whoever wanted to come. That was good and quite successful. Then the talking got to be, "We would like our Friday night group to meet here," but there was only an opening on Sunday afternoon. They got to saying we should organize, have a club, and have this and that. So we needed a name for this space and Women's Preservation Society was the winner. That's where

that started in 1988. We also wanted a bigger space. We looked around and found one off Bird Road in the warehouse area. We kept that space for a few years. I still have some of the books from there and old newsletters, like the *InformHer*.

One highlight from that day happened when I came back from Michigan this year, and was in the airport, waiting for a plane. A woman leaned over and said, "I know you. Didn't you have the warehouse, the Women's Preservation Society in Miami? That's where I met my friend here." She introduced herself, and then said "And you're the one who told me about Michigan, and it changed my life! I went there and met my lover." That is the one best thing that I remember that happened because of the Women's Preservation Society.

At that time there were no women's bars in Miami. There were no places where women could go, particularly down south. They could bring beer or whatever they wanted to the dances held at the Women's Preservation Society. It was a cross between a bar and Something Special.* We weren't open all the time, but we were open quite a few days a week because I did not work then. It was in the evenings that we would be open. I would be there as much as I could. It was wonderful! I could have a place for women to meet and for women to go, and it was better than a bar! It was more wholesome and like a living room. That's what I tried to make it like. People donated couches and everything, so there were comfortable places to sit. They could just socialize and meet somebody, and always I made a point of introducing everybody in a nice way so they could feel more at ease. It was very important for me to do that.

The Women's Preservation Society was a good thing, but it never made any money. I started going to work because I needed to pay the rent. There was never enough, so I put my money into

it. Each month it was like four hundred dollars. We didn't charge, just took donations. I would write down everybody's name and send thank-you notes. We did concerts and anything we could to make money, but we had to give it up because I got so deep in the hole. The FNWG continued meeting there into the 1990s. They had a different subject every Friday. Whatever anyone wanted to do we would help organize.

I was really for the lesbian separatists at that time and still am. I think back to how wonderful it was and cozy to have new women come in. It was such a safe space, a cozy environment. There were never any fights. There may have been arguments or something, who knows? There were definitely disagreements, but nobody ever was violent or anything there. It was just wonderful, a peaceful place to go. Those were the days.

* See Barbara Ester, "Inside Miami's Lesbian Culture," *Sinister Wisdom* 93 (2014): 30-31, and "Outside the Box," this issue.