

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Maryanne Powers

“Think outside the box,” “color outside the lines,” or, as Katherine Hepburn used to say, “if you obey all the rules, you miss all the fun.” Louise and I always had that strange philosophy. We were just addicted to it. We always came full circle back to it. Nothing outside of our own crazy ideas seemed to satisfy that itch. It seemed that this zany, daring, outside-the-box thinking just wouldn’t let us be. We tried. We really did. Conformity just wasn’t in our vocabulary. *Compromise* was a dirty word. After all, I was a privileged white girl and Louise was a working-class Black girl. We dared to meet and date during the segregated South of the mid-sixties and remained lovers for forty-eight years. But that’s a whole other story.

It was 1987. Women’s bookstores were closing at a rapid pace; lesbian bars were being swallowed up into the “alphabet” community (LBGTQ). The remaining “wimmin-only” spaces were either a boring potluck or an elitist rap group. We just had to come up with something different—“something special.”

We knew that wimmin loved to gather in the kitchen and around the dining table. Louise was an excellent cook, and I loved to prep and serve. True to our philosophy of “start where you are, use what you have and do what you can,” we took our small one-bedroom, one-bath cottage and proceeded to take out the living room furniture, clear the enclosed front room, make the small office off the kitchen into a pantry and then contact friends. Amani was just remodeling her vegetarian restaurant Our Place on South Beach, and voila! We had tables, chairs, and plenty of kitchen equipment. We were brutally honest with our neighbors, so they knew to expect just about anything from us and whatever happened at our house.

We wanted to adhere to our belief that the three things that divide wimmin are “men, meat, and money”—therefore, Something Special would be strictly for “wimmin born wimmin”—

no gay male friends, no loving brothers, no transsexuals. We would play only wimmin’s music. All meals would be vegetarian and by donation only. Oh yes, wimmin often asked “but what should I leave?” and I would respond “you eat out—what do you normally pay for a salad, soup, etc.?” This was not to be a source of income for us. We worked other jobs during the day and opened our home five nights a week from six to ten. We took no reservations—we wanted wimmin to feel they could stop by any time they needed to. Talk with us, eat if they wanted to, drum around the fire pit in the backyard, or read the latest lesbian magazines and books—sort of a lesbian drop-in center with the focus on learning about and taking pride in our *lesbian* culture, not gay culture, not feminism, but LESBIAN culture.

So who were these wimmin who dared brave a new concept, or, as we called it, a new “lesbian venture”? At the time, Miami’s lesbian community/communities were divided by class, color, and language. The Spanish-speaking lesbians lived and socialized mostly in the southwest, and some even belonged to *tatiana de la tierra*’s group Las Salamandres.* The Black lesbians eventually started a group called The Rainbow Ladies, and the corporate-climbing white lesbians soon moved to Fort Lauderdale, bought homes with swimming pools, and joined Women in Network. We somehow attracted wimmin from all these facets plus some lesbians as crazy as us. Wimmin found themselves socializing, laughing, and becoming longtime friends with wimmin they might not have ever crossed paths with before. As we opened our advertising to *Lesbian Connection* magazine and *Damron Women’s Traveller*, we’d see the occasional backpacker from Europe or South America on their way to the Keys. We offered our backyard for overnight camping.

Eventually, we started hosting solstice and equinox gatherings. We’d spread a huge buffet, light a fire in the backyard (Did we

* On Las Salamandres, see interview by Nivea Castro, “*tatiana de la tierra: The Cuando Supiste?*” *Sinister Wisdom* 97 (2015): 175–95.

get a permit or check laws concerning this? Of course not!), and brought out all the variety of donated musical instruments. Our favorite bongo player, Martha Ingalls, along with Barbara Ester, even wrote a song about these gatherings.

Chorus:

There's something special about this place
What it is—it's all women's space

There's something special about this place
What it is—it's all women's space

They serve up a meal that pleases my tummy
And they let me decide for how much money
The music's just right, all wimmin of course
Along with the candlelight such a soothing force

Chorus

Out back with the plants I can smoke some herb
There's kitties and chickens and spirits I've heard
as the seasons change, women gather around
Dancing and drumming and singing abounds

Chorus

The backyard fire, the warmth inside
This lesbian venture fills me with pride
The warm winter hugs, the stories we tell
The laughter, the smiles, it all feels swell

Chorus

When the patriarchy tries to pull me down
I run to this haven that I've found
Many a sister has passed thru these doors
And I'm sure there will be many more

Soon, we built a raised platform in the backyard and, once a year, asked lesbian entertainers (headed to South Florida for a paying gig) if they would be willing to do a house concert for a "pass the hat" compensation. Most wimmin said yes. We had Kay Gardner, Nurudafina Pili Abena, Lucie Blue Tremblay, Alix Dobkin, Karen Williams, and Jamie Anderson, along with a handful of local talent.

We wrote a cookbook in 1997, *Dancing in the Kitchen*, and printed about 900 copies. I was a graphic designer, so I used my resources to keep the costs to a minimum. We eventually made back most of the money for the printing and bindery. Our recipes also appeared in other cookbooks: *The Butch Cookbook* by Lee Lynch and *The Perennial Political Palate* by The Bloodroot Collective of Bloodroot Restaurant in Connecticut.



Photo courtesy of Martha Ingalls

F. Louise greeting everyone
at the Lesbian Bizarre, 1992.

For a few years we held an annual "Lesbian Bizarre"—sort of a huge community yard sale and talent show. Eventually, this just became too much and we scaled back. Every year we'd ask each other, "Are you still having fun? Do you want to commit to doing

this for another year?" We would close in July and August, do house repairs, clean, go to The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and just regroup.

In 2009, Louise's health started to fail, and we eventually closed Something Special in April of 2011. Louise passed away the following September.

Those twenty-four years in that small wooden house will always be very "special" for me, and I'm sure for many others, too. In 2012, I was blessed to be able to pass the house on to another "sister" who is happily renting the place with her three furry friends. I bet she can still hear womyn's laughter in the trees in the backyard.