

# Veteran Feminists of America

Vol. 2, No. 1

Spring 1993

## **HOT ISSUES:**

# The Joys and Anguish of Aging

*NY Chapter's Speak-Out Reveals Sexism & Agism Go Together*

Some 23 feminist pioneers from the New York VFA chapter met at Janice LaRouche's apartment one evening recently to discuss, in a conscious-raising, "speak-out" format, how aging has affected our lives.

We talked about the loss of youthful beauty (and the attention it had gotten us), and some of us were glad that this was over. We talked about menopause; having to take care of aged parents; not having planned for an old age; facing physical slowing down and being treated differently by the world. Some women said they had discovered new-found joys in growing old. Others said they feared poverty, abandonment and facing their own mortality.

### **Behaving the Way 'They' Expect**

Most of us said we feel young inside (our "interior" ages were variously reported at 22 to 35), but many women reported that they were affected by how society sees us (particularly in the work world, where most of us are still expected to be "charming and attractive"). Several women talked about how we have internalized the outside world's preconceived notions of how old people should act, and how this negative feedback threatens to force us into acting and feeling as "they" expect. "We have this category of 'old' pushed on us, and we begin to behave accordingly," one woman said.

The shock of discovering that we are "invisible" was mentioned by several

women, with nods of recognition around the room: being served last at a coffee shop counter...seeing a man's eyes light up as he walks toward you on the street, only to realize that he's looking past you. Another shock, some women said, was looking in the mirror and thinking, "who's that?"

### **'Celibacy Is Liberating'**

The loss of sexual attractiveness was cited as a relief by many women. "A blessing," said one woman who had been a model. Celibacy is liberating, she added. "Men are so blatant in the way they ignore an older woman," said another. One woman said she was shocked when she realized, in a sudden epiphany in the dental chair, that her dentist was treating her "like an older woman." Some noted that there is "no respect or dignity in aging in the U.S."

### **Buying Into 'Youth Is Beauty'**

The loss of physical beauty was mourned by some, accepted by others. "When I was young, all I had to do was just be," said one woman. "Now I have to work hard to keep my lovers and friends." There was talk of cosmetic surgery, and some women said "why not?" Others said, "We don't have to buy into the 'youth is beauty' culture any more than we bought into sexism." One woman insisted that "it doesn't matter how attractive an older woman is—youth, not beauty, is what men want."

Some women confessed that they had

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## **HOT FLASHES**

### **New Name: Veteran Feminists of America**

As you can see, the name of our organization has been changed from Veterans of Feminist Wars to Veteran Feminists of America (VFA). Mary Jean Tully did some legal research and turned up the fact that using the initials VFW might expose us to legal action by another VFW, the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Our new name is not carved in stone. Some others that have been suggested are: Veterans of Feminist Struggles; Pioneer Feminists of the Second Wave; Pioneer Feminist Veterans. Jacque Ceballos would like your suggestions.

### **Catherine East Banquet Is a Smashing Success**

Some 250 veteran feminists and their families gathered at the Veterans Armory in New York on May 26th for a banquet to honor Washington area-based Catherine East, one of the earliest feminists of the second wave. Among the well-known feminist activists attending were Bella Abzug, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Flo Kennedy, Kate Millett, Barbara Seaman, and Gloria Steinem. Jacqui Ceballos will send more details to members in a separate mailing.

Catherine, in her position with the Kennedy Commission on the Status of Women, worked behind the scenes in those early days to sound the clarion call to women all over the country. Betty Friedan has called her one of the "midwives to the birth of the new feminist movement."

# What's Age Got to Do With It?

By Dell Williams

When I got a request to do a column on sex and aging, I stopped in my tracks. What did aging have to do with sex? Was it a problem? Does getting older affect our sexual libido?

What is getting older anyway, except an archaic belief system. I'm 69 and I don't feel old (well, maybe not as energetic; I can't ski as fast as I used to). But never "old." Someone made that up.

The fact is, sex is as natural a function of the human body as eating, sleeping and breathing. The Goddess granted us a body with the ability to respond sexually in many ways. Our entire outer skin is one big erogenous zone. So why would age affect our responses?

## Banish the Thought

If it does, it's all in the head. We create thoughts, and these thoughts solidify into our belief system. So if we *think* we are lacking in lust because of age, and since we

manifest what we think, we believe it. My advice: Banish the thought!

My experience is that the older I get, the sexier I get. Perhaps that's because I've spent many years in an unfolding process: pulling away, leaf by leaf, the psychic wounds that bound me.

## Facing Our Fears

And who in our society has not been psychically wounded? Psychic wounds create fear and distrust, the two elements that interfere most with the flow of intimacy, the flow of sex. When I was able to face my fears and dare to break through distrust, a space opened for love and lust to show up on a deeper level.

The only change in women that occurs with aging is the hormonal change after menopause that causes the thinning of the mucous membranes of the vaginal walls and a loss of elasticity. Rosetta Reitz, in her book *Menopause/A Positive Approach*,

recommends masturbation as a way of postponing this condition. It is also alleviated by the use of lubricants or by hormonal replacement therapy.

After discovering that estrogen is not necessarily the cancer-invoking ingredient we thought it was and that, in fact, it could actually lessen the chances of heart attacks, strokes and significantly decrease the risk of breast cancer, I decided to look into it. My doctor affirmed my decision. Hormonal replacement not only cured my vaginal dryness, it also stimulated my sexual libido.

To judge if estrogen replacement is for you, I recommend the book *Estrogen/A Complete Guide to Reversing the Effects of Menopause Using Hormone Replacement Therapy*, by Lila Nachtigall, M.D. and Joan Rattner Heilman.

My stand on sex and age is, "Til breath do us part"—which means, until my dying breath. Where there is life, where there is the life force, there is sex. Whether it is in the arms of your lover, or your cat, or in the middle of an orgasm, enjoy it til your last breath. Who knows, it may only be another beginning: I believe that each orgasm is a mini-version of the Big Bang that created life.

*Dell Williams is the owner of New York-based Eve's Garden International, Ltd., founded in 1974, where women have access to the "tools of pleasure."*

## Aging...

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finally realized that some dreams would never be fulfilled ("I know now that I'm never going to be a really good tennis player," said one woman). Some brought up the question: "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?"

A few women expressed fears of poverty and abandonment. The awareness of our own mortality was heightened, some said, by such things as having to care for aged mothers, the loss of important people in our lives, a mastectomy. One woman relieved the gloom by saying, "When I go, I want it to be in the middle of an orgasm." "Only one?" quipped another.

Jane O'Reilly said that she views aging

losses from the point of view of her favorite Japanese haiku: "Now that my house has burned down, I have a better view of the rising moon."

Among the joys of aging mentioned were: putting on weight and not caring; the discovery that menopause is "a breeze;" not taking rudeness anymore; the pleasures of grandparenthood; the time to do what we really want to do.

The anguish of getting older included: regrets about the book or play never written; difficulty in getting a job; insecurity on the job, (including pressure to move on and make room for younger people); physical slowing down, and forgetfulness.

The group agreed that, as we had with sexism, "we're going to have to fight back

against age discrimination, both economic and psychological." One woman reminded us of the full page newspaper advertisement some years ago in which women publicly admitted that they'd had illegal abortions: "We could do the same for agism by taking out an ad telling everybody our ages."

But even in the group, not all women were willing to tell their ages, and when one woman did volunteer that she was 77, she was greeted with the oohs and aahs of the "you don't look it" type.

Most of us realized, in this 1990s-type consciousness raising, that we are now under double jeopardy: We are not only women, with all that entails, but we are *older* women—and up against another "ism."

—Scotty Welch & Jane Everhart

# All We Have is Each Other

By Phyllis Chesler

In only 25 years, a visionary feminism has managed to seriously challenge, if not transform, world consciousness. Nevertheless, I am saddened and sobered by the realization that no more than a handful of feminists has been liberated from the grinding poverty, illness, overwork and endless worry that continue to afflict the lives of most women (and men) in America.

I have seen the best minds of my feminist generation go "mad" with battle fatigue, give up, disappear, kill themselves, die—often alone and in terrible isolation—as if we were already invisible to each other and to ourselves, our role as pioneers and immigrants diminished, forgotten.

Immigrants always form infrastructure or self-help groups and tithed themselves accordingly. We are the immigrants who in the late 1960s and early 1970s left the Old Patriarchal Country to clear a path in history for the generations to come. It is too late for us to turn back, and we've still got "miles to go before we sleep" in our own feminist country.

## Few Feminist Networks

There are few feminist networks in place with a mandate to assist feminists (or female adults) when they lose their jobs, become ill, *stay* ill, face death and are without patriarchal family resources, supportive mates or other safety nets.

I ask: Where are our feminist credit unions and emergency funds (remember those failed attempts in the mid-1970s)? Our feminist soup kitchens, Meals on Wheels, land trusts and old-age homes (remember those fiascoes)? Our breast cancer fund-raising campaigns, our hospices, our burial societies? (Feminists are just starting to get serious about breast cancer and about women with AIDS.)

These support systems do not yet exist. One survivor of breast cancer told me that in the mid-1980s, her newly formed cancer support group disbanded *when its first member died*.

Some feminists blame those whose immune systems cannot absorb any more environmental toxins—or toxic amounts of hostility. Some of us still say: "It's her own fault she has no health insurance,\* no nursing care, no job, no mate. She should have planned better or compromised harder." Or we say: "But isn't she really a little (or a lot) crazy?"

## Tired of the Fight

In 1982, Elizabeth Fisher, founder of *Aphra* magazine and author of *Women's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society*, and in 1987, my dear friend Ellen Frankfort, author of *Vaginal Politics*, killed themselves. Not just because they were depressed, on drugs or without hope that things would get better (although some of this was so), but also because they were tired of fighting so hard for so long for a place in the sun, tired of never having enough emotional support or sufficient money. They despaired of both man's and woman's inhumanity to woman.

So many of us have died, mainly of breast cancer. To name only a few: June Arnold, Parke Bowman, Jane Chambers, Barbara Deming, Mary-Helen Mautner, Barbara Meyerhoff, Lil Moed, Pat Parker, Barbara Rosenblum, Isacca Siegel, Sunny Wainwright.

## No Quilt, No Memorial

And so many of us are struggling with long-lasting disabilities, such as Lyme disease and Chronic Fatigue Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS), myself included.

We have no quilt, and no memorial.

Some of us have been blessed by feminist caretaking. I think of how magnificently Sandra Butler cared for—and orchestrated community support for—her cancer-stricken lover/partner Barbara Rosenblum (an account is in their book, *Cancer in Two Voices*). I think of how tenderly, how enduringly, Jesse Lemisch

## HOT FLASHES

### TBS Working on Documentary About Women

TBS Superstation in Atlanta is working on a four-hour documentary, titled "A Family of Women," about women in the 20th century. It is being produced by VU Productions, which says it has exclusive rights to the diaries, photos and collections at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, the largest archive on the history of American women. The program will air in the spring of 1994, in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the Library.

To contact VU Productions, call Dee Spiro in Atlanta (404) 827-3994; Stephanie Sperber in Los Angeles (310) 788-6904 or Yadira Garcia in New York (212) 852-6859, or write to TBS, One CNN Center, Box 105366, Atlanta, Ga., 30348-5366.

### Share Your Story

*How did the women's movement affect your life? Where has life taken you in the past 20-25 years? Would you like to share what you've learned in life with your VFA sisters? Send submissions to either Editor Jane Everhart or Director Jacquie Ceballos (and thank her first).*

has cared for his CFIDS-racked wife, my beloved comrade, Naomi Weisstein. I think of how many lesbian-feminists cared for and sent "white light" to Barbara Deming and Jane Chambers.

But these are splendid exceptions—lucky, individual solutions, even trends—not yet sturdy.

I recently attended a rent party for Ti-Grace Atkinson, author of *Amazon Odyssey*. Ti-Grace's health was seriously impaired by exposure to low-dose radiation. (Her father was head of the Atomic Energy Commission's Plutonium By-Products Division at Washington State's Hanford Reservation.) She says: "First, I had a

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## HOT FLASHES

### Betty Friedan Back in Hospital

Betty Friedan, who recently had open heart surgery at the Hospital of the Good Samaritan in Los Angeles, was back in the hospital at press time, suffering from an infection of her spine.

We spoke to Betty on the phone at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan, where she was in good spirits and said she hopes to be out in a few days. She told us her second heart valve replacement in Los Angeles was a success (the first one, using a pig valve, was not; the second, successful one, used a human valve), so she flew to Miami to speak at the Booksellers Convention about her new book, *The Fountain of Age*, which is due out this fall.

"My heart is fine—it's like a Cadillac, and recovering beautifully," she told us, but the infection that had eroded one valve of her heart spread into three disc spaces in her spine. She's on medication now, out of pain and full of her old vim and vinegar.

### A Feminist Retirement Community?

Interested in helping to start a feminist retirement community? Some of the ideas that women in the New York chapter have been talking about are: buying a hotel and running it ourselves for profit; buying a garden apartment building (one VFA member priced a garden apartment complex in the Long Island, N.Y. area going for \$500,000) or buying a small apartment building in Arizona, Florida, New York or Washington, D.C. Hotels are selling for 40 cents on the dollar in these tough times in real estate, particularly through the RTC and FDIC. If we can change the world, we can run a hotel. If you are interested or have ideas, contact Sandy Zwerling, (212) 758-5906.

### All We Have...

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hysterectomy. Now I have no thyroid left. I take tons of thyroid medication, some of which has made me sick and unable to work."

The rent party was a determined, even inspired, grassroots effort that yielded more good will than cash. However, such events are too labor-intensive, too hard to repeat on a monthly basis for every pioneer feminist who is in an illness-related economic crisis.

### Some Are Homeless

Ti-Grace at least has an apartment. Other feminist pioneers are—or are about to become—homeless.

For example, a legendary anti-pornography activist has been forced to warehouse her files and move in with a friend. The co-author of a lesbian-feminist classic, a well-known feminist comedienne, an abortion rights activist and countless other pioneers all sway unsteadily on the brink of joblessness and homelessness. The co-author of a much-loved book on feminist spirituality became homeless last year; she left New York for a warmer climate to be homeless in.

Shulamith Firestone, author of *The Dialectics of Sex*, and a welfare-recipient, had to battle hard to hang on to her rent-controlled apartment in between visits to Bellevue in the late 1980s. The fact that none of these women has written second books impoverishes us all.

I am not blaming any of us for not having done more. We did the best we could, and we did a lot. But in all our imaginings, we failed to imagine that we ourselves would grow weary or fall ill and have no real, specific "family" to take us in and tide us over until we could get back on our feet.

### We Talked Sisterhood

Some of us acted as if we didn't think we'd need families again. Perhaps our collective experience of transcendence blinded us to our ordinary needs. But most of us were longing for "communitas." We talked about sisterhood and community, tribes and alternate families—but only in

the abstract, as we rushed from one dazzling spectacle to another.

I know: The republic ought to provide employment, health insurance and medical care for all its citizens. But it doesn't, and we have fallen on hard times, along with everyone else. All we have is each other: Our sisters, ourselves.

*\* In May, 1992, the Older Women's League (OWL) released a report which showed that due to low-paying and part-time work, American women between the ages of 40-60 are far more likely than their male contemporaries to lack health insurance.*

*Phyllis Chesler is the author of Women and Madness, N.Y.: Avon, 1973*



## Mailbox

"...What a magical feeling to see all those feminist names again. Since I moved to Australia in 1978—as the first female executive in the U.S. company that sent me—I've had no active involvement in organized movements.

The Australian women's movement was very different from the U.S., being closely connected to electoral politics rather than mass movements. We've certainly had some real changes in this country. Our gender gap in wages is less than yours, but our breadth of female opportunity is more constrained. I guess I was a strong role model because in the early years I had a high media profile...I gave speeches to women's forums and acted as a feminist gadfly.

I recently became an Australian citizen. My life is quiet now; I am married to an Australian, semi-retired and enjoying it. I would be happy to hear from other veteran feminists. As more and more tourists come to Australia, I'm sure some of that old crowd of stalwarts must be among them.

—Judith Lightfoot Cormack  
Sydney, Australia

# Going for a Hundred

By Mary-Scott ("Scotty") Welch

I'm one of the lucky old women, and it's thanks to feminism that I know just how lucky I am. That is, I know how difficult life was for the women who came before me.

I have feminism to thank, too, for my so-far-cheerful acceptance of "looking my age." Now if I could only have back the time and money I wasted on such conformities as hair frosting...ah, but I've promised myself not to regret the past, even to that extent, only to *understand* it.

And that's where feminism weighs in to my greatest advantage at age 73. It enables me to get a self-forgiving handle on my younger days. Understanding the past doesn't improve it, I'll admit, but in my case, at least, it keeps me from wishing I were young again. My feminism lets me see myself as a survivor.

## What I Survived

For what it may be worth when you get to re-assessing your own history, here is what I feel lucky to have survived:

- I survived the 1940s, including a scary illegal abortion. If I hadn't found that boozy doctor in the proverbial back alley of Chicago, I wouldn't have been able to build the foundation of a career that has sustained me from then on to this day.
- I survived the 1950s, when I was made to feel guilty and "unfeminine" because I wasn't completely "fulfilled" by raising four children. Working half days made me the odd-woman-out in the suburbs—even though, as the *Ladies Home Journal* and its ilk ordained, I worked at home, so I could be "there" for the kids.

I also survived the "family planning" that produced the first three of those kids in three years. Believe it or not, it was my own idea to have the children so close together, starting when I was 30. What we now call

the "biological clock" ran out earlier in those days, and this "plan" was designed to get me back to my full-time editorial job that much sooner. A hollow joke, that, but how was I to know better, in those days when women didn't talk turkey to each other except at Thanksgiving time?

## Cancer and Depression

- I survived the 1960s, which included both breast cancer and the unacknowledged depression that followed. Part of my emotional problem was pretending the mastectomy never happened: Remember back when breast cancer was a big secret? The other part of my problem was trying to cram my entire future into the five years I thought I had left to live. (Eventually a psychiatrist would help me see that I'd been confusing the computer in my head, giving it two diametrically opposed messages: "I'm fine, fine, fine," versus "I'm on my deathbed.")

- When I think of how I survived the 1970s, I really have to credit my husband.

(I know, I know, I too always cringe when I hear those modest little pull-the-forelock speeches that women give from the podium, saying they couldn't have done it, whatever it was, without their fathers or their husbands or their bosses or Patriarches Anonymous. But when it comes to the 1970s, see if you don't agree that my husband's survival-power was crucial to my own.)

## Deep, Bitter Anger

What he survived was the deep, bitter anger that welled up in me as a result of two major events of 1971 and 1972. First was my own consciousness-raising with the Radical Feminists. (I joined up for the sake of my daughters, I thought—hadn't I always been a feminist? Ha!) Then came

the devastating rape of the most vulnerable of our three daughters—with the painful side effect of causing me to rethink my own experiences with men. Including said husband.

He also survived my first year as an activist in the Movement, an intensive year of full-time work with New York NOW's Rape Prevention Committee.

## Widowhood & Sexism

What my husband of 39 years did not survive was his heart attack in 1981. Widowhood carries its own load of sexism, some of it internal, but once again feminism came to my rescue. Janice LaRouche, in particular, helped me with the guilt, the money and the choice I had to make when the New Man turned out to be the marrying kind.

I chose what I called a political statement (against marriage), but I felt like a fraud until Janice called it "personal autonomy." That label also seemed to take care of my children's objections to their mother's doing what *they* do—living with a person of the opposite sex outside of marriage—especially with a man not of their own choosing.

## Reminders of Age

So here I am, 12 years later and so what if my daily quarter mile swim now takes me 15 minutes, I can't spring up from the floor without using my hands, I start yawning at 11 and (most telling of all), I really need that nap in the daytime? In exchange for such everyday reminders of age, I am enjoying a let-up in the driving force that used to make me restless and sometimes reckless, too: I am no longer afraid that I'm missing something!

What I'm definitely *not* missing is the '40s, the '50s, the '60s, the '70s or even the '80s. So here's to the 1990s—and on to 2019!

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*Mary-Scott Welch is the author of 13 books, including **Networking: The Great New Way for Women to Get Ahead**. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981.*

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Please keep this list and share it with other women who are interested in the VFA. We will add to the list as membership grows.

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