

Sally Miller Gearhart, Lesbian Separatist and Activist, Dies at 90

She fought anti-gay policies alongside Harvey Milk, wrote influential books, including science fiction, and founded a women-only refuge in the woods.



Sally Miller Gearhart at a rally and street party in San Francisco in 1979. Her community, Women's Land, in Northern California, was home to an eclectic group of women, many of them lesbians, who wanted to be closer to nature and farther from men. Credit...Daniel Nicoletta

By [Annabelle Williams](#)

Sally Miller Gearhart, a feminist, lesbian activist and prominent opponent of anti-gay policies whose writings included a classic of lesbian science fiction about a women-only society, much like the one she later founded in Northern California, died on July 14 in Ukiah, Calif. She was 90.

Deborah Craig, a friend and the [producer of a forthcoming documentary](#) film about Dr. Gearhart, confirmed her death.

Dr. Gearhart rose to prominence in the 1970s when she campaigned with Harvey Milk, a San Francisco city supervisor and the first openly gay politician elected in California, against Proposition 6, a ballot measure that would have banned gay and lesbian teachers from public schools.

In 1978, on television, Dr. Gearhart and Mr. Milk debated the measure's main backer, State Senator John Briggs, who said at one point, "We cannot prevent child molestation, so let's cut our odds down and take out the homosexual group and keep in the heterosexual group."

Dr. Gearhart responded: "Why take out the homosexual group when it is more than overwhelmingly true that it is the heterosexual men, I might add, that are the child molesters?"

She refused to back down and cited data on the topic, staring straight into the camera as if daring viewers to disagree with her.

In large part because of Dr. Gearhart and Mr. Milk's efforts, the proposition did not pass in the November election that year. Less than three weeks later, Mr. Milk and Mayor George Moscone of San Francisco were fatally shot in City Hall by a conservative former city supervisor.

In 1973 Dr. Gearhart had become one of the first openly lesbian tenure-track professors at a major American university when she was hired at San Francisco State. She taught classes on women and gender studies. In 1977, she appeared in the noted documentary "Word Is Out," which interviewed gay and lesbian people about their experiences and [is considered](#) one of the first feature films about the L.G.B.T.Q. community.

She wrote widely, both fiction and nonfiction, focusing on the environment, religion, feminism and lesbianism. Her writings include scholarly works examining the relationship between Christian churches, including Catholicism, and homosexuality; "The Feminist Tarot" (1975), which examined tarot card practices from a women's studies angle; and "The Wanderground, Stories of the Hill Women" (1978), a book of science fiction.

"The Wanderground" is about a utopian community of women who communicate psychically with one another. It explored themes of women's inherent connections to the Earth and to one another. Remaining in print for over two decades, the book was one of the first major instances of lesbian representation in science fiction, a traditionally male genre.

Dr. Gearhart created her own Wanderground later in life: a community she called Women's Land in Willits, a city in redwood forest country about 140 miles north of San Francisco. She considered it the culmination of her lesbian separatist philosophy.

"I keep saying that feminism as I understand it is an ideology of possibility, not probability," she said in [an interview in 1980](#). She lived there with her "land partner," Jane Gurko, her dog, Bodhi, and an eclectic group of women, many of them lesbians, who wanted to experience life closer to nature and, in many cases, farther from men.

Members of the community, which fluctuated in size, lived in cabins in the woods, outside of patriarchal confines, in Dr. Gearhart's view.

Sally Miller Gearhart was born April 15, 1931, in the Appalachian town of Pearisburg, Va., and raised in a conservative Protestant family. Her father, Kyle Montague Gearhart, was a dentist; her mother, Sarah (Miller) Gearhart, was a secretary.

"Mine was the childhood of the penny postcard and the ten-cent movie," Dr. Gearhart wrote in an autobiographical sketch [on her website](#), adding, "We were salt-of-the-earth people, believing in the Threefold God and in the everlasting virtues of hard work, a clean house, and strong drink."

Her parents divorced when Sally was young, and she spent much of her childhood with her maternal grandmother, who ran a women's boardinghouse. It was her first taste of a female-only community and one that stuck with her throughout her life.

She attended Sweet Briar College, a women's college in Virginia, earning a bachelor's degree in drama and English in 1952. She received a master's degree in theater and public address at Bowling Green State University in Ohio in 1953 and a doctorate in theater from the University of Illinois in 1956.

Dr. Gearhart hid her sexuality throughout her time in college and graduate school. [She recalled](#) ripping up books with gay themes lest anyone discover that she had read them. She did not come out until she moved to San Francisco in 1970.

And she rejected marriage, even once it was legalized for gay and lesbian couples, viewing it as a regressive, patriarchal institution. Ms. Gurko died in 2010. Dr. Gearhart left no immediate survivors.

Despite her forceful views, she was a figure of some contradiction — and openness. Ms. Craig, the filmmaker, described Dr. Gearhart this way:

"A lesbian feminist tree hugger who lived in a rustic cabin in the woods but ate only Pepsi and junk food.

"A disrupter who rejected the church and the 'patriarchy,' but knew the Bible through and through, had many close men friends and admirers, and enjoyed the company of conservatives so she could explore what made them tick."

Finally, Ms. Craig said, Dr. Gearhart was "a master debater who rejected persuasion and rhetoric as violence and sought more equitable and mutually respectful forms of communication."