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From the Archives

An Update on the June L. Mazer Archives Project

DIGITIZING ORGANIZATIONAL RECORDS FROM THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
WOMEN FOR UNDERSTANDING (SCWU)

by James Hixon

As a graduate student researcher for the Center for the Study of Women, I have been working on a grant-funded project to digitize several collections from the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives in West Hollywood. Among these are the organizational records from The Southern California Women for Understanding (SCWU), which was established in 1976 and grew to be one of the largest lesbian organizations in the country.

At the time, SCWU was well aware of the important contribution its records could make to the construction of lesbian history. In an issue from SCWU's 1982 newsletter, Bunny MacCulloch, a longstanding member of the Board of Directors and the organization's archivist, wrote about the challenges that she and her contemporaries faced in developing lesbian identities without having any historical

documents upon which they could look back. She writes: "We each examined, therefore, only our own corner of the closet. Each of us invented for herself, through trial and error, ways to interpret the world and ourselves so that we could manage to fit ourselves into it in spite of the nearly universal contempt in which homosexuality was held. There was no gay press to speak of, nor any of the usual time-binding structures that cultures traditionally form in order to perpetuate and improve themselves, such as schools, museums, archives, cultural centers, libraries, and so on."¹ The establishment of such community-based archives as the Mazer Archives fills a critical gap in the documentation and preservation of lesbian history.

Inspired by the metaphor of Janus, the two-faced Roman god who was said to guard the doorways of the ancient archives by looking

both backward and forward, I want to suggest that these records are valuable not only for the evidence they garner regarding lesbian histories; rather, they also impart knowledge about the struggles that persist in the present and future of the LGBT movement. Spanning 22 years, the SCWU newsletters provide a fertile ground for exploring some of the close connections between the early lesbian and gay rights movement and contemporary LGBT issues. Several key newsletters help explicate these connections.

In 1978, SCWU and other California gay and lesbian organizations fought against the Briggs initiative, or Proposition 6, that would ban homosexuals and their allies from teaching in schools. Revealing how gay men and lesbians successfully overcame their often separatist agendas to form a strong political campaign, the SCWU newsletters from 1978 to 1979

document the trajectory of activism against this insipid proposition. Though in some ways they are very different, Proposition 6 and the recent Proposition 8 represent similar attempts to defend dominant social institutions against the perceived threat of homosexuality. In reading about the challenges that those who fought against Proposition 6 overcame, one can't help but feel that these lessons could have been significant for the recent campaign.

Many of the racist and classist assumptions inherent in the "No on 8" campaign came to the forefront after its passage. Likewise, it is no secret that the LGBT movement has had a long history of promoting a white, middle-class representation of homosexuality that would easily assimilate into and be accepted by mainstream culture. In the SCWU newsletters, however, we can also see a challenge to that agenda. As an example, a 1989 newsletter contains several articles about racism within the lesbian movement, one of which dates back to the mid-1970s. These powerful articles challenge white liberals to confront the racism that they have inherited and from which they continue to benefit. An article from an early 1989 newsletter takes up the issue of classism specifically. In it, Carol Matthews writes that "[a]s lesbians, when we suffer the pains of internalized homophobia, when we separate ourselves from our sisters along lines of color and class, we not only lose the relatedness that is so essential to

our personal growth, we also severely weaken our community."² In the wake of Proposition 8's passage, as we confront the inability of the campaign to bridge borders of race and class, Matthews' insight is particularly powerful.

In short, these newsletters provide a rich sense of the complexities of the lesbian movement, and in them, we can find evidence of the profound work that has been done by the activists that came before. As records, these documents reveal the diversity and multiplicity of lesbian historical narratives. But they are not only documents of the past. They also have the power to inform the present, and future, of this movement.

James Hixon is a graduate student in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA.

Notes

1. MacCulloch, Bunny. 1982. "Oldies But Goodies Wanted." *SCWU*, April-May, 1982, p. 7.
2. Matthews, Carol. 1989. "Hanging Together: A Viewpoint on Classism and Internalized Homophobia." *The SCWU Newsletter*, December, 1988-January, 1989, p. 5.

DON'T MISS THIS EVENT IN
SPRING QUARTER OF 2009!

Mazer Symposium

This event will feature presentations on the 2-year project and will bring together representatives of the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, the UCLA Center for Community Partnerships, and the UCLA Center for the Study of Women.

Check the CSW website for information on the date and time for this public event.