

## **Title- Formative Years: The Birth of *Our Bodies Ourselves***

**Panelists: Joan Ditzion, Nancy Miriam Hawley, Paula Doress-Worters and Wendy Sanford  
Co-Founders of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective**

These notes are from our panel which we presented at the "*A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s*," a conference organized by the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, March 27-29, 2014.

Welcome, I'm Joan Ditzion, one of the original founders of The Boston Women's Health Book Collective (BWHBC) now named Our Bodies Ourselves and along with; Nancy Miriam Hawley, Paula Doress-Worters, Wendy Sanford we welcome you to our Activist Panel: "The Formative Years: The Birth of Our Bodies Ourselves". We are thrilled to be part of this conference, thank Deborah Belle and Jaho King and all the organizers for capturing the passion of the social change/social justice vision, and the intelligence, creativity, and energy that was unleashed in us as a cohort 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists of the WLM in the late 60's and early 70's. For us as founders of the BWHBC, a core part of this WL movement, we are continually amazed that our project, to help ourselves and other women deal with health, reproductive and sexual issues has come so far and changed the global conversation on women and health. We are one of the few surviving projects of the early days of the women movement and in 2011 celebrated our 40th anniversary along with some of our global partners that adapted *Our Bodies Ourselves (OBOS)* and produced our 9<sup>th</sup> edition of *OBOS*. Way back in the early 1970's none of us would have imagined that *OBOS* would become a household phrase. The book, which has a life of its own has struck such a responsive chord and has been exchanged by so many hands and touched so many women here and around the globe. More than 4.5 million copies have been sold. How many of you have read it? You probably each have an *OBOS* story about yourself, sister, mother or friends finding supportive, trustworthy information at a critically important time in your or their lives. That's part of our story, all of our stories and we want to hear from you. And it's possible that many of you here aren't familiar with the book/project. Great, we want you to know this history.

So, let me tell you about the format of our session together today. We will start with our panel, as birth mothers of the project and we will weave together our stories with the early history on *OBOS*.

Then after 45 minutes we will open up for discussion, initially small group and then expand to a large group for feedback from small group discussion and Q &A. We want to hear your stories.

We as founders are aging women and we want the wisdom that we have accumulated, our legacies and the complex legacy of the early days of this feminist WL movement to be documented and built on and to stimulate intergenerational conversations and questions in thinking about what are the important issues today as we continue to work together for a just, egalitarian society.

Some of you are interested in more details and history of this project.

We have a handout of a time line and a Web site [www.ourbodiesourselves.org](http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org) , books are available here, downstairs in the Sherman Center in the Center for Gender, Sexuality and Activism we have a visual display of photos and memorabilia from the early years and all our materials are archived at the Schlesinger Library.

So let us begin. I am proud to introduce Founder panelists; Nancy Miriam Hawley, Paula Doress-Worters, Wendy Sanford and myself. With regret Jane Pincus was not able to join us and sends her love. Founder's present in the audience are: Judy Norsigian, our amazing Executive Director and Pamela Berger, Founders Vilunya Diskin, Norma Swenson, Sally Whelen, Ruth Alexander and Elizabeth Mac Mahan with regret were not able to be here and Pamela Morgan and Esther Rome who have died are with us in spirit.

## **Nancy Miriam Hawley**

### ***From One Question to 4.5 Million Copies Sold:***

- *Burning Question*

As you listen I invite you to ask yourself “what is my burning question?” (And I will ask you later)

A “burning question” helps you get at the purpose of your life (or organization or business) and the actions you need to take to fulfill your purpose. A burning question gets you up in the morning, wakes you at night and is so compelling that you have to follow where it leads you. It calls out to you as much as you are asking it. It occurs as having a life of its own.

- *History of My Question*

Today I am 71. Story begins 48 years ago (some of you were not born yet) in office of my OB/GYN at the 6 week check up after the birth of my first son

Imagine me as a 23 year old professional young woman asking a question after the doctor (he) recommended that I use a new –to- market pill for birth control

What's in this pill? I ask.

His response: condescending pat on my head and literally said "don't worry your pretty little head!"

My reaction – first embarrassment, then anger that would turn to outrage, an outrage that would help source the women's movement and create OBOS

In months that followed my family and I moved from Ann Arbor to Cambridge. I refused the high dosage pill he prescribed and instead continued to use a diaphragm for protection – messy though it was!

I would now like to share the journey of my burning question –to share what happened in a sterile doctor's office and how it triggered a movement that resonated with women globally. Let me give you the context:

- *Context of 60s and Family*

Look at context of late 60s in America—growing civil rights and anti war movements followed by the deaths of some of our most important and inspiring leaders – JFK, RFK and MLK, Jr. We were coming out of the 50s and the “feminine mystique” and into the beginnings of the second wave of the women's movement.

I was the first generation in my family to complete college. My parents were activists. Social justice was the family's religion. I grew up singing songs of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, the Weavers, and Odetta. My mother was an early feminist and encouraged me to get the professional degree she hadn't been able to pursue because of the Great Depression. While opportunities have expanded, there are still great inequities in the marketplace.

November 1968: I attended a meeting in Chicago of women from the New Left. We discussed women's roles in the movement and we heard original papers on education (Naomi Weinstein) and on health (Anne Koedt on “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm”).

December 1968: open women's gatherings happened monthly at MIT. At this meeting we shared about Chicago event and talked about a women's conference.

The burning question remained with me through the birth of my second child and motivated me to organize the first women's conference in Boston.

- *From First Conference to Publications of Book*

It's now late April 1969. Early in AM. I'm sitting in butterfly chair. My 3 week old daughter has finally fallen asleep in my arms. Exhausted and questioning why I had taken on helping to organize the first women's conference in Boston. Then I think back to my unanswered question, the conversations with women friends about their questions and to the stories of friends who had unnecessary C sections or no access to abortions. I look at my daughter and think "I am doing it for you!"

May 4, 1969- I am standing in front of a packed room at Emmanuel College's female liberation conference leading the workshop "Control of their Bodies."

We discussed control over our bodies from many perspectives. We couldn't evaluate the medical skills of our doctors but we could their attitudes. Women want to continue talking...

June 1969 to Dec 1970 there was a lot of activity. We meet in each other's homes; we research topics on women's health and sexuality and gather women's experiences; we mimeograph papers and deliver a course at an MIT lounge; women ask for a book; we raise money and print the book ourselves; in December, 1970 *Women and Their Bodies* (later named *Our Bodies, Ourselves*) is born. We bring together three threads, three threads that continue to make our book unique: accurate health and medical information; women have lived experiences; and a social/political/economic analysis of the medical system.

In the next two years we sell 250,000 copies by word of mouth...every woman has a body and knowledge is power. I say for that reason we are going to sell 1 million and people laugh at me. In 1972 we sign a contract with Simon and Schuster to achieve wider distribution...eventually of many millions!

- *Current Collectivity*

By seeking information for ourselves, we saw the value for all women, and we found we could make a difference. In the context of the growing women and women and health movements, OBOS was one committed group of women that was instrumental in altering the global conversation about women's health and sexuality.

- *Personal is political – then and now*

We have honored our personal questions and our personal experiences. Coming together and sharing our stories, we have learned that the personal is political. We have named and addressed the systems in play—first and foremost, our bodies. Then the hierarchal medical system dominated by male doctors. We don't blink at the fact that over 50% of doctors today are women. When I first asked my question in 1966, none were visible to me.

And we recognize that the social/political/economic systems that focus on profits before people are still alive and well in the current healthcare debate.

- *Your Burning Question*

It all started with a burning question- “What’s in this birth control pill?” – that led to women gathering together and generating a new way of looking at our bodies, ourselves and the world

Take a moment – what is your burning question? Turn and speak it to your neighbor. I trust you will continue to share your burning questions and get support for addressing them throughout this conference

- *My Question Now and Moving Forward*

Our Bodies, Ourselves helped change the culture. For the first time, women took responsibility for their health before the birth of the internet, social media and ubiquitous connectivity. For example, this week we were acknowledged online in the Huffington Post as one group among 21 extraordinary women who changed sex forever!

It began with a burning question – a question my doctor refused to answer – “what’s in this (birth control) pill?” It was the right question at a time when the culture was ready to hear it. Now over 40 years later the book is still in print. And that question and the other questions that gave rise to it are now answered, though in doing so, deeply ingrained attitudes about doctors, knowledge, the role of gender and women’s rights were transformed.

There is a new burning question that has arisen for me, every bit as compelling as the original – less concrete in nature, less medical, less gender specific – no less important – and just as urgent, may even more so.

End- From my work as a business coach and researcher/author, what is compelling to me now is **“how do we bring our whole selves to the whole of our lives in the present moment”** for the purpose of enjoying life and of making the difference we want to see in the world?

Just as in the sixties, we are in the midst of a cultural shift – a shift that demands that women take leadership and women and men work together to keep the thread alive that for me started with my initial question.

Will you join me? Will you join us? As we enter into a process that cares for self, for one another and the planet? Together we can cause the transformation that will create a sustainable reality for our children, grandchildren and generations to come. As poet, deep ecologist and Buddhist Joanna Macy said – it may take 900 years...we are only responsible for asking the questions and getting started.

### **Paula Doress- Worters**

Good morning, I'm Paula. I grew up the eldest child of immigrants, in 1940s-1950s Roxbury, then a predominantly Jewish working class neighborhood of Boston. Unlike Miriam's parents, mine were not politically active, but as new citizens made sure to vote in every election. I grew up increasingly aware of my mother's anxiety about family remaining in Poland, the grandmother and uncles I would never know. This awareness sensitized me to racism as a danger to all societies. When African-Americans were moving north after WWII settled in Roxbury, I noticed that city bus drivers were rude to them when they took the bus to our high school. Other adults and some teens as well were uncomfortable with our new neighbors. As I came of age in 1960s America, I identified racism as the major national social issue in a college-wide survey. Soon racism in the U.S. became a major focus for American college students questioning the status quo.

Many of us in the OBOS founders group were active in the social justice movements of the 1960s, especially Civil Rights and opposition to the Vietnam war. After graduating from college, I worked as a community organizer in a racially mixed section of Roxbury. When some in our interracial organizing project embraced Black Nationalism, they urged white participants to go back to their communities to organize white people against racism. As a newly married woman living in a brick apartment building,

without porches or yards for neighboring, I wondered where and what was my community if not with that project?

The rise of a Women's Liberation movement was an exciting new development that provided an answer for many of us. How could we be successful in the fight for greater social equality without challenging our own subordinate positions as women --in marriage, the workplace, and the wider society? I began attending CR groups, and task force groups with the hope that our new movement would strengthen women in our personal lives and empower us as a political movement.

At the first women's liberation conference in Boston in May 1969, there were such a variety of workshops. I watched a karate demonstration and signed up for a class in Brookline, attended sessions on Women in Algeria, and in China. I was drawn to a session on Women and Control of our Bodies, because the two discussion leaders were friends of mine. Miriam Nancy Hawley, then a new friend I met through the women's movement, now an old friend of nearly a half century. She was presenting on the advantages of prepared childbirth which we had both chosen for our births. The other presenter was Sociologist, Nancy Stoller Shaw, an old friend from the Civil Rights movement who was presenting on abortion as an important part of reproductive rights then still illegal in the U.S.

That workshop was very well attended, yet despite our numbers, everyone had a chance to share their questions and experiences. The session was so compelling that many wanted to continue meeting through the summer, with the goal of creating a course that would help other women find answers to health and medical concerns. That summer of research and sharing experiences was the start of the Our Bodies Ourselves project.

Those developments coincided with important changes in my life. I had become a mother by choice in 1966, yet seemingly out of nowhere, was overcome with depression, and marital problems. I was frustrated that there was no literature for lay readers on postpartum depression, and so I chose that topic for my research and course presentation.

When the opportunity arose to publish a book based on our course, I felt motivated to do further research on postpartum. I worked with the late Esther Rome, whose mother had experienced a postpartum depression. We were a good team, and crafted a chapter that looked at the physical and emotional challenges of postpartum depression, and ended with a list of "demands," that is, social policy changes,

that would ease the isolation of new mothers and support mothers and children, such as free child care. We were naïve about what was involved, but we had begun to identify what was needed.

We were a group that challenged the role of experts, especially male experts who set themselves up as experts on women. In the medical literature, we were outraged to read, “women are passive, narcissistic, and masochistic.” Our motto, “Women are the best experts on ourselves,” was an important theme of OBOS. That can-do philosophy shaped our approach to the research we did for the course and later, the book. We each chose chapters that particularly interested us and wrote from a laywoman’s perspective, turning to our few allies in the medical profession to help us gain access to medical journals, steer us to useful resources, and read drafts of our chapters for medical accuracy. We also collected and shared information on doctors, for women seeking referrals.

We were empowered by our can-do philosophy in our group decision-making. In negotiating a contract with our publisher, we asked for concessions that were unheard of. We insisted on control over the cover, and on traveling in pairs on book tours. Traveling together strengthened our bonds within the group, but also served to demonstrate collaboration as we shared the spotlight on interviews. We also asked for and received a clinic discount for low-income women, and funding for a U.S. Spanish translation.

#### My other book projects following OBOS:

(The New) Ourselves Growing Older (1986, 1994) was a project I developed in my forties and fifties with Diana Laskin Siegal, a friend and my role model for how to manage hot flashes. We reached out to other midlife women and to those older than ourselves, holding CR groups about experiences of aging and ageism. We ran workshops asking the question: what kind of older woman do you want to be? We took our workshop to a seniors women’s group at Freedom House in Roxbury and were impressed that many spoke of grandchildren who looked to them for advice about their lives, not a phenomenon we had experienced in our mostly white communities.

In between book projects, I taught Women’s Studies as an adjunct professor at Emerson College. In preparing a Women’s History course, I came across a name that was new to me. Ernestine Rose, was an early 19<sup>th</sup> century activist and a mentor to the better-known Stanton & Anthony. As an immigrant, a Jew, and an atheist, Rose transcended those marginal identities to become a ground breaking early leader of first wave feminism. She coined the phrase: “Women’s rights are human rights.” In my sixties, at Brandeis University’s Women’s Studies Research Center, I satisfied my curiosity about how Rose and her colleagues got together and organized at a time when women had so few legal and economic rights. I



researched and published *Mistress of Herself*, a collection of Rose's speeches and letters with an introductory chapter about her life and work in women's rights, abolition of slavery, and religious free thought.

### Burning Issues

There are no safe communities when guns and ammunition are allowed to proliferate. I grew up in Roxbury, where the mostly peaceful terrain of my youth has become a magnet for profiteers who bring in guns from surrounding states to sell to adolescents, weapons that easily escalate petty quarrels to murder. Two of my grandchildren live 35 miles from Newtown CT, where a tragic mass killing of children and teachers took place little more than a year ago. I am saddened and angered by so many preventable deaths. Gun safety, a euphemism for gun control (which bizarrely has become a politically incorrect term), is a burning issue for me. What other reform could save so many lives?

Women are the majority of straw buyers of guns when men with criminal records coerce or seduce them to be straw purchasers of guns, often many in one purchase. One woman in that situation lost her scholarship to Barnard College when she was convicted of buying guns for her boyfriend. When violence against women was declared a public health issue, it focused awareness of health and medical professionals and the general public. It turns out in addition that when a woman is abused by a male partner or husband, the assault more quickly turns deadly when a gun is involved.

### The Future of Reproductive Rights

Another burning issue is protecting Roe v Wade in the courts and state legislatures. We must protect abortion rights for and with future generations, and protect marriage & workplace rights for the LGBT community. These are essential reproductive rights, not mere 'social' issues. Yet, as long as a noisy crowd of narrow-minded people are willing to turn other people's lives upside down to turn back progress, our work is never finished, and every generation must fight these battles anew. If there is a bright side to this, it's that it draws each new generation back to these issues and keeps many of us veteran feminists working on them as well.

## **Wendy Sanford**

[As I spoke extemporaneously, I have reconstructed my portion of the panel, inevitably leaving out some things I don't remember having said. I have also woven in a couple of points that I didn't have time to include that day.]

I took a slightly different route to the early Our Bodies Ourselves work. Today I will trace that route briefly, and then talk about how the book grew and changed over the years to reflect the voices and health and sexuality concerns of wider circles of women.

I grew up in an upper middle class WASP family, no red diaper baby me; I didn't even know about folk singing until I joined the women's health book collective! I got to the OBOS group through post partum depression, which I experienced after the birth of my first child in 1969.

I had tried speaking to my ob/gyn about how I was feeling. Across the expanse of his desk, I told him how I sank to the living room floor and cried while my baby napped, pressing my cheek against the carpet, how I felt like I was falling apart. The doctor laid a hand on mine. "Don't want too much," he said, patting. "This is what I like to tell my new mothers: Get out to a library once in a while to keep your mind going and your spirits up, but be satisfied. You are raising a new generation. You are taking care of your husband when he comes home from a busy day."

When this same physician fitted me for a diaphragm, I asked when to put it in, meaning how soon before intercourse with my husband. His recommendation was clear. "Dinner, dishes, diaphragm," he said. He was a kind man, and a generous doctor. He saved the life of a friend of mine. But he was ready to steer me down an old road.

Thus primed for the women's health movement, though not yet knowing it, I got a call from Esther Rome, the wife of a graduate school friend of my husband. She invited me to an informal "course" on women's health taught by laywomen in an MIT lounge. I didn't go the first week. I couldn't seem to get myself out the door to evening events. Peter was nine months old, but still I felt tired. And the term *women's health* put me off. Although calling myself a "woman" instead of a "girl" made sense in one way—I was twenty-six—"woman" sounded too old and too self-important.

The next week, Esther sent someone to drive me to the class, so I had to go. I walked into an MIT lounge crowded with fifty women. They weren't girls, I could tell that. They stretched out on the floor, leaned against each other's legs, nursed their babies, cupped their pregnant bellies in both hands. A woman was addressing the group from the front. "Masturbation," she said. Several women smiled and gestured for us to come in. As we tiptoed across the floor, I could feel my face heat up. I had seen *masturbation* in print once, in an article I had skimmed furtively in a library. This was the first time I had heard the word said out loud.

The presenter held up a life-size diagram of a woman with her legs spread apart to reveal a huge vagina, pubic hair and all. I snuck a shy glance around me. I had never looked at myself down there. "See," the woman said, pointing boldly with her finger. "Here's the clitoris. During sexual arousal it engorges with blood just like a penis does." Laughter rippled across the room. "No, I'm serious. It's got all kinds of nerve endings. It's our major organ of sexual pleasure. Not the vagina, despite what Freud

says. Who knew this before?" She looked across our upturned faces. A few hands. "That's my point," she said. "We should know these things. These are our bodies."

Someone to my left began describing her orgasms. I ducked my head, the flush rising again. Intercourse didn't always make her come, she said, but it was hard to ask her husband to touch her differently. Men were "socialized" to think that they should know what to do; they didn't like being told otherwise.

Soon we were supposed to "break into small groups" something as new to me as the idea of being "socialized". The women moved purposefully around me, gathering their things. My arms ached with emptiness, and I ran a finger along my cheek as if to caress my son's soft skin.

I was the last to file into the nearest classroom, where a dark-haired woman who turned out to be the Miriam who is on this panel today was moving the desks into a circle. We all introduced ourselves. The other women turned out to be in their late twenties, like me. Nearly all were mothers. I studied their faces for happiness.

The conversation in my small group jumped around from orgasm to breastfeeding to birth control. I found myself leaning toward the others as they spoke. Suddenly a woman across the circle named Paula (also on the panel today) revealed that for months after her baby was born she had felt terrible. Not physically, but emotionally. She lay around a lot, feeling drained, worried, and afraid. "What was it?" I asked, hearing my own voice for the first time that night. "What did you do?"

She turned to me with her serious hazel eyes. Many doctors dismissed postpartum depression as the "baby blues," she said, but it was a serious condition caused by hormonal changes and social isolation. She was trying to exercise more and to spend time with other mothers. She was researching postpartum depression so that maybe other women wouldn't have to go through what she had.

"Yes!" another woman added. Her mother had suffered from a severe postpartum depression, and so had she.

This was dizzying news to me. What I had been feeling had a name. It was a real phenomenon, with physical and societal causes, and it wasn't my fault. The nuclear family could be a lonely place for mothers, the women said. What I experienced as I blotched the yellow living room rug with tears while my baby napped was part of a societal picture that I could learn about—that perhaps, with others, I could change. I felt a glimmer of elation, as if someone had lifted the flap of a heavy tarp that had settled on me, letting in light, a gust of air. That night as I floated down the steps between the huge MIT pillars, I felt forgiven somehow. I jumped into teaching the Bodies course, into women's health activism, with the energy of one sprung from a trap.

On an early March Saturday in 1971, close to Peter's second birthday, I ventured alone to Harvard Square to my first International Women's Day march. A young woman in sneakers raced

breathlessly up and down the lines before we started, giving us a phone number to write on the backs of our hands in case we were arrested. Arrested! I began to tremble. Then we were moving. The women strode forward with placards and banners, chants and laughter and fierce ebullience. They seemed angry and glad at the same time. Many had their arms around each other in the chilly wind that made me shiver even more. When our feeder march met the larger one coming from Boston, we were to turn toward the Charles River. As we approached Central Square, a ripple came through the lines from the front: We were going to take over a building. We were going to liberate a women's space. My teeth were chattering now. My jacket felt paper-thin across my clenched shoulders. We passed my street just then, and I veered towards my warm kitchen, where I scrubbed the number from my hand before my husband could see it.

The march I defected from made history that day. After taking over a building, the women demanded that Harvard build low-cost housing in the neighborhood and that Cambridge support what would become one of the first women's centers in the state. The women who camped out for ten days in the seized building both allured and alarmed me. Later that week I pushed my son in his stroller to a corner where I could see brave white sheets hung from the building's second-story windows: *Women's Space*, they proclaimed in bold red letters. *Liberation for Women*.

I didn't go any closer that day, but when the women in my new group started writing about women's health and sexuality, I jumped in to help. Writing, I could do. Writing seemed like a less alarming way to be useful. Today I can gratefully report that I have been involved as a writer and editor in every edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* for the past 40+ years.

Miriam and Paula have let you know how the book itself got started and how we wove three critical strands together into a text of what turned out to be revolutionary usefulness: clearly stated factual information, first-person women's experiences, and analysis of the politics of medical care. I am going to talk now about some of the ways the book grew, and Joan will take the story forward into the present.

The book grew, first, because we and others in the burgeoning women's health movement at that time developed a wider and wider lens on women's health. Sexuality, of course, was the first life experience we took to be inseparably involved in women's health. We went on to include topics like violence against women and self-defense, environmental toxins and their effect on the reproductive system, also nutrition and exercise and other preventative health fields crucial to women. We looked beyond US borders to issues like the dumping in developing countries of drugs that activists had successfully had banned here, and came to include a chapter addressing the global women's health movement. We learned to identify structural factors affecting women's health – racism, economic oppression, heterosexism – and sought to address those usefully.

The book also grew because of groups all over the country and beyond who were researching and mobilizing around key factors in women's health, from the legendary DES Action group to Carol Downer's self-help work to Breast Cancer Action's fight to re-focus cancer work on causes and prevention. We wanted OBOS to reflect and forward all that work. As one of the book's main editors over the years, I can tell you that first drafts of the book as we revised it got HUGE, and we had to winnow down without losing useful material. We used to joke that the book became so large that we needed a wheelbarrow to take it from room to room.

One of the most significant ways the book grew was in the inclusion of the voices and health concerns of more and more communities of women. I will talk briefly about what we learned through the health activism of women of color, the writing of the first lesbian chapter, how the participation of women with disabilities changed the book, the inclusion of the concerns and voices of older women and, in the last decade, of trans women and genderqueer people.

First, I want to address what someone on a panel here at the conference has already referred to as the heady appeal of the "we." We were, and are, a group of predominantly white, middle class, college-educated, heterosexual women within fifteen years of each other in age. Currently there is one lesbian (me), and one Latina (Elizabeth), but we were and are pretty homogeneous. We were elated to discover in the late-sixties and early seventies that we had so many health and sexuality issues in common, that women from many backgrounds had some similar issues, and that we could help make a difference in women's lives through a new kind of health and sexuality education. It was tempting in that exciting time to think that we could say "we" and mean all women. Even then we knew this wasn't true, and in our first newsprint book we acknowledged the limitations of our experience, yet I would say that our real learning happened over the next decade or more as we began to open our eyes to the experiences of different communities of women. As just one example, African American, Native American and Latina women who had begun organizing around health in the same period pointed out to us that a single-minded focus on abortion rights reflected the white, middle class bias of much of the women's health movement; protection from sterilization abuse and support for low-income mothers were issues equally crucial to their communities – the right to have wanted children was just as important as the right not to have unwanted children. Our perspective and understanding, and the usefulness of our book, grew with interactions like this.

In the very first book we wrote about how "some of us" had slept with our best friends. That's how close we came to addressing lesbianism, and I know that that "some of us" did not include me. In the next edition, we knew we needed a chapter on lesbian issues, and none of us could write it. So a collective of lesbians in the Cambridge area, some of whom are at this conference this weekend, came together to write "In Amerika They Call Us Dykes." Some of us didn't like the title at first, but the

group, exactly as ours had done with our publisher, had insisted on editorial control. In our meetings with Tess and Marla and the others I was uneasy; I sat far away from them in the circle and avoided having my eyes meet theirs – what if they saw something in my eyes, what if they thought I was attracted to women? Of course, that intense nervousness around my first ever lesbians foreshadowed my own coming out a few years later. Remember those early days when the press claimed that all feminists were bra-burning lesbians? Well, finally, when I came out in 1979, the BWHBC had a lesbian member. I participated in all the subsequent revisions of the lesbian chapter, and I have to say that, while the chapter got more informational for the many women who might pick up the book for a health problem and then get educated about lesbians, no subsequent version of the chapter has been as electrifying, hot and groundbreaking as “In Amerika They Call Us Dykes.” For years, letters poured in from grateful women all over the country and beyond, letters of love and appreciation and story-telling addressed to the “Boston Gay Collective.” Women like Libby Bouvier at Cambridge Women’s Center collected them and let us peruse them for subsequent editions. They were a trove of love and newfound liberation.

In the early eighties, we understood that we needed to address body image as a women’s health issue. We created a chapter on body image that was subsequently transformed and greatly improved by new involvement from women from Boston Self Help, an organization run by and for people with physical disabilities. The women who met with us to work on that chapter knew from acute personal experience what an “attractive” or “beautiful” woman was supposed to look like in the mainstream US culture, and the abuse those who did not look that way. They contributed to other parts of the book, as well, and soon one of the hallmarks of our sexuality chapter was not only the inclusion of voices of women with disabilities but – in a chart that focused at on women rather than, as most others did, on men – a thorough run-down of the impact on women’s sexual experience of a whole range of conditions and treatments.

Suddenly we were menopausal women and realized we must include menopause in the book in ways that could help women find a way through the plethora of medicalized approaches and negative cultural images of women entering “the change.” Then, it seemed just as suddenly, we were growing old! These developments led to new chapters in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and then to a separate book by Paula Doress-Worters and Diana Laskin Siegal called *Ourselves, Growing Older*.

Most recently, we have understood how relevant gender identity is to women’s health and wellbeing. With the involvement of trans and genderqueer participants in the past two editions of OBOS, we have included material on gender identity and on trans issues around body image, sexuality, hormone use, and more. These appear not only in a dedicated chapter but mainstreamed throughout the book. For the 2011 Relationships chapter, for example, we organized a three-week private online conversation among thirty-two women selected for the range of their backgrounds and experiences. Several trans and

genderqueer participants joined in these conversations, and their voices appear throughout the 2011 edition. Now we are delighted to welcome an impressive new book by and for trans people, just out this spring, called *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*. Modeled in part after OBOS, this book addresses a great deal more than we had the experience or space to cover, and will be the go-to book on trans life and concerns going forward. We are honored that OBOS founders were asked to contribute the Afterword to that book.

## **Joan Ditzion**

As you can tell from these stories our founder group of birth mothers is intact after 42 years and we're bonded for life. As moderator of this panel I both want to share my personal story as well as fill you in on some of our history. So there will be two threads to my remarks.

My initial awakening to feminism began in Jan. 1969 at an Anti Nixon Inaugural gathering in Washington DC. I was age 25, newly married almost 2 years. I remember hearing a group of Bread & Roses women from Boston saying "we are not going to be making coffee and taking notes. We want full participation in this political process and we want to end gender inequities". I thought to myself when we move back to Cambridge this summer I want to find out more about this movement. My parents had a strong social conscience were, progressive NYC school teachers. I am a first born child and come from a close, Jewish middle class extended family. Of major influence was a matriarchy of strong nurturing women who were always present in my childhood and inspired my involvement in the women's movement. I became politically active as a graduate student at Berkeley and was arrested in the Free Speech Movement. That was my coming of age politically. The political climate of the time gave us the optimistic sense that we could make a difference in changing oppressive institutions and make the world a better place.

Summer 1969- we moved back to Cambridge and I saw an ad in the OLD MOLE, a left wing underground newspaper announcing a "Women and Their Bodies" Course and I joined the course in the fall of 1969. I like many women in the room I was just awakening to the implications of having been socialized female in a patriarchal society and I knew I didn't know much about reproduction, sexuality and health other than the basic biological 'facts of life'. Sitting, in one of the first sessions on anatomy and sexuality there was a large drawing of a vagina, I had never seen a drawing that explicit in public and I began to learn about clitoral orgasms. It was such a breakthrough to begin to own and affirm a women's point of view of female sexuality, despite the fact that women have been sexual since the

beginning of civilization. I was excited to hear a range of firsthand accounts of women's pregnancy and childbirth experiences and learn about the Pioneering work of the natural childbirth and breastfeeding movement. My mother's child birth account "I was in the hospital, anesthetized and then the doctor brought you to me!" I was on the Pill at the time but my consciousness rose sky high about the stakes I and other women had in being able to control reproduction. We needed safe birth control and to be educated consumers and had the right to safe abortion as a last resort. It was chilling to hear women's stories having to resort to using coat hangers or having back-alley abortions.

There was Amazing energy in the room. I knew I needed information I wasn't getting from mainstream sources and the diverse experience of all women need to be validated. For me these were the AHA break thru moments in those early 70's when I began to embrace a women's centered view of myself, which was one of the most formative experiences of my life. Up until then I viewed myself as a woman as less than and inferior to men and that a male centered view of the world was reality. When I began to realize that there was nothing biologically predetermined about this but a sexist social construction based on a patriarchal view of the world I began to change my sense of myself. The Personal is Political had deep meaning when I realized the extent my own life and lives of all women were affected by sexism which prevented women from leading full, healthy lives. Everyone would benefit by eliminating sexism, and embracing feminism and the full economic, social and political equality of women and men. This touched me at the core like no other social change movement had.

In 1970 I jumped in and joined the project. It was so gratifying working on a project I felt passionate about. There was something compelling about this core body knowledge/course and the process of sharing experiences in small groups, raising our consciousness about sexism, giving the course together in community settings and working together on the Free Press edition. In 1970 the first newsprint pamphlet, *Women and Their Bodies*, was produced, which soon became *Our Bodies Ourselves*- and *OBOS* was born; the title change symbolized another AHA moment when we realized we were talking about women as them in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person not us/first person. In 1971-2 Commercial presses began to approach us. It took us a year to decide to go with Simon & Schuster, fearing we were selling out to a corporate entity. We were compelled to get this work to all women and S&S had the marketing capability to do this. We incorporated in 1972, a group of 12, as the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and negotiated a great contract, in tune with our values- with editorial control by the authors, control of cover design, 70% discount for clinics, a cap on the price (\$ 2.95) and the provision for a Spanish-language edition.



In 1972 soon after we incorporated we deepened our collaborative writing process. For me personally writing for these projects were AHA moments. I had been an art major and had written papers in college and graduate school. This was very different; it was the first time in my life that I was writing in a passionate, authentic voice. I had never before taken my words and the words of other women so seriously and believed that we really could make a difference. As in all collective /CR groups we work by consensus and talked for hours until we came to a clear agreed point of view or clearly ways we agreed and disagreed. We were always in ongoing conversation. The first S&S edition was published in 1973. In the Free Press and the S& S edition I was always interested in women's identity issues and wrote about that.

1973-At age 30 my husband and I decided to start a family. Many of the founders of OBOS had children and had been radicalized thru their childbirth experience. They wanted and loved their children but became mothers when biology was destiny and motherhood was intrinsic to the female identity. I having gotten involved in the WM before having children was very aware that it was a lifestyle choice and that my identity as an adult woman didn't hinge on it. I was the first founder to have her first child while reading the Simon & Schuster *OBOS*. I loved being pregnant, felt in contact with a long history of female ancestors and I found great joy in raising children. In the 1976 edition I worked on "Considering Parenthood" chapter. *OBOS* has always taken the perspective that in the context of having control over our bodies and reproduction, parenting if chosen and the raising of the next generation is incredibly important work. We claim and own a feminist perspective to family values, it's not just turf of the right wing. Our definitions are inclusive of all forms of family. That parenting can be shared with men, who are as capable of raising children as women. That it's vital work and society needs social policies to support parents with childcare, paid, maternity paternity leaves and work place policies that allow parents to take leave of work without penalty and that support parents in work/ family balance . These are values I continue to feel passionate about and unfinished issues of the women's movement. In 1978 some of us wrote *Ourselves and Our Children* expanding on these issues.

In terms of my life today, personally the project inspired me to go to social work school. I had previously been an artist/educator. I became a geriatric social worker and focused on aging, older adults and family care giving. Over the years I have worked on all editions of *Our Bodies Ourselves* and on the aging chapters in recent years. I feel passionate about combating ageist attitudes and embracing the aging process with passion, purpose and sense of agency. I'm turning 71 on Sunday. After all these years I have returned to watercolor painting and love being a grandmother.

Now I want to go back to the project history in the 1970's. —all royalties went back to the organization. With the books' profits, which have never fully covered expenses of the organization, we modestly paid ourselves for Book Work and funded other projects. In addition to the Spanish translation, *Nuestros Cuerpos Nuestras Vidas*, among them were: a newsletter, *Healthright*; "Taking Our Bodies Back", a film; and the Porcupine Women's Health Collective, a Native American group in South Dakota. The book inspired and was part of a growing grassroots women's health movement. Carol Downer and her team were teaching women's self-exam groups to use a speculum and follow their own menstrual cycles. Women's health clinics and know-your-body courses were starting to spread. The same year The National Women's Health Network started, Barbara Seaman was making a strong case against indiscriminate use of the pill. Roe vs. Wade, the landmark Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, was handed down in 1973. In 1972, Mary Howell, the first woman Dean of students at Harvard Medical School, contributed research resulting in a legal ruling requiring medical schools to eliminate the female admission quota, then informally at about 8% .In 1975 we co-sponsored a Conference on Women and Health at Harvard Medical School, where Mary was Dean of Students, and drew 2500 participants including many grass roots women's groups and inspired formation of new organizations the National Black Women's Health Project. Over time, there were ever more groups based on ethnicity, geography, and other factors, building toward a national women's health movement. In the 70's the book went global with Italian, Japanese, Danish, and British translations/adaptations.

Now, shifting fast forward to today, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, now called Our Bodies Ourselves, is one of the few surviving organizations from the early days of the women's movement. It has changed from a founder-driven collective to a nonprofit organization with a staff, Community Board and Advisory Committee. Founder Judy Norsigian, without whom the organization would have never survived all these years, is the Executive Director and has more energy than any woman I know and created an amazing network of health work organizations and partners. The book has gone global and for the last twenty years this global work has been administrated by founder Sally Whalen. We provide technical support and need to raise funds for these and other projects. Groups of women around the world have done 26 translations, adaptations and local editions inspired by ours including a Tibetan version by a group of Nuns exiled in India (with an introduction by the Dalai Lama), Editions in Turkish, Albanian, Nigerian, Russian, and an Israeli version written by Israeli and Palestinian women. Most recently there is a Vietnamese edition and a Farci edition written by Iranian women based in the US. In 2011 in addition to celebrating our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary we had the 2011 Educate Congress Campaign. We gave each member of Congress a print copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* to promote evidence-based policy making correcting such misinformation from Senate Candidate Richard Mourdock from Indiana who said that pregnancies

resulting from rape were “something that God intended to happen”. The book became to be known as one of the best expressions of the women’s health movement because it was the tangible result of a collaborative process involving an ever increasing number of women. In 2012 *Our Bodies Ourselves* was cited by the Library of Congress as one of the 88 books that shaped America. Check our website [www.ourbodiesourselves.org](http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org) and our blog which reaches women young and old globally. We are about to launch a terrific new website in May, so keep posted.

You have heard from us we want to hear from you. Women’s stories are the heart and soul of OBOS- and the WLM. Stay in your seats and we’d like you all to pair up with a person next to you or if that’s not possible cluster up into groups of three. Then we have two questions to talk about for 10 or 15 minutes.

1. Many of you have an *OBOS* story; share this with one another on how it touched your life. Or if it’s new to you share how issues raised in the book have touched your life.
2. What are the burning issues for you today?