



*"A compelling story,...  
What a life Betty Berzon has lived!"  
- Betty DeGeneres*

*Surviving Madness*  
*the Life of Betty Berzon*

# *Surviving Madness*

*the Betty Berzon Story*



2011

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## Introduction, 2011



I saw her see me. The diminutive woman’s sapphire blue eyes studied me from across the room, but I pretended not to notice—at least at first. Did I know who Betty Berzon was? Not yet. But there was such intrigue and familiarity in that gaze of hers that I couldn’t help but smile. And she smiled back before abruptly and definitively turning away from me. How was I to know that this moment would begin the first chapter in a story that even now, years after her passing, I am still writing?

It was a warm summer day in Topanga. Nine men and me, attending a “Gay and Growing” workshop. Most of the men knew Betty and were easy with her, bantering back and forth while we were waiting for the workshop to begin. She was wearing jeans—bell-bottoms at that—and old-fashioned tennis shoes. Tiny feet. I would later learn they were size four. A T-shirt, belt, and a sailor hat pulled down low on her forehead as a sun protector completed her outfit. Pretty much everyone was in jeans—except me. I was in a Prussian blue #5 Rattan Chadha lightweight denim suit from the Netherlands.

The suit was meant to emphasize my lanky frame and my long legs. Topped off by my Jane Fonda shag, face framed by Chanel sunglasses, my presentation was, I hoped, one of youthful good looks and self-confidence, guaranteed to hide how scared I was of what this workshop might bring in terms of self-discovery, self-awareness, or... who knew what? I certainly didn’t expect to find my future in Topanga Canyon that June weekend.

*Gay and Growing? Seriously? Why am I even here? And why am I wearing this stupid designer suit?*

My therapist had advised me to attend this workshop to see how other gay people managed their lives in a homophobic world. She’d said she didn’t know Betty but had heard good things about her workshops, and why not give it a try? So here I was: one woman, nine men...and Betty

Berzon. The rest, as they say, is history, a lot of which you will find in these next pages as you get to know Betty, and the impact her life has had on so many of us.

In 2005, when Betty was an honoree of Christopher Street West, she rode in an open convertible during the West Hollywood Gay Pride Parade, waving at the bystanders, basking in the applause. One young woman, pierced lip, tattooed, wildly dressed, ran up to the convertible and yelled something at Betty.

Betty turned to me, startled and puzzled. “What did she say?”

“She said, ‘Thank you for starting everything, Doctor Betty,’” I responded.

Betty was genuinely surprised. In her endearingly earnest way, she said, “But I didn’t start everything.”

Maybe not everything. But she sure started a lot.

Betty was methodical and organized. When I gave her papers to ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, the archivist said that she had never seen anyone’s materials so thoroughly organized with categories, sub-categories, headings, references and cross-references. The Betty Berzon Archive is a treasure trove of information and contemporaneous notes on the beginnings of the many LGBT organizations and initiatives she either began or co-founded. And the photos are invaluable—all organized chronologically and by organization.

Her community was her passion, and Betty never lost focus. Where there was a gap in gay and lesbian life, she tried to fill it, and when she identified a problem, she set out to solve it, usually by starting a new organization or by launching an initiative. In 1976, recognizing that middle-class lesbians had no social and political venues other than bars and male-dominated political organizations, she founded the Southern California Women for Understanding. After spending weeks carefully designing the organizational structure and governance, she invited a dozen women to our home, presented her plan for SCWU, and a new organization was born. Betty declined to accept a leadership position, because she wanted other women to have the experience of leading an organization. Membership in SCWU eventually grew to more than 1000 women, with chapters throughout Southern California.

As more and more LGBT people from all walks of life began to come out during that halcyon 1970s decade, Betty noticed another group that, like the SCWU women, seemed to be lost in the world of gay bars, discos and night life—academics. So in 1978, having moved on from SCWU, Betty and a male colleague launched the California Chapter of the Gay Academic Union. Meetings were packed; at last gay and lesbian academics

had a safe place to go for conversation about things that mattered to them. Not that the gatherings were stodgy: there were booze, cruising and tricks to be picked up as well. Betty started a women's division within the chapter that met in addition to the regular chapter meetings. Soon there would be a conference of gay and lesbian academics from all over the country, with Betty presiding as President of National GAU (she had learned her lesson about demurring leadership from her SCWU experience). No one expected that more than four hundred people would attend this conference. Midge Costanza, who had just left the Carter White House, was the keynote speaker. The plenary speakers were legendary feminist firebrand Kate Millett and psychologist-author Don Clark. And Betty organized every detail of the conference and banquet, both of which went off flawlessly.

Betty had been on the Board of Directors of the Whitman-Radclyffe Foundation, a San Francisco-based organization dedicated to disseminating education about gay and lesbian lifestyles. She designed a series of brochures and pamphlets that became the core building blocks for her 1979 book *Positively Gay*, a guidebook for LGBT people, young and old. In an era nearly thirty years before the advent of social networking, Betty received an astonishing number of letters from people throughout the country telling her how much *Positively Gay* meant to them, and how it helped them to feel connected to other gay and lesbian people as a community.

All the while, as she continued her movement work along with her psychotherapy practice and as our relationship deepened and grew richer, Betty thought about the lack of legal rights for same-sex couples. Since her therapy practice specialty was couple relationships, she began to collect vignettes of her clients' challenges as partners, and whether I was ready for it or not, Betty also began to offer me piercing insights into the dynamics of our own relationship! Not too many years later, those observations and her clinical work with couples evolved into her best-selling book, *Permanent Partners: Building Gay and Lesbian Relationships That Last*. This book has sold nearly a hundred thousand copies.

The success of *Permanent Partners* brought Betty considerable media attention, so she began crisscrossing the country, appearing on television and radio shows to talk about the rights of gay and lesbian couples, including the right to marry. The range of reactions she got from callers and hecklers, even from some of the talk-show hosts, was the basis for yet another of her books, *Setting Them Straight: You Can Do Something about Bigotry and Homophobia in Your Life*.

Many of Betty's therapy clients were physicians, some single, others

in coupled relationships. As soon as the AIDS holocaust hit, she began a physicians' support group to give our community's doctors somewhere to go to talk about what they were seeing and dealing with every day in their offices. For some MDs, AIDS was a double-edged sword. They not only had patients with AIDS, some of them had AIDS themselves, while others had partners who were HIV-positive. By the time it was over, we had lost nearly an entire generation of gay men, and we were all exhausted, including Betty.

We did manage to have a black-tie dinner dance at the Beverly Hills Hotel for our fifteenth anniversary. The greatest joys of that evening were the men coming up to us to thank us for giving them an evening in which they almost forgot there was AIDS. Betty and I exchanged vows that Rabbi Denise Eger remembered and quoted eighteen years later when she presided over Betty's burial.

In 1986, Betty shrugged off a devastating cancer diagnosis that gave her two years to live. "Bring it on," was what she said to the oncology team. Chemotherapy spigots on tubes as wide around as her arms were turned on, and we watched gaily colored fluids drip into her veins, giving a promise of more life as her hair fell out like chemotherapy leaves. I brooded, cursed, worried and cried. Refusing to give an inch, she arranged her schedule to have her chemotherapy administered late on Thursday afternoon so she could spend the weekend in bed, and continued to work. Watching dozens of reruns of "Magnum P.I." through her chemo-induced brain fog, Betty could never again see Tom Selleck on television without becoming nauseous. She wrote, saw clients, dreamed up new organizations, and in spare moments of joy, took care of the first pair of the generations of Yorkshire terriers that would dominate our lives and take up a lot more space than you would expect from five pound fluff balls. The cancer passed. Or so we told ourselves.

I started GLASS—Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services—to try to alleviate the abuse routinely inflicted on LGBT teens in and by the foster care system. Betty was there for me financially, emotionally, and intellectually, as well as with all of her formidable organizational skills at the ready.

The years passed all too quickly. Betty even used her cancer battle as a means of advancing the rights of LGBT couples by forcing Cedars-Sinai Hospital in West Hollywood to change their admission form to include domestic partnership as a valid response to the question about marital status. She let nothing pass. She always said. "If you stop to rest, they'll get you."

The cancer did finally get her, but not before her participation in

the American Psychiatric Association contributed to their removal of homosexuality as a mental disorder from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual; not before she wrote or edited six books; not before there was at least domestic partnership in a half-dozen states in the United States, not before there came into being a Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center, a GAU, a Whitman-Radclyffe Foundation, and GLASS; not before there were changes in hospital policies throughout California; and not before there was a street in Studio City called “Betty Berzon Place.” And not before I had the good fortune to share thirty-three years with the most amazing human being I have ever known.

I hope you enjoy this memoir.

Terry DeCrescenzo  
Studio City, CA

This book is dedicated:

To the late Paul Monette, who taught me to dig deeper and write better  
and not be afraid of my anger.

To the late James Leo Herlihy, who said the magic words, “Are you  
crazy? Write the book!”

And, as always, to the very much alive Teresa DeCrescenzo, without  
whose love and encouragement I’d still be thinking about writing a book  
someday.

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Some of the names of people in this book have been changed or omitted, either to protect their privacy or to preserve the illusion of their innocence.



## Prologue



Come with me to a psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of Los Angeles. See in the bed a young girl, wrists and ankles tied to the bed rails eyes staring through the barred window, silent testimony to the mind blanking effect of depression.

I am that young girl, being protected from myself, restrained against the vein-slashing suicide attempt that brought me here. I am twenty-two years old and I am certain that my life is over.

Then see the girl one year later, same hospital. She wears a white coat and is a member of the electroshock team, gently holding a patient's legs as he convulses in response to the jolt of electricity being shot through his brain. She works in the hospital now, recovery in progress, a new career underway.

I am *that* girl, too, and the one who studies psychology and becomes a therapist and sits here now telling the story of how it all came to be. It is a story that reflects the joy of achievement and the fun of defying convention at long last to claim an authentic identity, one that does not have to be okay with absolutely everybody.

Today I am the woman, the seasoned therapist, the writer who passes on what I know about the need to explore illusions, the elation of insight, and the power that love and sex, experienced as one, can have on redefining identity.

Come with me to trace the interconnections that weave the splendid fabric of identity. The process of psychotherapy gave me incredible strength for this endeavor. Through it I learned not to be afraid of my emerging self but to welcome change, to accept desire, to allow passion. This is a tale of sanity in the world making sanity in the individual more possible, where the patient becomes the doctor, and madness becomes the teacher of healing.

# Chapter 1



I was brought into this world by two bewildered teenagers who were as unprepared for their passage into parenthood as they had been inattentive to ways to prevent it. As if having a baby were not terrifying enough, I was born with a gaping hole where my palate should have been. For the first nine months of my life I had to be fed every few hours with a medicine dropper, head held back to ensure the flow of nourishment down my throat rather than out my nose. It was not a good beginning for any of us.

Fortunately for me, my parents lived at the time with my maternal grandmother and my mother's four sisters and one brother. My aunts took turns feeding me, including ten-year-old Esther, who would climb into my crib and pretend she was feeding her little baby doll.

At five months I was taken to visit Dr. Vilroy P. Blair, a renowned plastic surgeon who practiced in St. Louis where we lived. By some miracle, my young impoverished parents had connected with this famous man, who declared he would operate to close my palate when I reached nine months, leaving four more months of water-torture feedings.

I shudder when I think of the fragile infant that I was on that operating table, but Dr. Blair obviously knew what he was up to because the surgery was a success. The worst part of it, I'm told, was my mother's reaction when she first saw the bloody sutures hanging out of my mouth. She

fainted dead away and refused to visit me again until the sutures had been removed.

The cost of that surgery in 1928 was \$100, including pre- and postoperative care. I still have the bill. The cost of the trauma suffered by my mother when she saw those bloody sutures was much greater, setting the stage for an abiding fear in me of my effect on her that would play out over my entire childhood.

When I was nearly two we moved to our own apartment. I'm sure that I missed the attention of all those aunts, but liberated from the rigorous feeding routine and the worry of a sick child, my mother appeared to warm toward me.

In the summer my parents would take me on bicycle rides through the lush green acres of St. Louis's Forest Park. I rode in the handlebar basket of my father's bike, hugging my knees, feeling the breeze against my face. I remember those outings as though they occurred in slow motion, dreamlike, everyone happy, everything perfectly balanced, the world as it was meant to be.

Our family got through the Great Depression thanks to prostitution. My father was in the credit clothing business, going to his customers' houses to sell his merchandise and to collect the installment payments—\$2 down and \$1 a week. As a salesman he had the perfect combination of persuasiveness and charm. His handsome, dapper appearance included a serious mustache and an ever-present cigar, which made him look older than his years.

Prostitutes were his best customers. He'd make the rounds of the brothels that continued to prosper even as people stood in lines at the soup kitchens. Sometimes, on Sundays, he would take me with him as he made his "stops." I waited in the car while he disappeared into these mysterious establishments.

One Sunday I decided to rummage through the stacks of white cardboard boxes piled high on the back seat of the car. I was curious about the miniature dresses I found folded neatly under layers of tissue paper. They looked like little girls' dresses, but they were big enough for a grown person to wear. When my father returned to the car I asked him what these garments were.

"Shut those boxes and mind your own business," he snapped.

That, of course, just aroused my curiosity more. I continued to work on the problem until I had occasion to ask my cousin, Sidney, a whole year older than I, what he knew about the dresses, for his father was in the same business.

"Teddies. They're teddies that the whores wear when they see their

customers,” he announced triumphantly.

“How do you know that?” I demanded.

“Boys just know certain things,” he said.

I decided to leave it at that. Solving the mystery of the teddies was enough without delving into the vagaries of what boys knew that girls didn't.



In the winter of 1935, when I was seven years old, I awoke one morning unable to breathe. I ran into my parents' room, crying and gasping for air.



Chosen as the prettiest child at the St. Louis Jewish Forward Ball, 1932.

The doctor was called and in minutes I was on my way to Jewish Hospital, a frantic trip that would be repeated many times for the next five years. In the hospital I was placed inside a huge oxygen tent that covered half the bed. I was almost lost to sight in its vast interior. Inside all that plastic I lay quietly waiting to die, terrified but resigned.

I didn't die. A week later I was breathing normally again. A few months later I was back in the tent, another asthma attack, another mad dash to the hospital. Jewish Hospital became my second home, actually a kind of haven from my fear that both my parents, but especially my mother, would tire of my illness and the problems it caused and abandon me, just run away and be done with me. The nurses at Jewish Hospital were always kind and affectionate and welcoming. Eventually, I began to wish that I lived in the hospital all the time. I almost did.

When I was ten my parents brought home a red-faced, squalling little bundle who, I was told, was my new sister, Stephanie. I was not happy with this, worried that I would get even less attention from my mother. That worry was well founded because Stephanie turned out to be the easy child I was not. She was pretty, healthy, and compliant. To add to the insult of her arrival, I sometimes had to take care of her. I was not the best caretaker, allowing my ambivalent feelings about her existence to be expressed physically in little jabs and shoves, nothing to leave any marks, of course. Many decades later she assured me I had done her no permanent damage.

Asthma seemed to be a mystery to the doctors in those days. They tried every treatment they knew before we moved on to what I thought of as exile. First my mother and I were sent to the California seashore where the fresh salt air was thought to be a remedy. Then we shipped out to the Arizona desert where the hot dry air was thought to be a remedy. All I knew was that I was falling behind with my little crowd of girlfriends in St. Louis and I might as well never go back. Magically, that was arranged.

Early in the morning of December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the war was practically on our doorstep. For reasons I've never understood, my father decided that was the time to move us lock, stock, and barrel out of St. Louis to live in Tucson, Arizona.

I liked that move. Tucson meant starting over and getting away from the tight group of friends who by then had probably cast me out anyway. Everything about St. Louis felt tight to me. I was not happy in the middle-class Jewish ghetto where I had always lived. At a young age I was aware of the pressure to be like everyone around me, but something inside me rebelled against it.

The others in my crowd of six little girls seemed quite satisfied to blend their identities into one another's, taking their cues from a collective

sense of self-importance. I had a lot of doubts about how important I was or whether I was okay as a person. I was shaky in my sense of myself, never as confident as all the rest seemed to be. I felt different but I had no idea why.

At fourteen I started dating boys. Maybe it was developing a life outside my family, or maybe it was the desert air after all, but something healing occurred then—my asthma disappeared completely.

War was my hobby. For years I had kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings about the battles in Europe. When there was show and tell in school, I proudly brought my scrapbook. The teachers seemed disconcerted at this interest of mine and the other students seemed uninterested. I didn't know why I had this strange preoccupation with war, but I also wondered why no one else seemed so fascinated. It was the most interesting thing happening in the world.

I went to every movie about combat. Star-crossed lovers and battlefield heroes were my romantic icons. I had not a clue, of course, of the blood-and-guts horror of war in real time. I only saw the glamour of it.

By 1942, World War II drew a little closer as shortages began to show up on the home front. Things we were accustomed to having plenty of were suddenly in short supply—butter, meat, coffee, and anything made of leather. Shoes were rationed, three pairs a year to each citizen. Each automobile owner in the country was allowed only four gallons of gas per week. Our government told us just to be glad we didn't have death raining down on us from the sky or battles being fought in our city streets.

There was no bloodshed on the city streets of Tucson, Arizona, but they were bustling with military. Davis-Monthan Air Base in Tucson was an embarkation point to overseas duty for Army Air Corps bomber crews. The young servicemen training to fly the big airplanes were not much older than I was—second lieutenants dashing in their crushed aviator caps, tan gabardine pants called “pinks,” and perfect-fitting belted jackets. They looked like heroes and swaggered like tough guys, but I'm sure that underneath they were scared witless.

Many would never come back, and some would come back physically or emotionally wrecked. Their time in Tucson could be their last encounter with anything like a normal life.

I was sixteen when I started going out with flyers. They were so much more interesting than high school boys. The young flyers were grown up by virtue of what they were about to do. The hamburgers, milkshakes, and awkward groping of high school dates became rum and Coca Cola, dancing at the Blue Moon Ballroom, and a seduction routine involving military secrets.



The whole family still living in St. Louis: mother, father, sister Stephanie, and an almost adolescent Betty.

I was slow-dancing to Glenn Miller with a young flyer at the Blue Moon. My date began to whisper in my ear, telling me that he feels like he is falling in love with me.

“Let’s sit down,” he said dreamily.

At the table, the young man grew solemn and took my hand. “I’m going to tell you something I’m not supposed to tell anyone. It’s a military secret.”

“A slip of the lip may sink a ship!” I heard in my head, the oft-broadcast warning against talking about anything military. I said, “Why would you want to tell me a military secret?”

“Because I want to show you how much you mean to me.”

That didn’t make much sense because we’d only known each other a few days, but I was intrigued. He took out a pen and began painstakingly drawing on a cocktail napkin. When he finished he looked around to make sure no one was near enough to hear, then he leaned toward me and said, “Look.”

“What is it?”

“It’s the new, high-altitude, precision bomb sight that’s just been installed in our B-17s. The Norden bomb sight. It’s going to win the war for us. See, here’s how it works,” and there followed a technical explanation I didn’t follow. When he finished, he picked up the napkin, dropped it into an ashtray, and set it on fire.

“You see, I’ve discovered that I really care about you, that’s why I’ve told you this precious secret that I’m so excited about. Do you think we could go someplace where we can be alone and get a little closer?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Please, this might be my last night here.”

That in itself seemed like a good reason to decline. Patriotism aside, I stood my ground. He was disappointed, but after downing a few more rum and Cokes he seemed not to care anymore.

That young man shipped out and before long I was dating another flyer, then another, and another. Soon I could tell when the routine was coming as my date began fiddling with the cocktail napkin and looking very solemn. I sat through a couple more Norden bomb sights, complete with the ashtray fire, then always politely but firmly refused to go somewhere “to get a little closer.” After a while I just stopped the routine as soon as it got started.

“I’ve heard it. I know all about the Norden bomb sight.”

The young man would look startled, too embarrassed to ask where I’d heard about it. I wondered how often this routine actually worked or whether it was just one of those myths passed on in military bullshit sessions.

Between my scrapbook hobby, my immersion in war movies, and my patriotic dating of Air Corps flyers, I felt like I was fighting World War II

on my own personal front. On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. Three days later we dropped another atomic bomb on Nagasaki. On August 14, Japan surrendered. We won the war in the Pacific and introduced a device of mass destruction that has held the world hostage to its horror ever since.

In Europe, the Germans had already surrendered, Hitler was dead, Mussolini hung by his heels in a public square. Franklin Roosevelt, the only president I'd ever known, was gone. Everything was happening so fast. My world seemed to be turning upside down. There were no more flyboys to date. Tucson went back to being a quiet little desert town. My scrapbook was closed.



During the war years my father owned two bars and a restaurant, each mobbed every night with servicemen. My father loved the excitement of a crowded bar, people to schmooze, and new women to seduce. He was a habitual womanizer, often involved with a girlfriend and making no secret of it. My mother cried a river of tears.

The perpetual victim, my mother's outlet for her anger was me. She blamed me for everything bad that was happening in her life. At the time I didn't understand the dynamic of displacing her anger at him onto me. I simply felt very vulnerable to her. When she told me that I was the cause of her failing marriage, I internalized her feelings and made them my own. I hated my father for causing all this heartache, and I hated myself for being unable to relieve my mother's suffering or fix the situation.

How co-opted I was by my mother's dilemma, by the web these two emotional juveniles wove around me. I was trapped in their torment, powerless to help them or myself. She cried and he fled. I didn't know what to do. My own life seemed quite beside the point in this household.

There was so much pain at home I knew I had to find a way to escape it. My deliverance came through the Tucson Little Theater, a world that was distracting, seductive, and all-absorbing. The Tucson Little Theater was one of the best amateur community theaters in the country. I started out doing props, learned to do lighting, and graduated to stage managing. I loved being backstage where I could immerse myself in the cast-and-crew dramas that were sometimes as compelling as the theatrics onstage.

My life revolved around the theater. I was also studying acting, so I went from school to drama class, a quick dinner at my father's restaurant, and on to the evening's rehearsal or performance. I usually got home around midnight, but no one seemed to care about that except my French

teacher because I often fell asleep in her 8 a.m. class.

It was about this time in my life that something was stirring in me that had me confused and concerned. I was having daydreams that were so preoccupying that I thought I was going crazy. These daydreams were all about women. There were romantic scenes in which I was Clark Gable or Errol Flynn sweeping some beauty off her feet, only the beauties were women I knew from school or from the theater, women I had developed intense feelings for though I didn't necessarily know them well.

My daydreams were not sexual per se, though I did think about holding these women, and I knew that was not what I was supposed to be thinking about. I liked dating boys, but I never had fantasies about them. It felt as though I were in love with women in a way that wasn't happening for me with boys. I didn't hear anyone else talking about such things, so I knew it was something I shouldn't talk about. I tried to shut off the thoughts, the intrusions into my thinking of this woman's face or that woman's body.

I was embarrassed by what was happening to me, hoping that no one could read my mind. The worst part was coping with what these fantasies meant. I'd heard of homosexuality, men loving men, women loving women, heard that it was a sickness, and I wondered if I had caught it. I had to know more about it.

The trip to the library was nerve-racking. I was afraid of what I would find. I looked all around before I pulled out the little wooden drawer marked 'H.' The books I took off the shelf told me that homosexuals were perverted, diseased, social outcasts, and pitiful creatures. That certainly was not me and never would be. Hurriedly replacing these volumes, I walked quickly out of the library, relieved to be outside breathing the fresh air. Whatever my feelings about women might be, they had nothing to do with the awful condition described in those books. I was sure of that. I was okay. I was normal.



Interview Eleanor Roosevelt? I was almost beside myself at the thought. As a reporter and feature writer for the Tucson High School *Cactus Chronicle*, I was always on the lookout for scoops, but this one would be monumental.

Just one year out of the White House after Franklin's death, Eleanor Roosevelt was a whirlwind of activity—a delegate to the United Nations, a syndicated columnist, on the lecture circuit, constantly visiting one corner of the world or another. I'd been a lifelong devotee of the Roosevelts. He was *my* president, elected when I was five years old, in office until I was

almost finished with high school. Now, Mrs. Roosevelt was coming to Tucson to give a speech, and I decided I would somehow talk to her. Was I crazy to think I could get in to interview this legendary woman? “Well,” I told myself, “they can’t shoot me for trying,” but I wasn’t really at all sure they couldn’t.

My big break came when I learned that Mrs. Roosevelt was speaking in the building sometimes used by the Tucson Little Theater. I knew that building intimately—where I could get in, where the star’s dressing room was, where there was an open bathroom window I could climb through. Happily, I recruited a photographer to accompany me.

“Are you game for this?” I asked as we stood before the open window.

“Sure, why not, but what about the Secret Service?”

“She doesn’t use them anymore. She convinced them to stay away after she learned to use and carry a gun.” I’d read that somewhere and I dearly hoped I was right. We barely squeezed through the window and with hearts pounding proceeded to tiptoe into the hall. I jumped when I heard the voice.

“Well, hello there!” We froze.

“Nice to see you again. Where are you headed?”

It was Howard Pyle, a famous war correspondent, soon to be governor of Arizona, whom I had recently interviewed. I took a deep breath.

“We have an appointment to interview Mrs. Roosevelt.”

“Well, good for you. I just came from talking to her. I’ll take you in and introduce you.”

“Fine,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “Lead the way.”

I couldn’t believe what was happening. Howard Pyle knocked on the door of the star’s dressing room. A cheerful voice called out, “Come in.”

Howard stuck his head through the open door. “Mrs. Roosevelt, I just ran into a young reporter I know from the local high school paper. She’s here to interview you.”

Mrs. Roosevelt smiled and waved us in. I moved slowly toward her and shook the hand she extended. Then I stood there, notebook in hand, and found that I was speechless. Seconds passed that seemed like hours.

“What would you like to ask me, my dear?” Mrs. Roosevelt inquired.

I pulled myself out of the dream. I was standing in front of Eleanor Roosevelt and she was talking to me. I don’t know where the voice came from, but it began asking questions. “Where were you mostly educated?” the voice asked.

Mrs. Roosevelt answered that she was mostly educated in Europe, and in response to the next question, she described the ways in which European schools were different from those in America. “There is much

more emphasis on learning languages because in Europe the countries are so close to one another.” She also said she thought students of my generation were much more aware of contemporary world problems than they had been before.

“What do you remember as the most important thing that happened in your education?” I asked.

“I think the most treasured lesson I received during my schooling came from a teacher who had the remarkable ability to make one curious about things. She made you so interested in the subject that you wanted to go further and find out how and why it was so.”

I scribbled furiously. As the interview progressed I became aware of feeling incredibly attended to by Mrs. Roosevelt, as though my questions were of the utmost importance. I understood later that this quality is the hallmark of a gifted politician, the ability to convey enormous interest in whatever is being said to them.

Several times during the interview we were interrupted by an assistant who, on first seeing us, looked alarmed. She knew we weren’t scheduled, but Mrs. Roosevelt gave her an almost imperceptible nod. Not a word was said, but acceptance of our presence was established.

During these interruptions, I was able to observe Mrs. Roosevelt more closely. She wore a simple, long-sleeved black dress, topped by three strands of pearls, and at the V neck the Girl Scout pin so often seen in her photos. A corsage of gardenias was pinned to the left shoulder of her dress. In addition, there were two surprises—fire-engine red fingernails and a lacy black net over her short graying hair. I assumed the net was to keep her hair in place until she went onstage. But it never came off, and it was still there in the *Los Angeles Times* photo I saw of her a few days later, apparently a permanent hedge against a single hair escaping coiffed perfection.

I asked a final question. Mrs. Roosevelt responded with a long, thoughtful answer. I was momentarily distracted by the thought that should this building suddenly catch fire, Mrs. Roosevelt would undoubtedly continue to answer my question as she calmly led us all to safety.

One last request. Could we take a picture? She smiled graciously and motioned me to stand next to her chair. I did so and am forever recorded beside Eleanor Roosevelt in my tidy dark suit, clutching notebook and pencil, looking as though I had just done something of great moment, and indeed I had.

I sat in the audience afterward, listening intently to Mrs. Roosevelt’s talk.



As a high school reporter scoring an exclusive backstage interview with former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, on the lecture circuit two years after FDR's death.

She spoke of things I'd never given any thought to—the problems of young people whose countries had been the bloody battlefields of the war, who had not been able to go to school for five or six years, living precariously from day to day. “Ordinary standards of behavior do not suit them now. They have been living in an exciting world, a world where just outside the door death was imminent at all times. They have grown old very quickly.

It is difficult to find things that interest them, especially in their leisure time, for they must be taught that killing and stealing are not virtues in civilian life.”

I felt deeply moved by her description of young people like me so scarred by living with death and destruction. I could hardly imagine what that must have been like. How shielded we were from those shattering experiences, so removed from the real horrors of war, so lucky, so safe. I felt as though I'd looked through a window at a world startlingly different from mine. I looked and was appalled that I'd ever thought there was anything romantic about war.

It took a long time for me to come down from the excitement of interviewing Eleanor Roosevelt, of spending twenty minutes in the company of this extraordinary woman. I had gone against my fear of being denied access to her and simply created access. I would remind myself of this success in future dilemmas about whether or not to attempt the impossible. I think she would have approved of the effect she had on me.

Four decades later, reading that Eleanor Roosevelt might have had lesbian relationships, I thought back to our encounter. I wondered how it would have been had we known each other's secret. Would I have felt better about my own homosexual thoughts if I had known this great woman shared that inclination? Or would I have thought less of her?

In a world where being gay no longer has to be a secret for a great many people, would Eleanor have revealed herself as a lesbian, and would she have been appalled or proud that all over the United States there are gay Eleanor Roosevelt Democratic Clubs? I would hope she'd be honored.