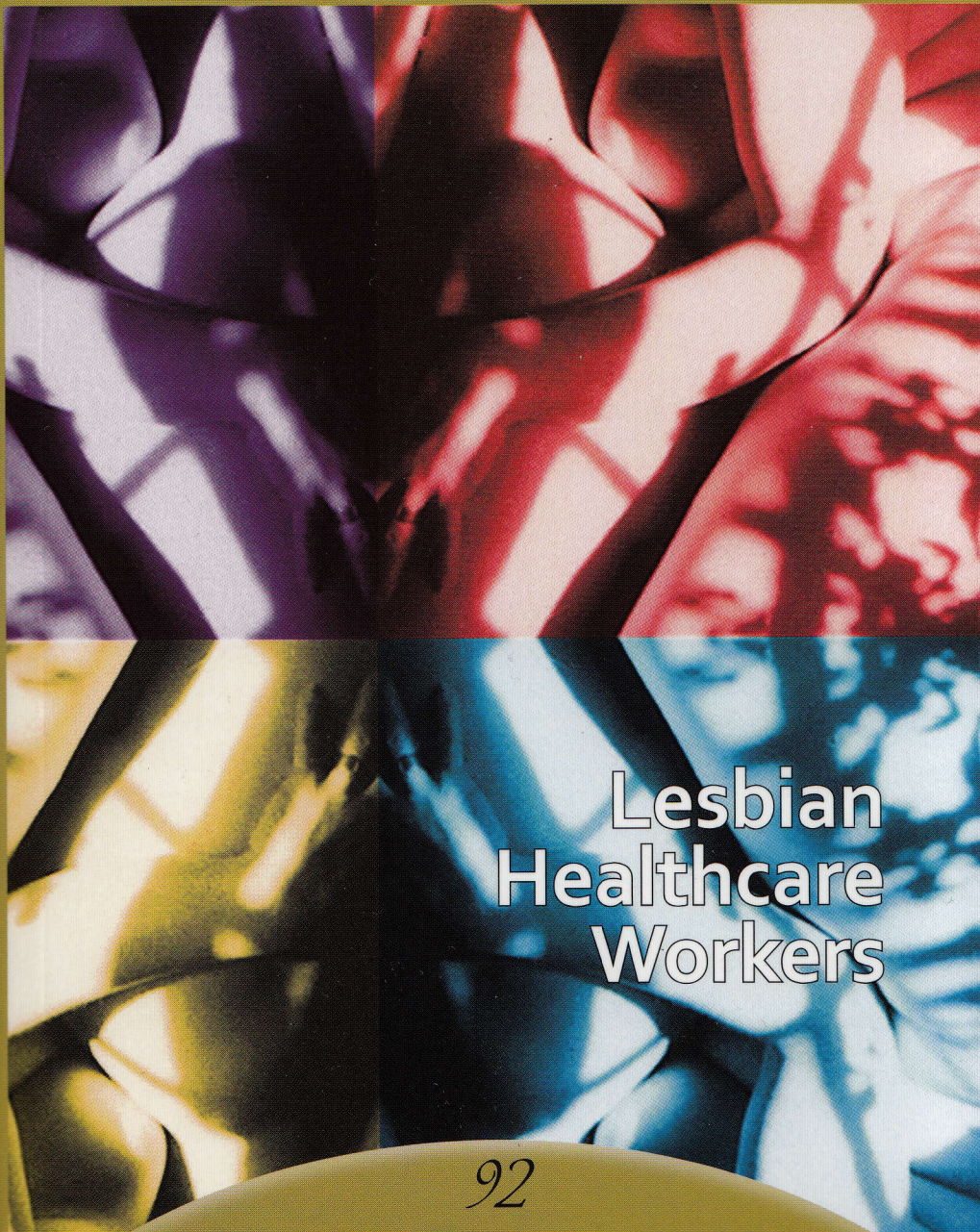


# Sinister Wisdom

A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal

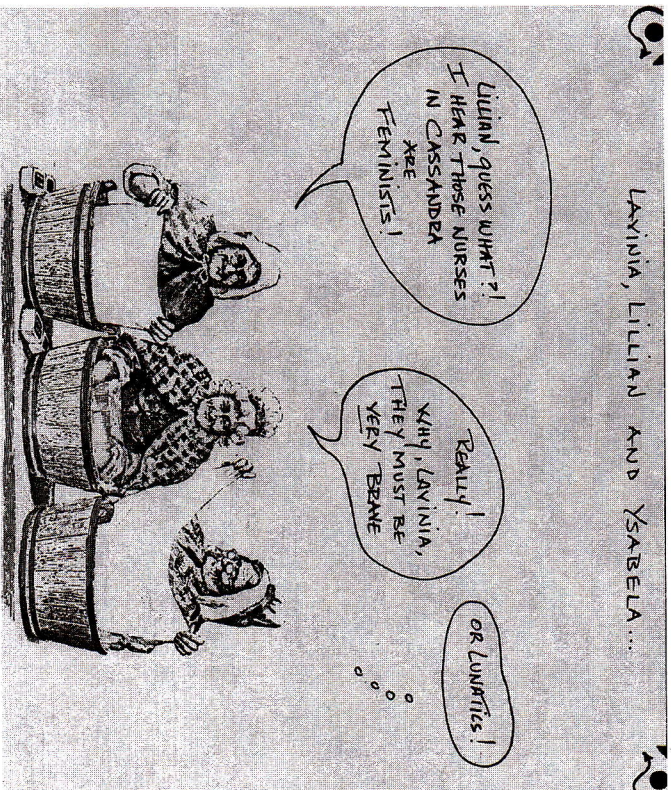


Lesbian  
Healthcare  
Workers



## CASSANDRA: LESBIAN (NON)PRESENCE IN NURSING

Peggy I. Chinn and Elizabeth R. Berrey



Cassandra Flyer, 1984

In June 1982, at the time of the death of the United States Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), a group of mostly lesbian nurses attended the American Nurses Association (ANA) convention in Washington, DC. As was the custom in the informal, closeted community of lesbian nurses, the site of our "hidden" convention was the hotel bar, which usually was located in a conspicuous spot in or near the hotel lobby. I (Peggy) was about five years into my life as a lesbian nurse, and by 1982 knew the customs and the codes of this community very well. So on arrival at the conference, I headed to the bar to meet a handful of women who I knew would be there, as well as a host of other women who would saunter by,

check out the scene, and either stay or leave depending on who they observed to be "convening." There was no overt conversation that announced who we were, nor did we have an agenda for being together, so occasionally a straight woman would happen into the circle, either knowingly or unknowingly—but unless she was very brave, very curious, or very naïve, it was not long before she managed to exit gracefully.

What was overtly clear was that we were having a hilariously fun time being together, exchanging tales and stories that elicited raucous laughter. To an astute observer, whether lesbian or not, our interactions were boldly flirtatious and we felt no reserve in this behavior, since we were only women alone for a "girls day out." Our talk gave no obvious hint of what our actions represented, but even to the uninitiated, there were frequent codes exchanged that only those in the know understood.

The few straight women who knew who we were and who stopped briefly to chat, often did so because they knew we would know the best restaurants, the hottest entertainment, and the most interesting sightseeing adventures around town. We were not bothered by their visits because we assumed that nobody knew who we were or why we were connected. We were the closeted lesbian nurses in town, presumably to attend the convention, but our real agenda was to connect with the strong women who we knew to be part of the inside group of other women who loved women but took every precaution to remain closeted. Many of us were also leaders in the organization, holding high office or leadership position. For those women, the time in the bar and about town with our "buddies" was limited, but they always knew how and when to find us even though there were no cell phones, email, text messages, etc.; at that time.

For most convention-goers in 1982, it was an ordinary biannual ANA convention. They were professionally active and committed nurses, about ninety percent women, who came to these events to campaign for office in the organization, recruit or be recruited



for jobs, attend various educational sessions, and generally advance the nursing profession. The attire of most of the women was skirted suits with polyester pastel or white blouses, usually with a large bow at the neck. A number of the bar-gathering closeted lesbians were also serious convention-goers and dressed accordingly, but a number of us defied the dress code in our jeans and shirts that were either tailored white or pastel button-downs, or a "feminine" plaid cotton. If we did attend a session, we added a blazer to dress up our jeans.

In 1982 there was still a strong resistance in nursing to any feminist ideas, and blatant repulsion for the feminist movement. The ANA had finally endorsed the ERA several years before, but continued to hold conventions in non-ERA states. Despite the fact that in 1982 Washington, DC, was alive with a massive feminist presence to mark the death of the ERA, and to honor the accomplishments of the movement to pass the ERA, there was no indication at the convention that anything else was happening in the city, nor was there any programming that acknowledged the significance of the ERA's defeat. So for the first time, our collective of bar-convening lesbian nurses had an agenda—to escape the convention as much as possible, participate in the citywide ERA events that were designed to celebrate the efforts of those who worked hard, and to engage with a renewed commitment to women's rights.

We went to a day-long Sisterfire music concert not far from the convention hotel. We attended a Margie Adam concert on the last night in June to honor the women who had staged a hunger strike in Illinois to try to attain passage of the ERA. We found small, intimate restaurants and cafes with good food, and talked for hours about what was happening around us politically. We grew in our feminist consciousness, and became determined to do something to bring a feminist consciousness into nursing. Near the end of the convention, a small group of us gathered in a hotel room and formed Cassandra: Radical Feminist Nurses Network.

We chose the name Cassandra in honor of Florence Nightingale's essay titled "Cassandra: An Angry Outcry Against the Plight of Victorian Women (1852/1979)". For a brief description of the group Cassandra, and access to all of the *Newsjournals*, go to <http://www.peggychinn.com/projects.html#cassandra>

Despite the fact that almost all of the women who formed Cassandra were probably lesbians, we never spoke of this. Several of the women were openly couples but still did not use the term lesbian or demonstrate any public displays of affection. There were no terms of endearment exchanged and no physical contact in any way, only the abiding presence of both women, an occasional knowing glance exchanged, and perhaps small accessory clues such as matching shoes or fountain pens (matching rings did not start to appear until the late 1990s). Despite this powerful protective veil of assumed closetedness, the women who founded Cassandra were in consensus about using the term radical in our name, and clearly identified its use with Mary Daly's work (1978).

### **Internalized and structured homophobia**

The failure of the ERA gave us motivation and shaped our feminist intentions. The magnificent writings of prominent lesbian-feminists were beginning to create a shift within the women's movement toward a lesbian-feminist consciousness. But within nursing, where feminism was still decried as an assault on society, it did not occur to us, as closeted lesbians, to even poke our toes out of the closet! We were acutely aware that strong women, strong nurses, were literally censured, even fired, simply for their courage, intellect, and just practical effectiveness. To be identified as a woman-identified-woman even affectionally, not to mention sexually, was dangerous. We knew we faced great odds against our efforts to raise feminist awareness in nursing. We harbored our own internalized homophobia, but there was also the realistic sense that to identify as lesbian meant even more



severe opposition to our desire to bring feminist insights to bear on nursing.

As an example, the word lesbian rarely, if ever, appeared in the nursing literature. Charlene Eldridge Wheeler, who had not been at the 1982 convention but who eagerly joined with me (Peggy) in producing the *Cassandra Newsjournal* (and managing the membership list), submitted an article for publication in *Nursing Outlook* soon after we started the *Newsjournal*. The article was titled "Feminism and Nursing: Can nursing afford to remain aloof from the women's movement?" (Chinn & Wheeler, 1985). After several months of not hearing from the editor regarding the status of the manuscript, I happened to be at a meeting where the editor was present and asked her about the manuscript. She ushered me to a corner of the room, clearly tense about the question. She leaned against the wall for support and in a subdued whisper told me that while they viewed the article favorably, they could not publish it with the word lesbian in it. I reminded her that if we were to overcome a fear of feminism in nursing, we had to address the fear that every nurse has of being discredited by being called a lesbian. I asked her to reconsider—that we could not take the word out. Several weeks later, we got a letter asking us to make minor revisions, with no mention of the word lesbian. Here is one of the paragraphs in this article where the word appears:

Feminism is not a lesbian ideology, but it is committed to ending the isolation and divisiveness that exist among women in male-defined systems, advocating that women value themselves and other women. More-over, it acknowledges that all forms of woman-shared experience are in essence revolutionary acts in a male-dominated system that demands and depends on the devotion of women's energy to it. In this context, it is apparent that the derogatory use of the term "lesbian" to label women

seen as independent, assertive, aggressive, or self-sufficient is a tactic intended to frighten them into submission. (p. 75)

As much as this article's publication represents an achievement in even mentioning the word lesbian, the context in which we use the word reflects the overwhelming sense of homophobia that prevailed then in nursing. The idea of lesbian pride, of a sense of positive lesbian identity, was yet to emerge. Many of us who were actively involved in Cassandra did not exactly hide our identity. Rather, we followed the long-standing tradition of going about our lives, including open partnerships with women, without "waving a flag." In practice, we simply did not use the word lesbian in any context, nor did we reflect on our own experiences of homophobia. The *Cassandra Newsjournal* reflects this dance around the edges of lesbian identity in that the articles, poetry, reports of our gatherings, and so on, address women's oppression, oppression within nursing and healthcare, and a clear feminist perspective.

### Stories from our gatherings

Each time we gathered, the topic of lesbian identity quickly came to the surface, often prompted by concerns around the meanings of the terms feminist and radical. Often the concerns were raised by women who were new to the group and were just beginning to tread on ground that, until now, had not existed. However, the reports in the *Newsjournal* focused instead on discussions of our bylaws, our principles of unity, practical matters of planning the next gatherings, and the like. In other words, our collective experience mirrored the personal experience of lesbian nurses—we did not exactly hide lesbian identity in the group, but we managed to not address it!

The 1985 gathering in Ann Arbor, Michigan, like all of our gatherings, was intense, inspiring, and memorable on many



levels. We met for three days, from August 4–6, in a large activity room on the University of Michigan campus. We had a full agenda, but much of it was taken up with a backdrop of tension around lesbian presence, and to what extent the terms feminist and radical actually meant lesbian. We spent considerable time working on our *Principles of Unity*, which included statements of value for nursing; our intention to function as a cooperative, nonhierarchical group; the need to balance self-care and care for the group as a whole; acknowledgment of our commitment to a radical feminist perspective and analysis; value of diversity; our commitment to end oppression of women in nursing and healthcare; and our intent to create a safe space for all women, regardless of race, class, creed, ability, or sexual preference [sic] ("Report of the 1985 Cassandra Continental Gathering," 1985). There is only one indication that we discussed lesbian presence in the section related to creating a safe space:

How do we create a safe environment for all Cassandrans? A focus for discussion around safety was the perception by some that Cassandra is a lesbian organization. Not all Websters [our alternative term for "members"] at the Gathering shared this perception. To the extent that we are viewed as a lesbian group, Cassandra may be perceived as unsafe for some lesbians who fear being known as a lesbian, as well as for some non-lesbians. As a group we agreed that we do not necessarily want to encourage an image as a lesbian organization, but also we felt it is important to acknowledge the presence of lesbians in Cassandra, as everywhere else, and to examine the dynamics of oppression that lesbians experience—dynamics that effect all of us as women regardless of our sexualities. We need internal self-care around this

issue with recognition of the value of self-definition as a Principle of Unity. (p. 6)

### **Picking up the banner and waving it in Ohio**

A group of women at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) invited Peggy Chinn and Charlene Eldridge (Wheeler) to present Cassandra to a gathering of Nursing Doctorate (ND) students and interested nursing faculty at the Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing (FPB) at CWRU. At the time, I (Elizabeth) was completing my doctoral program, and having been involved in the arrangements for this visit, I sat in the front row of the auditorium, singing along with gusto when Charlene and Peggy played "Song of the Soul" as part of their presentation.

Cassandra in Cleveland, as we became known, immediately formed. We gathered regularly for a few years, with the height of our number being as many as forty. Cleveland has long been a strong union city and Ohio a strong union state, so radical organizing was in our blood. We made Cassandra in Cleveland buttons that we wore proudly, sometimes even on our work name tags. Some of our Cleveland Cassandrans sewed a banner that we hung with pride everywhere we could think of to take it, including the Ohio Nurses Association (ONA) biennial convention in Columbus. About half of us Cleveland Cassandrans were lesbians, and all of us identified as radical feminists. For us, this meant that if we knew if any of us were accused of being a lesbian, all of us would stand with pride as lesbians. So we had a quick and easy discussion at an early gathering, then we did not discuss it anymore—not until the blowback we received during and in the immediate aftermath of the ONA convention in 1983.

Several Cassandrans were elected as delegates from our very large ONA Cleveland district. As Cassandrans we were enthusiastic about being feminist nurses. We saw ourselves as representing our district, but this was also an opportunity to proudly wave the



Cassandra banner. We reasoned that, as members of a primarily women's profession, many of these political-activist nurses in Ohio would be only too proud to identify as feminists and, standing in that light, work to improve our profession. So we hung the banner from the balcony overlooking the House of Delegates Assembly. Almost immediately, the organization leadership, in the person of the Executive Director, directed us to remove it. Stunned, we moved it to a suite where we were hosting events for delegates from our district who were running for ONA office.

There was a lot of buzz from the leadership pointed in our direction, looking at us askance from the platform, and talking and nodding in our direction. But being the seasoned organizers that we were, we proudly and defiantly left it hanging in our District suite, wore our buttons, and passed out fliers announcing how to contact us and when the next gathering would be (see the drawing at the top of this article). As we tried to figure out what all the reaction stemmed from, not once did our conversation include any mention that the real reason for the pushback may have been because they thought we were a bunch of upstart lesbians, and that we may have been seen as threatening the closets of Ohio nursing leaders. Not until the letter came.

Within a few days of the convention's conclusion, I (Elizabeth) received a letter from the Executive Director, Dorothy (Connie) Cornelius, taking me to task, and directing me to cease using ONA as a vehicle to recruit for another nursing organization. I had been personally singled out and chastised. I was stunned. We were in no way competing with ONA. Could they have possibly believed that we were recruiting for a competing organization? If so, why had they not approached us at the convention so that we could have cleared this up? This did not seem to explain the heightened level of their discomfort with Cassandrans' presence and action at the convention, and now this chastising letter. Even though we regularly gathered at my private practice office, I could not understand why I had received the letter. I had not made the

banner, it was not hanging in my room, and, in this instance, I was not the most vocal Cassandran present. I did not even come out for four more years.

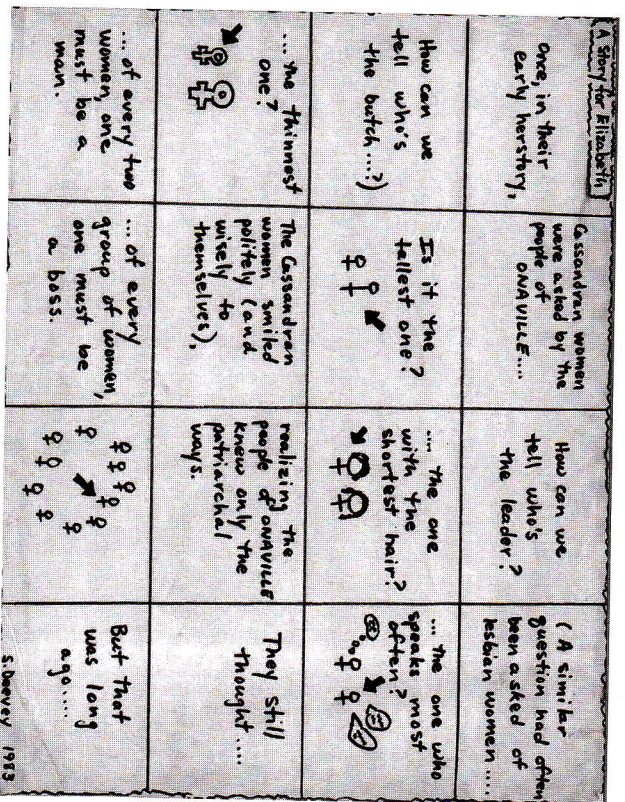
After reading the letter, one of the lesbians in our number pointed out that several of ONA's leaders were long-time, deeply closeted lesbians. Of course, although many nurses assumed or suspected that certain single leaders in nursing were "with another woman," only those who were lesbians knew, and even their knowing grew out of the unspoken, undeclared, underground lesbian nurse culture. Nobody came out even within the underground culture itself, so if a lesbian nurse shared the fact that someone was a lesbian, this knowledge was only known by unspoken clues and participation in the culture—not because anyone explicitly identified as a lesbian. Typically, hardly anyone, especially lesbians, used the word.

Even though we only recognized the possible/probable lesbian identity of our nurse leaders who were opposing us, we began to realize that these leaders truly were afraid—afraid for their current positions and afraid for their national (and in a couple of cases, international) reputations. We recognized that their understanding, without ever saying the word, was that Cassandra was not a *feminist* body, but a *lesbian* body. Proud Cassandran and lesbian, Sharon Deevey's, response to this incident was the following cartoon.

Years later, at her final ONA convention, when she was being celebrated in retirement, Connie Cornelius came out. She did so in the following manner: her right hand staffer at ONA for many years, Elaine (not a nurse), announced from the stage that she and Connie had met when Elaine had been a lounge singer, and Connie had come into the lounge where Elaine was singing. We then had a lengthy program of Elaine playing the piano and singing love songs for Connie at the retirement party. Looking around the banquet hall, I (Elizabeth) tried to catch the expressions on the faces of the



hundreds of nurses gathered. No one seemed shocked or even surprised. I wondered if they actually understood what they were witnessing. Even the expressions on the faces of those nurses that I knew to be closeted lesbians did not reveal anything. I guessed that they were well-practiced in not revealing their emotions in public. Approaching Connie afterward, I asked about her reaction to our Cassandra banner those years before, and she confirmed that she had feared for her personal reputation.



A Story for Elizabeth, by Sharon Deevy, 1983

In 1984 Cassandra in Cleveland hosted a gathering of approximately twenty-five Cassandrans that included nurses from New York and Utah. We hosted it at CWRU's official rural meeting place, The Pink Pig. As you can see in the photo below, we proudly displayed our Cassandra in Cleveland banner that had been dismissed at the convention. Several nurses from Buffalo, New York (including Peggy and Charlene) joined us for a full day of talk, discussion, and consciousness-raising. A number of those



in attendance were long-time lesbians. I (Elizabeth) recall clearly knowing who was who, so to speak, but in our discussions, we all (straight and lesbian) colluded in keeping silent about what it meant to be lesbian nurses.



Cassandrans in Cleveland, 1985

## The calendar

Inspired by the activism that Cassandra signified, Charlene and Peggy established MargaretDaughters Publishing as an avenue for documenting the important lives of nurses who claimed a feminist sensibility. We started by publishing the dissertation of Wilma Scott Heide, nurse and third president of the National Organization for Women. Her dissertation and the book were titled *Feminism for the Health of It* (Heide, 1985). Wilma was thrilled with our publication of her book, as well as a biography of her life by Eleanor Humes Haney (1985), and the book of feminist group process "Peace and Power" (Wheeler & Chinn, 1984). We also launched a calendar with Elizabeth Berrey as the first "cover girl," and January featured Sherol See [http://www.peggychinn.com/plc\\_files/1987%20Sheroes-sm.pdf](http://www.peggychinn.com/plc_files/1987%20Sheroes-sm.pdf)



Charlene asked each woman to make a statement for the calendar, something that revealed our radical feminism. I (Elizabeth) did not come out until August 1987 and did not even use the word feminist in my statement! Fully half of the women in the calendar were lesbians, but none identified as such, although Sharon Deevey did include in her statement that she is "an advocate of lesbian and gay clients." Although I (Elizabeth) do recall making certain that I came off as woman-identified, taking care not to mention my motherhood, or being married to a man. I wrote the following statement to accompany my picture:

I come from a long line of women of courage, of passion, of intellect, of determined persistence, of honest forthrightness and hopeful expectation—our foresisters in nursing whose lives have been obscured and trivialized and who made significant contributions against great odds. We are now realizing that they were gifted, as am I, with a few colleagues who are also brave, hopeful, risk-taking women who have refused to succumb to horizontal violence or to pessimism. We are not alone. We will make a difference. Our network of sisterhood is as powerful as it is radical.

## Conclusion

The journey for lesbian nurses is not over by any means. From our perspective now, the struggle with lesbian identity in the 1980s in and around Cassandra seems odd. Looking back, we now ask "What were we afraid of, exactly?" Yes, some of us were sometimes rightfully afraid of being fired from jobs. In Cassandra we were fully aware that being a lesbian did not equate with having feminist ideals, but most of the nursing world harbored an abiding fear of both. At the time we outwardly tried to hold on to



the notion that our main concern was to bring feminist insights to bear on our work as nurses, but our refusal to more openly address lesbian identities probably hindered our cause. Looking back, we can see the many ways that our own internalized homophobia was expressed . . . not in what we said or did, but in what we did not say or do. Now that we can see more clearly, and now that we have an entire cultural movement behind us, we can, and must, live our lives fully in the open. Until we do, we are not whole, we are not reaching the high level of wellness that we advocate in our profession. When we do live openly, we join the many others in LGBTQ communities worldwide who are indeed inspiring full human rights for all!

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## Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the many women who shared our Cassandra journey in the early to mid-1980s. In particular, we honor the memory of Charlene Eldridge Wheeler, without whose tireless



work and dedication Cassandra *Newsjournals* would not have been possible. Charlene died of complications from lupus at the age of forty-eight in 1993. But her legacy remains.

We also acknowledge the friendship that we, Elizabeth and Peggy, have shared throughout the years, even though we have never lived in the same city together! Our friendship, birthed in Cassandra in 1983, has provided an abiding and essential source of inspiration, confidence, criticism, tears, and laughter. We have been nurtured in our friendship by the amazing communities of women in the many cities where we have made space to be together and to work together in Buffalo, Cleveland, Denver, Oakland, Albuquerque—and of course, the land at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival!