

Cathy Gorman & Marge Moskol / RIWA & ORIOLES

Overview

Catherine “Cathy” Gorman and Marjorie Moskol, two early members of the Rhode Island Women’s Association (RIWA) and the Organization of Rhode Island Older Les Energy (ORIOLES), discuss the genesis of the two notable organizations that emerged from the feminist and lesbian movements of the 1970s and 1980s. While both organizations shared parallel goals of providing lesbians with a sense community, their demographics and activities reflected the separate and distinct interests of their membership.

Summary

In the swirling currents of the 1970s feminist movement, six pioneering women laid the foundation for the Rhode Island Women’s Association (RIWA). Born in 1978 out of a charged landscape of lesbian activism and feminist organizing, RIWA began as an inclusive space for Rhode Island’s lesbian community, and a place to meet, organize, and share solidarity.

“It (RIWA) was really kind of exciting,” Cathy recalled. “There was a tremendous explosion of interest and connection among women.” Many had met through groups such as Gay Women of Providence or through consciousness-raising groups in Boston.

In its early years, RIWA was deeply political. Members met monthly in one another’s homes to plan actions and campaigns. They were on the front lines during the International Women’s Year in 1977–78, pushing back against conservative opposition and rallying for feminist causes like the Equal Rights Amendment and reproductive freedom.

However, as the organization expanded, internal tensions surfaced. The initial vision of RIWA as a group for “professional women” raised concerns about inclusivity. Some members, particularly teachers, feared being outed and risking their jobs if their association with a lesbian organization became known, especially if students could also join. In response, RIWA dropped the word “professional” and adopted a minimum age requirement—first 30 and later lowered to 23.

As the intensity of political engagement in the 1970s waned and the age threshold decreased, RIWA gradually shifted its focus toward social gatherings, especially its popular monthly dances.

This shift, however, did not appeal to all members. The group's founding members, now older than the influx of younger members, began seeking quieter, more intimate forms of community. In October 1983, they formed a new group: the Organization of Rhode Island Older Lesbians (ORIOLES).

The ORIOLES centered their gatherings around meals—lunches and potlucks—reflecting Rhode Island's cultural emphasis on food. "ORIOLES was more than just meals—it was grounding," said Marjorie. "It was the place where you could talk about relationships at a time when that wasn't possible at work."

As RIWA and ORIOLES evolved separately, both continued to offer safe and affirming spaces. In addition to their potlucks, the ORIOLES nurtured community through travel. For over a decade, members gathered at the Beachmere Inn in Ogunquit, Maine each Memorial Day weekend. As the group grew, they later moved their annual trips to the Berkshires in Massachusetts, drawn by its renowned arts scene.

While the ORIOLES prioritized social connection over activism, they remained engaged in key political moments. Members participated in the Marches on Washington in 1987 and 1993 and stood in solidarity with gay men during the AIDS crisis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ORIOLES worked to stay connected with their aging membership but disbanded around 2022.

Today, RIWA continues to thrive as a social organization under the leadership of chairperson Donna-Marie Frappier. Though its focus has shifted from activism to community, it remains a vital part of Rhode Island's lesbian landscape and will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2028.

Together, RIWA and the ORIOLES reflect the evolution of a generation. RIWA captured energy and urgency of political awakening; the ORIOLES offered the comfort and resilience of chosen

family. Their legacy lives on in the courage, connection, and community they fostered—one protest, one potluck, and one friendship at a time.

“It (RIWA) was really kind of exciting. There was a tremendous explosion of interest and connection among women.” — Cathy Gorman

“Rhode Island culture focuses a lot of attention on food. ORIOLES was more than just meals—it was grounding. It was the place where you could talk about relationships at a point in time when you could not do that at work.” — Marjorie Moskol

Audio Quote from Interview

🔊 A Necessary Social Group (1:07)



And not a, not a political group at all. People were busy working this. This was the time when you had a lot of energy. I know I did. I'm sure Marjorie did, and and and others were, were really invested in the work that they were doing, or families, and so just being able to spend time with in a group of Lesbian, an affiliation group, a group of lesbian women, was a nice antidote to the work day world. And although that, but that world absorbs so much energy that it's somehow, at least for me, I feel it's sort of hard to recall some of those years from the standpoint of, you know, a social group, except that it was sort of grounding. It was the place where you could, oh yeah, where you could talk about relationships and what you were doing. And at that point in time, you could not do that at work.

Related Items in Wanderground Collection

- Incomplete organizational files from RIWA & ORIOLES (1981-2005) includes Organizational history, meeting notes, newsletters, and photos

Details (single space ok)

- Interview with: Catherine Gorman and Marjorie Moskol
- Topic(s): RIWA (Rhode Island Women's Association) and ORIOLES (Organization of Rhode Island Older Les Energy)
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