



photo by Bunny MacCulloch

Would that you all could have such a sister!  
Irene & Ret.

## THE CHALLENGE . . .

" . . . No more than 3½ pages, typed, double-spaced: tell how you feel and what you think as the sister of a lesbian."

That's about 30 years of learning—slow, painful, cautious, surprising, satisfying, frustrating, amazing, broadening (and more adjectives), *learning*—how can I possibly?

I am 65 years old, raised by a mother who, only 7 years ago, would not discuss with me the probability (certainty) of an unmarried aunt having died in childbirth (taboo subject). I matured and married woefully ignorant of sex and sexual mores. In my 20s and early 30s I heard infrequent snide references to sexual deviation, to "fairies" and to homosexuality. But the words were meaningless, and I wasn't interested.

In the early '50s my sister announced to me that she was being harassed by the OSI\* who were accusing her of improper sexual activity. We didn't dwell on the accusations and I inquired if they were true. She replied indignantly, "Thank you for your vote of confidence!" End of conversation.

I was distressed and at work the next day found myself unable to concentrate. I asked to go to the quiet room where I wept copiously—not really knowing what I was weeping about. My supervisor, who had worked at a military base during the war, came to check on me. Unable to fabricate a lie promptly, I told the truth—ending with "Do you think they could be right?" She looked me in the eye and said, "They probably are." She never mentioned the subject again.

And I knew they were—but still I really *knew* nothing.

My sister, who had a history of what I shall conservatively call 'irresponsibility', continued her nomadic life . . . in and out of jobs; one city, one state to another; friendships which seemed remarkably intimate and as remarkably short-lived . . . but a life about which I never got any true insight although she visited me periodically.

Then one day in the '60s she was again visiting me between jobs and the subject of her military discharge arose. With no preamble she asked, "Have you ever considered that there might have been an element of truth in it?" And I looked directly and steadily at her and said, "Is there?" (My instinct told me not to pussyfoot, that this was a moment of truth, and I desperately wanted to hear a flat truth from her.) And she said, "Yes."

I still didn't *know* anything—except that I was sure my sister had really told me the truth and that she had told me something important.

The ensuing conversation was cautious, tentative, and shortly directed to another subject. I was uneasy (but strangely, not shocked) with this new knowledge. I didn't understand all I "knew." I have a husband with whom I had often discussed my sister's unorthodox life-style. Should I tell him? How would he react? And what if I couldn't handle his reaction—or if his attitude toward her became significantly different? So for a couple of years I guarded my secret, groping for information and very slowly coming to terms within myself about how I felt. During those years I came to know a couple of her friends quite well and we'd discuss the subject of homosexuality occasionally. I began to understand—still inadequately, but enough to share my knowledge with my husband. Bless him!

I have known two of my sister's lovers well. Her life with the first largely predated my awareness of the nature of their relationship and certainly my ability to converse about it. But I liked the woman immensely, and still do. Her present commitment is to a woman I'd choose for a sister or a daughter—although I'd never elect the pain of lesbianism for one I loved.

Nearing the end—and still the unanswered questions—How do I feel . . . What do I think?

I don't feel stigmatized or ashamed.

I don't feel secretive about this aspect of my sister's life although I am careful to speak of it only if I can be fairly sure nothing unfair will accrue to her because I spoke. In good time, I talked with my three sons about my sister. These discussions all took place more than 10 years ago and they have continuously enjoyed a "normal" relationship with my sister.

I can visit in her home for an extended period and not be concerned about or particularly aware that a different life-style abides there.

I think we have an openness with each other that few siblings ever reach. We have talked from the very depths of our being, exposed ourselves to each other vulnerably—and met the test.

All this verbiage and I'm not sure I've met the challenge . . .

Yes, I have. I *do* know how I feel and what I think. I *feel* a deep love for my sister which is no different than the love other sisters feel for each other, if they're lucky. I love her totally—as she is totally. I *feel* a great pride in what she has done and in what she has become—largely without support from those who should have supported her. I *think* I'm *very* fortunate.

Irene Schmidt

\*The Office of Special Investigation; that is, the Intelligence Unit of the U. S. Air Force.

## ACW ANNOUNCES SERVICES FOR BOTH NON-ALCOHOLIC AND ALCOHOLIC

Family Services at the Alcoholism Center for Women offers a new program of groups for the non-alcoholic woman from alcoholic families or incest/child battering families. These are low or no-cost support groups. There is also a special 8-week series concerned with compulsive behavior or dependency problems ranging from substance abuse (including food) to relationship dependency. Call Nancy Taylor or Jael Greenleaf (381-7805) at ACW for details and sign-up.

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**Lynne Turner**



# The Benefits of S.C.W.U. Membership

When I was approached about writing this article for the newsletter, I thought how I could best put into words all of the benefits I have received through membership in Southern California Women for Understanding. I would have to say the privileges have fallen into two very distinctively different categories.

There have been the financial privileges derived through membership. We have the option of attending the monthly special interest programs, the mini-raps, various educational programs and/or social activities at significantly reduced rates, as well as the resource raps and singles' group activities.

In order to illustrate the financial savings involved, I have shown the substantial savings derived by a member in attending a special interest program, a mini-rap, a resource rap and a social event or educational program on a monthly basis.

## THE BENEFITS OF SCWU MEMBERSHIP

|   | Member                            | Non-Mem.                            |
|---|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Special Interest Program . . . . .            | -0-                               | \$ 5.00                             |
| Mini-Rap . . . . .                            | -0-                               | \$ 2.00                             |
| Resource Rap . . . . .                        | -0-                               | \$ 2.00                             |
| Social Event or Educational Program . . . . . | \$ 4.00                           | \$ 6.00                             |
|   | \$ 4.00 x<br>12 mos.<br>= \$48.00 | \$ 15.00 x<br>12 mos.<br>= \$180.00 |
| Newsletter—incl. in membership . . . . .      | -0-                               | \$ 5.00                             |
|   | \$48.00                           | \$185.00                            |

As you can see, the savings are significant.

But, more importantly, there are the extraordinary benefits which have been shared by so many. In the course of the past eight months, I have talked with many of our members who have shared with me what they have experienced through membership in S.C.W.U.

You cannot put a monetary value on these benefits—for they involve special feelings, love and acceptance. Their comments have included, "I belong for the first time in my life. I feel like I lead a double life sometimes and S.C.W.U. provides me with a release, especially when you're not 'out'."

"As a contracting member, I have a voice in the organization. I've found acceptance; an opportunity for, and the freedom to express myself freely in a way never before possible."

"S.C.W.U. has provided me the opportunity to gain and to share knowledge, not only about the lesbian lifestyle, but as a member of the women's community. I've experienced so much personal growth."

"It's been a good way to reach people who are shy—a good way to reach out to others. S.C.W.U. has provided a warm, loving, accepting environment to ease the fear of being in a group. You really get a lot for your money. I've developed deep and lasting friendships. It's like being part of a family, a real sense of belonging."

From my own personal point of view, I have experienced all of these same feelings. I know the joy of belonging. I, too, have felt the love and acceptance. I firmly believe in S.C.W.U. Won't you join us? Won't you ask a friend to join us?

Sally Drum

## —CLASSIFIED ADS—

**WEDDING BANDS** from WINDFLOWER: Sterling silver Indian-made overlay and stamp designs ordered direct from New Mexico in your sizes. \$22 to \$27. Contact Bunny MacCulloch (213) 791-4561.

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**COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK:** The 1982 *Index/Directory of Women's Media* lists 351 women's periodicals, over 80 presses and publishers, 64 bookstores. In addition, it lists music groups, film groups, speakers bureaus, radio, TV, and cable groups, and MORE. In short, everything in communications. Send \$8 to WIFP, 3306 Ross Pl., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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