

powerful + sexy



Who are the lesbians working behind the scenes to help win equal rights and change the course of history? Which lesbians are enhancing our visibility and challenging stereotypes about what lesbians look like? Meet these often unsung heroines of lesbian culture.



the activist entrepreneur

Judy Dlugacz runs the largest lesbian-feminist company in the world.

By Victoria A. Brownworth

As a cofounder and the longtime president of Olivia Companies, LLC, Judy Dlugacz has spent nearly four decades providing lesbian-feminist entertainment for hundreds of thousands of women worldwide. And she's done it with a core staff she calls "small and mighty."

"Olivia is the largest lesbian business there is in the world," Dlugacz says with understandable pride. "There is nothing larger. It's pretty amazing. Our 40th anniversary is next year."

Olivia began in the early 1970s with a commitment to creating change—for women, but for lesbians in particular. In 2011, that remains Dlugacz's mission.

"I've always considered myself a political activist," she asserts. "When we started Olivia there were 10 of us. I was 20 years old. We were activists and we were radical and we believed that the world would change and that we would make it happen."

Dlugacz wants succeeding generations to understand just what inspired her to create Olivia, a company she refers to repeatedly as "she." "It's really important to teach the history. We want younger women to know how Olivia started and how she became what she is today."

The process so many lesbians are familiar with—a lesbian group gets together and tries to run a company entirely with volunteers—was exactly what the Olivia founders wanted to avoid.

"When we did that—all volunteers with other jobs—we all burned out, eventually, and things fell apart. But if we could make a living and create jobs and a financial basis to build on..." then the business could continue to develop and expand and become a force to be reckoned with.

As the Olivia collective's business concept was evolving, a singer-songwriter who is now a legendary music icon appeared in their lives.

"Cris Williamson comes to town and the idea then became [to] bring our activism together and create a movement," says Dlugacz. "And we did. We helped create a movement, a place where people—women, lesbians—could come together. I was the youngest and no one was over 30 and we started the company with no money, but now here we are, 40 years later."

Music was Olivia's first passion, and Williamson and Meg Christian, recording for Olivia Records, were the first big stars in what has come to be known as the women's music movement.

"We loved it. And if we loved it, so would everybody else," said Dlugacz. "With our single vision we started the record company. We produced over 40 albums from 1975 to the mid-'90s."

At 26, Dlugacz was Olivia's sole remaining founder, and the political organization she had started was becoming a thriving business. But the road to success was fraught with sexism and homophobia.

"We had this impossible task," she explains, "to get recognized. I couldn't always say it was a lesbian record



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company because that word scared people.”

In 1982, Olivia marked her 10th anniversary with the biggest concert in her history, according to Dlugacz, a spectacular event at Carnegie Hall. But this huge women’s music concert garnered a scant “inch and a half in the *New York Times*.” Recognition, yes, but not at the level Dlugacz wanted.

“No matter what we did, we couldn’t get mainstream attention.”

Fast-forward to the present and Dlugacz says it’s still the case; many women and the business community at large may not even be aware of Olivia, although Dlugacz has a mailing list that includes thousands of women.

The company has grown and changed over the years, morphing into a different kind of lesbian entertainment business, one that now features a large variety women-only travel and adventure packages and cruises. Olivia’s latest project is a retirement community. But as always, it’s all about the women.

“I greet everyone who comes on one of our cruises,” Dlugacz states, “and I tell them, ‘This is how it should be.’” Community events where a handful of women feeling the love would pack the pews and folding chairs in church basements and small neighborhood halls to listen to the likes of Holly Near and Sweet Honey in the Rock, have now become enchanting cruises and adventurous trips where hundreds, even thousands, of women in their 20s to their 80s experience a safe, secure, lesbian-only world—however briefly.

Olivia’s travel programs include as few as 45 women on a Galapagos Islands adventure, to as many as 2,000 women on a cruise. Dlugacz says 115,000 women have taken over 160 trips with the company—to destinations that range from the Caribbean to Europe, the Mediterranean, Scandinavia, Russia, Antarctica and even, when the area was less volatile, the Middle East.

Dlugacz’s mission with the cruises and adventure travel is not just to embrace all kinds of women but to take them into places where their mere presence is a political event. “A couple thousand women descending on a town and spending money makes it clear how lesbians can build your economy,” she explains, noting that many local newspapers have written up the arrival of the Olivia women in countries such as Greece and Turkey.


Getting lesbians recognized as an economic power base is part of Dlugacz’s plan. Maintaining a lesbian-feminist philosophy is another. “Originally, that’s how it was. Women came out because of lesbian feminism. Some of them were born gay and some of them were not.”

Today, Dlugacz continues to choose a life that revolves around empowering women and expanding Olivia. “Our success is about being able to change and grow,” says Dlugacz. And four decades of women touched by Olivia’s magic can only agree. (*olivia.com*) ■

the spin doctor

Media maverick Cathy Renna wants us to harness our power.

By Merryn Johns

 For media relations expert Cathy Renna, being a spokesperson for the LGBT community is more than just a career—it’s a calling, and she is a force to be reckoned with. After working with GLAAD for 14 years—during which time she played a critical role in the shaping of the media coverage of the death of Matthew Shepard and successfully countering the anti-gay rhetoric of the church officials following its abuse scandal—Renna went on to found Renna Communications, a public relations firm which specializes in representing LGBT and progressive organizations, and which allows her to continue to be a powerful spokesperson for justice and equality for the queer community.

You’ve been at the forefront of giving LGBT issues prominence for two decades. Which story, event or cause most influenced the political dialogue?

It is really almost impossible to choose after all these years. I have been so privileged to be at the center of many historic moments. And they have been a real mix—from helping organize the “come out with Ellen” screening in Birmingham, Ala. in 1997 when the lone ABC affiliate there refused to air the coming out episode to all the work I did related to the murder of Matt Shepard—and many other victims of hate crimes—to the amazing 2006 experience with