

## SHEWOLF: MAKING CHANGES IN THE SOUTH

Barbara Esrig

**O**n February 19, 2013, Barbara Esrig sat down with Shewolf in her home in Melrose, Florida, to ask about her decades-long experiences making change in the South. Later Kate Ellison and B. Leaf Cronewrite edited the six-thousand-word interview. Here is a short excerpt.

**Shewolf:** I was born Jean Boudreaux, on Desire St. where the streetcar used to run, in New Orleans. 1932. Which makes me eighty-one. It was just an easy place to grow up, New Orleans in the '30s and '40s. The beach at Lake Pontchartrain, was open—it wasn't polluted then. I don't remember being poor, but now I know we were very poor. We always had food and clothes, but nothing we didn't actually need. I grew up in the Ninth Ward, which later became notorious as a hard place to live, but not then. Segregation was just the way you lived. When I was a kid it was not kosher to associate with Blacks. It wasn't that my family had anything against Black people, but you just didn't go to school with them at that time.

I went to undergraduate school in Lafayette, Louisiana, then graduate school in West Virginia. I took a master's in education, psychology, and speech. If you went to the library to get books on homosexuality you had to ask the librarian to get the key and open the cabinet and get those books out for you, and you had to sign for them as a psych major. So I became a psych major.

I went for my doctorate at Case Reserve in Cleveland on an assistantship. I was treated by the Northerners as if I was stupid. You can see the faces, you know. When the first grades came out and mine was A, the attitude changed overnight.

I never married—I had girlfriends in elementary school, high school, college and thereafter. In the '50s and '60s we didn't even know the word *lesbian*.

**Barbara:** So you didn't have a name for you loving a girl?

**Shewolf:** No. It was just, you know, magic.

This is the beginning of my feminist lesbian political experience. Around 1969 I was at the University of Arizona, and my old professor at Lafayette had a job opening and wanted me to take it, so I came to campus and did a workshop for them on the stage in the auditorium, for all the Speech and Hearing people. I arrived and did my presentation in a pantsuit. This was in the late '60s, and no woman on the campus at the time had ever dared to wear anything but a dress. I never thought much about it. It was very common for me, coming from Arizona. I had no idea what they were ogling about. We negotiated back and forth, and finally they [offered me a job with] a full professorship, which allowed me to be a member of the graduate council, which ran the university at that time. When I got to work, the first message from my boss was, don't wear pantsuits on campus. I wore what I wanted to wear. Nobody said a word.

As soon as I got to the campus I connected with four other women, all straight and heads of departments. My tenure was safe—they couldn't throw me out. One of the other four women was tenured in, and the other three were not; so they were a little bit shaky. The five of us got together once a week because we were noticing that on campus, the women were all underpaid and underpromoted. The first thing we tried to do was have a meeting of the entire female faculty, not more than fifty women of about two hundred faculty.

Men were making about forty percent more than we were making, but we didn't know this; we needed to uncover the facts. One of the gals in our five-finger group ran the computers for the university, and one of the gals was head of the business department. Eventually we got hold of a faculty payroll and found out how underpaid women were. We called a meeting, and nobody showed up. Word had gotten around campus that something scary was going on. After the public meeting fizzled,

we went to the administration and said, "We think there are discrepancies in salaries and promotions, and we'd like you to do something about it." They did nothing.

We sent it to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. And of course, nothing happened. But one day, finally, the EEOC visited the President's office, and within one year everything changed. Most of the women's salaries were raised. They did new investigations, and we pointed out that women were staying instructors for five years where men were staying instructors for two or less. That changed too, but it took two years to do it.

**Barbara:** Were you pegged as troublemakers?

**Shewolf:** Oh, God, yeah! I applied for dean of the College, and I sure didn't get it. Nobody said anything about me being a lesbian until I ran for the deanship. Then it became important. I wasn't chosen for the job.

The first time I got together with other lesbians in a group was when I first moved to Lafayette, in about 1970. Hospitals used to have a newcomers' group, and when I went to one, the woman who was leading the group was a lesbian. She spotted me. I said, "Do you have a potluck group?" We invited about fifteen women to her house for a potluck on a Saturday night. We had that going for eight years. We had about sixty lesbians that came and went, but eventually one of the couples wanted to invite a couple of their gay guy friends. So they changed the dates, times, and format, and included the guys. It just wasn't the same, and it fizzled after a few months.

**Barbara:** How did you get your name?

**Shewolf:** It came to me in a vision quest in Florida. You had to choose a name to be in the circle. A white she-wolf appeared on a rock in front of me. I got goose bumps and I said, "Shewolf." I visited a friend and she retrieved this big book with all the symbols. She said, "Shewolf is the pathfinder." Well, that was during the time that I was traveling, and finding paths to all these different places; so it fit. I was still a university professor,

so using a pen name was prudent, and I took it as a regular name in the community. Since I came to Florida I've been Shewolf. Exclusively.

*For the last twenty years the paths to lesbians have led through Shewolf's Directory of Wimmin's Lands and Lesbian Communities (Melrose, FL: Target Blue Enterprises), published and distributed to over 1800 readers, now in a sixth edition (2012).*