

The basic thing about knowing our history is that it really helps LGBT people to create a social location for themselves. When you don't have history, it's as if you don't exist past your own life," explains Ann Mussey, who is doing her part to identify that social location.

The Portland State University professor moved to the Rose City from the Midwest in the early 1970s with a group of women. They were college dropouts who wanted to put their feminism into action. For Mussey, the move to Portland was also her coming-out transition.

She kept busy with an assortment of jobs. Some were traditional vocations for women such as day care and waiting tables, while others were not: She also worked as an auto mechanic and a spring maker.

"Yes," she says with a laugh, "that is what we were called. Spring makers. I thought it was kind of fun."

Mussey also was involved with political issues. She helped set up a women's health clinic and a halfway house for women who were getting out of prison.

But by the early 1980s, her partner noticed that perhaps Mussey needed something more and said, "You are understimulated; you need to go back to school." And that put Mussey on her path to becoming a professor.

She enrolled at PSU and took a wide variety of classes until she landed in David Johnson's U.S. social history series. He presented history in terms of social events rather than just economic or military events.

"I loved it!" Mussey says. "It sure was different from when I last took history in the 1960s." Mussey became a history major with an empha-

DUE COURSE

Portland State University professor teaches queer history

by Pat Young



PHOTO BY PAT YOUNG

Ann Mussey wants students to discover the evolving way sexuality has been understood through the years

sis on women's studies. At one point, she helped facilitate discussion groups in the Women's Studies 101 class. That experience got her interested in going to grad school and becoming a professor.

"I had never really thought about it before," Mussey notes. "But I was really turned on by ideas and discovered that going to college wasn't

as limiting as it had seemed in 1968 and 1969."

By now, she was hooked and went to Rutgers in New Jersey to pursue a Ph.D. in history with an emphasis on women's studies. She chose to look at lesbian history for her first research project.

Often she would hop a train to New York City and spend hours researching at the Lesbian

Herstory Archives. "The faculty was really supportive of my interest," Mussey explains, "but they couldn't necessarily support me with lots of guidance about research and stuff, as the field of lesbian history was just starting to open up."

After finishing her classroom work, she and her partner returned to Oregon. Mussey was in the right place at the right time to receive a phone call from the PSU Women's Studies Department. One of the professors was taking a year off, so she was asked if she wanted to fill in; she replied, "You bet!"

"The department had always considered offering more items related to queer studies, and I ended up being the person who actually took that on as a project," Mussey says. "It was the perfect opportunity for me. I just sort of walked into it."

Through the years Mussey has developed a cluster of courses relating to sexuality. Although she is not the only instructor, she is usually the one who teaches History of Sexuality, Introduction to Queer Studies and Lesbian History.

PSU plans to add more courses to the cluster including Lesbian Spaces, Sex in the Media and Pornography. There even has been talk about developing a certificate in queer studies.

"One of the things that is so important about the history of sexuality is that students can discover the way sexuality has been understood and has changed drastically over time and that terms like 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' are actually historically specific terms that arose at a particular time in history," Mussey explains. "I am not saying that same-sex behavior did not exist prior to the invention of those categories, but the ways in which that behavior is understood has changed over time." □

PAT YOUNG is a Portland free-lance writer and gay and lesbian historian.

WEDDING RINGS

AS individual AS YOU ARE.