

Helen Sandoz a.k.a Helen Sanders a.k.a. Ben Cat (1920-1987)

Stella Rush



Helen Sandoz was born November 2, 1920, and grew up living on a farm at the edge of a small town in Oregon where her mother lived and worked as a maid. Somewhere along the way, her friends gave her the nickname Sandy, and it stuck with her for life. After she earned her bachelor's degree, she moved to Alaska for a time, then moved back to the lower forty-eight and held supervisory positions in department stores in Washington and Oregon. While doing a bank errand for her mother in Oregon, she rear-ended a farmer's truck transporting a pregnant cow. Thinking the accident was minor, Sandy was so focused on reaching the bank that she was unaware

how injured she was. The bank teller asked, "Miss Sandoz, did you know that there is blood trickling down your chin?" Sandy had not been aware of any personal injury, but left the bank to seek medical treatment and learned that she had broken her neck. She had to spend a year in a full-body cast and never again was able to sit in a chair or remain immobile for any length of time. Never one to waste time or unnecessary energy in self-pity or meaningless activity, Sandy decided to shift her career goal to one in which she did not have to sit for any length of time.

Since she had artistic talent and some graphic art experience, she decided to build a career on these assets and became a sign printer by trade. Although it was physically demanding, it did not involve much sitting down. She soon left Oregon and settled in San Francisco and discovered the Daughters of Bilitis. When DOB legally organized with a state charter in 1957, Sandy was one of the courageous and far-sighted women who signed her real name in the state documents for chartering DOB as an educational and social organization for gay women. For some fifteen years, Sandy

worked devotedly for the Daughters of Bilitis and its publication, *The Ladder*.

Under her "public" pseudonym, Helen Sanders, she became president of the DOB in February 1957. Sandy's competence in so many areas quickly made her indispensable throughout DOB and *The Ladder*. When she decided later that year to move to Los Angeles to continue the personal relationship that she and I had recently formed, DOB regarded her as a missionary for DOB activities in Los Angeles. The following excerpt, "Time Out for Tribute" in *The Ladder* says it best:

The feud between the cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles is one of long standing, but it would appear that there will soon be a liaison officer in the person of Helen Sanders. Come the first of the year she will be taking up residence in "smogland."

Sandy, as she is known in DOB circles, has served as past president of the Daughters, as production manager last year for THE LADDER. She is presently serving on the Board of Directors as publications director. She has also proved most valuable in public relations, having represented the DOB at ONE's Mid-Winter Institute and the Mattachine Convention last year—to say nothing of her numerous appearances on panels at Mattachine and DOB public discussion meetings.

But aside from her usefulness (which we have taken full advantage of), we just kinda like the gal! And we hate to lose her . . .

However, if she's determined to make the move, we aren't above cutting out a big job for her in Los Angeles. For there is the matter of a chapter there, and she's just the gal who can swing it.

With warmest regards and best wishes, the Daughters say So long, Sandy! (*The Ladder*, December 1957, p. 15)

Sandy arrived in Los Angeles with a list of names of women, some provided by others and some from her own acquaintance, who might be interested in a chapter of DOB. She took me driving all over Los Angeles County. She kept track of those who were interested and got us all together at our home. She was the first president of the Los Angeles DOB. An important function of the chapter was to give the women a place to meet and get to know each other and to talk about their common problems, and to learn how to eventually accept themselves.

Many of the women eagerly came to the DOB meetings where there were no men present, but were reluctant to attend a public meeting where there would be a male speaker or gay men. Under Sandy, the Los Angeles DOB worked to help its members become comfortable at public meetings with speakers from the scientific and medical communities. The group thrived.

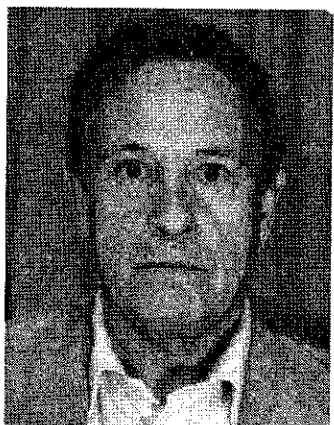
Sandy also continued to work with *The Ladder*. Although her roles and titles changed over the years, Sandy was a major contributor to the look and substance of this publication. She designed some of the most memorable covers and in 1966, for a brief time, became editor of *The Ladder*. Sandy made clear that what happened in the name of the homophile community also happened to lesbians, even though men dominated the homophile community. Because of this belief, she felt it obligatory to print extensive reports of programs and surveys that might not, at first glance, be pertinent to lesbians, but could have considerable effect on them if not reported, and sometimes challenged.

Although Sandy used her Helen Sanders pseudonym for most of her writing and public persona, she occasionally wrote under the pen name Ben Cat, writing from the perspective of the beloved housecat that Sandy and I had. As Ben Cat, Sandy was free to explore topics and perspectives that she would never have written in public print as Helen Sanders or herself, Helen Sandoz. For example, Ben Cat puzzled over the meaning of Christmas and the frantic pace of that holiday.

Sandy and I decided not to follow others in *The Ladder* and Daughters of Bilitis in joining forces with the new organization, National Organization for Women. Although she believed in NOW's goals, she did not approve of much of the rhetoric, and she wanted to concentrate on getting rights for both gay men and lesbians in the homophile movement. She died June 7, 1987, in Anaheim, of lung cancer.

Herb Selwyn (1925-)

Vern L. Bullough



Serendipity played an important role in Herb Selwyn's involvement with the gay and lesbian community. A devoted member of the American Civil Liberties Union, Selwyn was, in a way, a typical member of his generation. Born and raised in West Hollywood, a community which is surrounded by the city of Los Angeles, he entered UCLA and left for military duty in World War II, serving in the Air Corps in England, France, and Germany, returned to UCLA, went onto the University of Southern California law school, set up a law practice, married, and eventually had four children.

He was not, however, typical in his defense of gays and lesbians, a cause in which he became involved because his father, a doctor, had a patient who was known to him to be a lesbian. On one of her visits he mentioned that his son was a lawyer. She turned out to belong to the Mattachine Society and was hunting for a lawyer to speak at a society meeting, but, as an indication of the stigma and fear which many gays and lesbians lived, rather than approaching Selwyn directly, she asked his father to query him about whether he would be willing to talk to such a group. Selwyn remembers his reply was that his concept of a lawyer was a person who could help others and certainly he felt that gays and lesbians needed help.

The meeting itself was held in a private home with between twenty-five and thirty men and women in attendance, none of whom were lawyers. This lack of lawyers in attendance was understandable simply because those who were lawyers for the most part were fearful of being exposed, since they could in fact be disbarred. With such official hostility to gays and lesbians, it was perhaps inevitable that many of the public advocates for the community came from the straight community. Selwyn's talk led to various members of