

Our Bodies Ourselves turns 40

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Many social workers can remember the first edition of *Our Bodies Ourselves* (OBOS) providing information about women's health, reproduction and sexuality at a time when there was little accessible information and most had sexist assumptions about women's roles. You, yourself probably have an OBOS story about yourself or a family member or client who found support and trustworthy information in this book in a critically important time in your or their lives. Since the first edition in 1971 the book has brought trustworthy information to three generations of women throughout the world.

As one of the original Founders of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (BWHBC) I'm continually amazed that our project, to help ourselves and other women deal with health and medical issues, has come so far. Way back in the 1970s none of us could have imagined that OBOS would become a household word with more than four million copies sold.

The history of OBOS takes us back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time of social change. The political climate of the time, the civil rights movement, anti-war movement, and New Left gave us the optimistic sense that we could make a difference in changing oppressive institutions. Women activists were meeting in consciousness-raising (CR) groups throughout the country, beginning to question sexism and our traditional roles as women.

We had grown up with a male-centered view of the world, which shaped our sense of ourselves and reality. In this world we were viewed, and viewed ourselves, as having no intrinsic value, inferior to men, the "other" sex, objects to please men. By the time we reached adolescence we had silenced ourselves. Most accepted our roles as wife and mother because "biology was

our destiny." We were ignorant of our anatomy; our genitals were referred to by euphemisms. Sex was something that happened magically when we were with a man, and homosexuality and bisexuality were taboo subjects. Our notions of pregnancy and childbirth were medicalized. Natural childbirth and breast-feeding were just beginning to be reclaimed by the women's movement. Abortion was illegal and risky and some women died resorting to using coat hangers or having back-alley abortions. Doctors willing to perform abortions were few and far between. Natural events like menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause were medicalized. Medical

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care was practiced in a male-dominated system where "doctors knew best." Most medical research was done by men, on men, for men and applied blindly to women's lives.

In the initial course, given at MIT, as we talked honestly, authentically and openly about our experiences, we were breaking a long silence, ending isolation and discovering what we had in common. This increased knowledge gave us a sense of empowerment. We began to see that as women, we were the best experts on ourselves. We gave the course in community settings at first. We were urged to put it in pamphlet form. In 1971 the first newsprint pamphlet, *Women and Their Bodies*, was produced, which soon became *Our Bodies Ourselves*, selling at 75 cents and then 30 cents a copy. Women sent letters, called us and asked for more, so we added topics. Over 2 years more than 270,000 copies were sold.

Commercial presses began to ap-

proach us. We decided to go with Simon & Schuster because we wanted a wider readership. The first S&S edition was published in 1973, and it soon became a best seller. The royalties went back to the organization to further our work.

The BWHBC published rewrites of the book in 1976, 1979, 1984, 1990, and 1998 and 2005. OBOS got progressively thicker, from 193 pages to 780 pages, reflecting increased information and inclusivity. Chapters were added on violence against women, older women, rural women, disabilities affecting women, reproductive technologies, cultural diversity and environmental issues. A Spanish language adaptation for the Americas, *Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Vidas* was published in 2000. Two single-issue books have been added: *OBOS: Menopause*, published in October 2006, and a book on pregnancy and childbirth published in 2008. Now in October 2011, 40 years after the first edition, a new ninth, 40th Anniversary edition *OBOS* and companion web site www.ourbodiesourselves.org will be published.

Over the years OBOS has traveled abroad in the form of translations, adaptations and local editions inspired by ours in 25 languages in print, digital, audio or social interactive formats including seven volumes of Braille. Women's groups from around the world are hungry for accessible, reliable information on women's health, sexuality and human rights where it is scarce or unavailable in their own countries.

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, now called *Our Bodies Ourselves*, is one of the few surviving organizations from the early days of the women's movement. As a social worker and founder I have always felt a tremendous alignment with the mission of OBOS, the social work profession and NASW. Most social workers are women as are more than half of our clients and NASW has a mission to promote human rights, social and economic justice and



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access to unimpeded services to everyone. Since 1975 it has had a National Committee on Women's Issues. NASW Massachusetts has a Global Social Work SIG group. Share your stories about the impact of OBOS on you or your clients' lives: www.ourbodiesourblog.org/story-submission

***Our Bodies Ourselves* will be celebrating its 40th Anniversary on October 1, 2011** at the Boston University Tsai Performance Center with a free symposium "**Our Bodies Our Futures: Advancing the Rights of Women and Girls**" featuring women's groups from around the world that have adapted *Our Bodies Ourselves* in their own countries. For more information: www.ourbodiesourselves.org/40thanniversary.asp

To register, call 617-245-0200 #10, or visit <http://ourbodiesourselves.eventbrite.com>

Join us as we celebrate our global partners, the launch of the 9th U.S. edition and honor 40 years of activism on behalf of women and girls throughout the world!

Joan Ditzion, LICSW, Geriatric Social Worker and Co-author of all editions of *Our Bodies Ourselves*, Nancy Miriam Hawley, LICSW, Co-author of *Our Bodies Ourselves* and Elizabeth Macmahon-Herrera, LICSW, are all social workers and are three of the original 14 Co-Founders of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective/*Our Bodies Ourselves*. ❖