

She wanted to meet women. Instead, she cemented herself in D.C. history.

Sheila Alexander-Reid founded D.C.'s *Women in the Life*, a publication focused on connecting Black lesbian women.



It started as a sheet of paper in 1993.

Before one of her usual soirees at Blue Penguin, a lesbian-friendly restaurant and club on Capitol Hill, Sheila Alexander-Reid printed 50 copies of a pamphlet, folded multiple times. Inside was an *Elle* magazine article about how Black women died at higher rates from breast cancer compared with White women. The disparity shocked Alexander-Reid, then a 33-year-old senior account executive for Washington City Paper, and she thought other Black women attending the party needed to know about it.

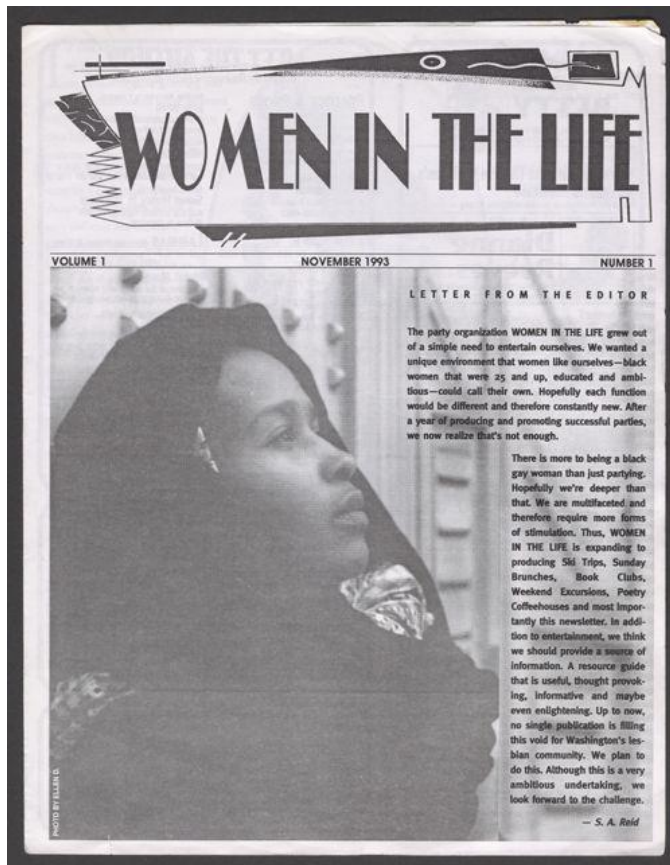
The 11-by-17 pamphlet was composed of two other stories, a front cover and a back that told revelers the location of the next party. Alexander-Reid placed them at Blue Penguin's front doors not knowing whether they would be picked up or not. Hours later all the copies were gone.

"I was like 'Wow, that was much more attention than I had expected,'" she said.

Reid went to Kinko's two other times during the party to make more copies. She recalls distributing nearly 200 total.

That night planted the seed for Alexander-Reid to start *Women in the Life* magazine, a monthly publication focused on connecting Black lesbians in the D.C. area and beyond. The pamphlet

evolved from a flimsy, folded-over paper to a staple-bound publication that reached close to 20



pages or more depending on the month. Over the magazine's decade run, it was a place for unknown writers and photographers to gain exposure, and a place to talk about the lived experience of being a Black woman dating other Black women.

The publication was available across parts of Maryland, D.C. and Virginia, and eventually spread nationally to lesbian and gay bookstores in Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta and even as far west as Flagstaff, Arizona. At its height, *Women in the Life* reached hundreds of thousands of readers.

As LGBTQ+ issues now come under attack, Alexander-Reid says that the magazine serves as a reminder of how Black lesbians thrived and wrote their way into visibility, even when other outlets rarely featured them.

It shows, Alexander-Reid said, "our stories are worth preserving and being told."

A way to meet women

Alexander-Reid was born in Cincinnati, but considers D.C. the place that shaped her. Her family left the Midwest for the suburb of Bethesda, Maryland, when she was 11. After graduating from her all-girls high school, she moved to Atlanta to attend Spelman College, a historically Black women's college. And while these experiences in all-girls schools prompted Alexander-Reid to question her sexuality, she said, she wouldn't officially come out until she was 26. From there, she didn't know where to meet other Black lesbians.

In hopes of meeting other women, she started to host parties. They started as smaller affairs that mostly included friends or friends of friends who wanted to meet women. But word quickly got around and eventually the parties were packed. She grew her name by throwing parties up and down the East Coast.

The November 1993 cover of *Women in the Life*, a LGBTQ+ magazine founded by Sheila Alexander-Reid. Over the magazine's decade run, it was a place for unknown writers and photographers to gain exposure, and a place to talk about the lived experience of being a Black women dating other Black women. (Sheila Alexander-Reid and Dig D.C.)

"The parties started as a selfish way to meet women," Alexander-Reid admits. "I had two lesbian friends and I came out and knocked the closet door wide open to make up for lost time," she said.

One of her best events, she said, was an after-party following the third March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation in 1993. Alexander-Reid recalls roughly a line of 1,000 women from across the globe waiting to pack into an alley warehouse. As the party got going, a group of Asian women chanted, jumped up and down and ended up topless, waving both their shirts and bras over their heads as other partygoers applauded.

“We had no idea what they were saying but it was amazing,” she said.

Alexander-Reid’s day job included selling ads. But she never thought she would add in “publisher” or “editor” to her list of side gigs. That came, she said, just from responding to what the community seemed interested in.

To the presses

After the pamphlets went red hot at Blue Penguin, Alexander-Reid and her friends worked without pay, to write, edit and distribute *Women in the Life*.

As readership grew, so did the range of stories. For instance, when R&B singer Phyllis Hyman died by suicide on June 30, 1995, readers asked for more mental health stories. As a real-time response, the July 1995 edition included a first-person account of depression. When they requested a movie critic, Alexander-Reid found one. Over time, the publication added an art critic, an advice column titled “Dear Dolly” and featured local poets.

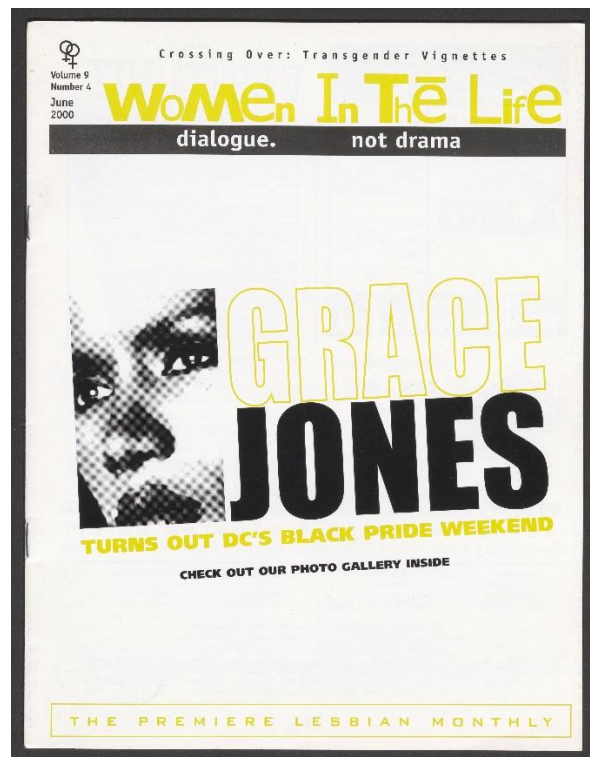
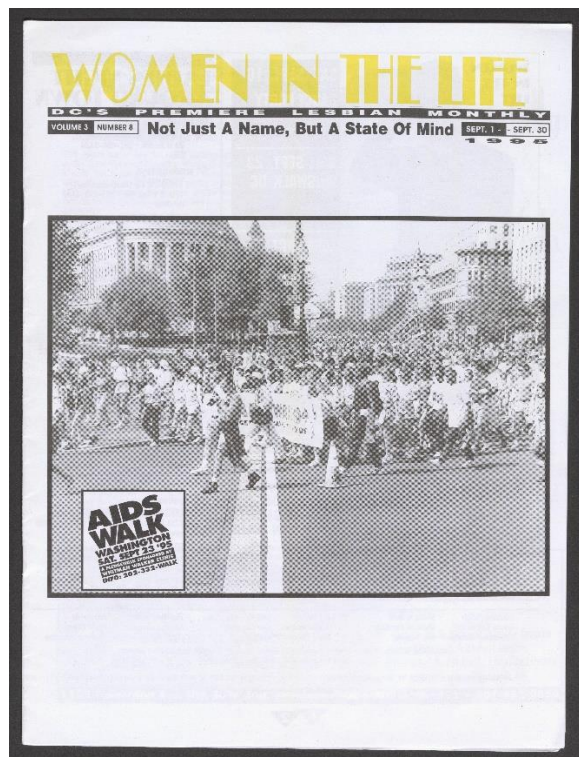
“It became this living thing. I planted the seeds, but the women flowered it,” said Reid.



Every issue was peppered with stories showcasing multiple facets of personal identity. The December 1995 issue featured a two-page spread on dating as an amputee. September 1997 covered life in the military in the mid-1980s and the dangers of being “hunted” or investigated for being lesbian. June 1998 highlighted interviews with incarcerated lesbians of color describing their life behind bars. This was in addition to a calendar with events for the community.

Writers included Alexander-Reid and her friends: Charlene Hamilton, who covered sports, and Phyllis Croom, a senior writer and future features editor who also wrote for *The Post*. Other contributing writers would be added, including poet Karma Mayet Johnson, who would go on to become a managing editor of an academic publication featuring Caribbean artists.

“We were writing about ourselves with ourselves and to each other. We weren’t trying to translate anything or explain anything to anybody,” said Johnson.



Alexander-Reid believes that the magazine probably resonated because other publications weren’t writing on subjects that Black lesbians found relatable.

At the time, D.C.’s LGBTQ+ publications included the Washington Blade and Metro Weekly. However, to Alexander-Reid and Hamilton, the content centered White gay men.

“I had to look in the Washington Blade and Essence and The Washington Post, and take a little bit from here [and] there [to see what] applied to me,” Alexander-Reid said.

Although there were other publications focused on Black lesbians, most were geared toward their own cities, according to Emerald Rutledge, a PhD candidate at the University of Wisconsin at Madison whose research interests focus on 20th century Black gay and lesbian literature. [Aché](#) (1989-1993) and [Onyx](#) (1982-1984) — two Black lesbian-focused outlets — were based in San Francisco; Venus (1995-2007) was originally based in Atlanta but eventually moved to New York.

“You could see [the magazines] as a first encounter for people looking for community who may be closeted or socially isolated,” said Rutledge.

The last issue of Women in the Life was dated Nov. 10, 2003. When asked what made them quit, Alexander-Reid simply said: “We were tired.”

The magazine operated as everyone’s side job and never turned into a moneymaking venture. Profits from the parties — as well as Alexander-Reid’s own money — went into printing and glossy

paper. Alexander-Reid would eventually go on to work in D.C. government as the director of the Mayor's Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Affairs from 2015 to 2021 under Mayor Muriel E. Bowser.

Archival work

In 2019, Dig D.C., an offshoot of the D.C. Public Library, scanned all issues of *Women in the Life* for the magazine's 25th anniversary. The archive focuses on preserving what makes D.C. special culturally, compared with other archives that may preserve government documents. All 87 issues are available to view with a D.C. library card free.

"We're the memory keepers of D.C. and we're collecting the full spectrum of the city," said Lisa Warwick, who manages the archive and was part of the team that acquired *Women in the Life*. Warwick said that *Women in the Life* was special because it specifically documented the Black lesbian experience in D.C. at the time.

Preserving *Women in the Life* in physical form is the next step for Alexander-Reid. She's mulling over where to donate her hard copies, worried that the work will sit in a box for no one to read.

Her fears aren't unfounded. Issues of *Blacklight* (1979-1985), a Black gay periodical that was founded in D.C., sat in a box for years before it was digitized in 2019, according to Warwick.

Alexander-Reid hopes that younger people looking at her magazine today will be able to see how an older generation lived, including their struggles and how they crafted community.

"I believe that just like our ancestors before us fought and survived, we fought and survived. And so telling our stories will enable others to [do the same]," said Alexander-Reid.



In addition to bringing a community together, Alexander-Reid's personal mission of meeting women was fulfilled. During the thick of the magazine's run, she interviewed documentary filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons, the director of "NO! The Rape Documentary."

The two reunited nearly 20 years later at an event, made a connection, and have been together for the past eight years.

"We just got married New Year's Day and had our reception party with family in May," said Alexander-Reid. "All of this is because of the publication."