

Crow's Caws

by Crow Cohen



Ageism

In the past couple of years I've had the privilege to run some informal workshops for seniors up in Franklin County on combating ageism. I'm always energized after one of those gigs no matter how wiped out I am beforehand. I've been lucky to have a co-facilitator who just happens to be the oldest lesbian feminist activist in Burlington, I would venture to guess - Alverta Perkins.

Al was born in 1924 and grew up as a Christian fundamentalist. "We didn't dance or go to movies. My father was extremely strict. I had to go to church several times a week. In a way it was good because I overdosed on it. When I started reading stuff on feminism I began to see the holes in everything."

Al went to nursing school at UVM when she was 57 years old after her kids had grown. She took a course in ethics and was introduced to the radical feminist book *Sexual Politics* which blew her mind. "Oh my God!" she said. "This is my life!" She was still married, but she figured out she was a lesbian even before she had been sexual with a woman. Around that time she saw a poster announcing a course in alternative healing being given by a group who called themselves "Redbird." They turned out to be a lesbian separatist collective who expanded her newly discovered lesbian feminist politics. She was far from joining their collective, but she was fascinated with their intense debates that went on for hours.

In 1976 she became involved with The Women's House of Transition - the first battered women's shelter in Burlington. Even though they never managed to raise enough money to renovate the house in the Old North End to meet city fire code standards, they housed as many as 25 abused women and children at one time. "It was terrible," Al said. "The plumbing was bad, the toilet overflowed, we had no paid staff." But like most activists, they just forged ahead because the need was there. "At that time nobody knew what battering was all about - the cops, social agencies - nobody knew what to do." So Al and her hardworking friends just did it. Eventually the group who ran the house dwindled down to three so they had to give it up.

Due to the fact that Al was about 30 years older than most of the radical lesbians at that time, she felt "neither fish nor fowl. They socialized together, and I was not a part of that. I was pretty quiet at the meetings." She felt invisible which is an indication that ageism was rampant even in the lesbian community. "I found that younger people wanted me as an older woman to give them something. It wasn't reciprocal. You give me your wisdom. You give me your ear. I'm going to talk about all my problems, and you're going to sympathize because you're old, and your job is to listen to me."

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But Al persisted. She continued to participate in radical activities. Her favorite was putting up notices around town announcing a 10PM curfew for men to protest a series of rapes that were happening in Burlington. The police were making public announcements for women to stay off the streets at night to protect themselves. These official looking notices that had the stamp of City Hall on them included the phone number of The Burlington Free Press for people to call "for more information." Apparently the Free Press was flooded with enough calls to print a front-page announcement that the curfew for males was a hoax. "Age was an advantage. No one pays attention to a little ol' lady thumb-tacking a notice on the bulletin board."

Al was also part of the decision-making group that brought HOWL (Huntington Open Women's Land) into being. And she is the founding mother (and would also be considered a charter member if there were such a thing) of the Crones- the first support group for older women in the area that is still active over 20 years later! "We started [the group] for women over 45 but [one of the women interested in the group] was only 40, and she pleaded with us to lower the age, so we lowered it."

There's no question that Al developed a reputation for confronting ageism in the community that was often lonely work for her, but we can thank her for keeping us just a little more honest. Growing old happens to all of us. Fears related to aging run deep. Affirming our aging bodies - proclaiming that old is beautiful - is a rare attribute for people 60 and beyond. Al will be the first to tell you that growing old is no picnic, but she's an amazing example of the vitality of feistiness. At the age of 75 she became involved in Senior Olympics and Senior Games. Now at 77 she trains 3 days a week at a gym and has won about 25 medals for her age category. Thank you, Al, for helping us conquer some of our fears of aging. You sure are one beautiful old woman!

Crow Cohen is a lesbian feminist who lives in Winooski.

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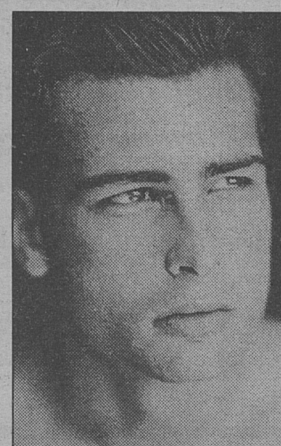
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