

HOWL creating safe, rural women's land

By Marianne Milton

"HOWL if you want to Help Open Women's Land" is what the flyer says, and the Grandmother Council directing Howl, a project of Commonwoman, really is open to any woman who wants to be involved in creating safe rural women's land. Commonwoman is the feminist group committed to building women's community, that publishes the currently dormant newspaper by the same name.

A piece of land bordering Camel's Hump State Park, about 20 miles southeast of Burlington, Vt., has been selected as the site of the Howl project and is being held until a lease is drawn up. The lease is expected to be signed in time for women to be on the land in some capacity this spring.

"The land has something for everyone," said Alverta, one of three women I spoke with on the Grandmother Council. The land that was finally chosen after two years of looking comprises 200 acres and includes fields, woods and streams. Because the land borders on state forest, which is protected against building, women on the land will be assured that the surrounding area remains rural. The property is on a town road, and a house and barn with electricity stand on the land; these features will help make the land accessible, particularly to less abled women who might otherwise be unable to use it.

The women on the Grandmother Council are devoting their efforts now to two main tasks: networking "to all of our connections that go to Boston and beyond," said Ioota, and placing announcements in selected women's publications, such as Sinister Wisdom and Vermont Woman.

They're also raising money, primarily through tax-deductible

donations, in order to buy the land outright, which they expect to do within the next few years. No private ownership is being considered in this project. Either Commonwoman will own the land, or a land trust will be created, to hold the land forever for the common good of all women who seek access to it.

"We don't want the issue of having to pay the rent to divide us. It's been a source of divisiveness for many women's lands," said Leah Wittenberg, founder of Commonwoman.

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Women meet monthly in the Grandmother Council. So far, these have been "vision meetings" to plan what will happen on the land; in these meetings, women are "operating on hope, not fear," said Ioota. The vision for the land is very much in process, but possible uses suggested so far include festivals, gatherings, educational events, cross-country skiing, camping, living and farming.

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So far, 15 to 20 women have been involved in the Council, which is open to all women. The women range in age from their early 20s to 62; some are Black, some are white, of different ethnicities; diverse class backgrounds and professions are represented; and some of the women are differently abled. The women thus far involved are predominantly lesbians. Because it is vital that all women feel welcomed to the land, the women I spoke with expressed concern about making an

issue out of this fact. Leah's response was, "The truth of the matter is: who wants to live on women's land? Lesbians."

Some decisions have been reached by the Grandmother Council, which makes all decisions by consensus. A basic philosophy has been adopted: respect for the land. And several purposes and guidelines have been outlined for the use of the land. As they appear in the flyer:


1. Earth first: trusteeship of the land
2. Sacred wimmin's land
3. Residential, recreational, vocational, cultural, educational networking
4. Safe space for wimmin and children
5. Diversity -- outreach, non-exclusionism
6. Good neighbors

Beyond these basics, plans for the land will depend on women's input to the Grandmother Council. The women I spoke with believe that there is a trust level and calmness among the women in the Burlington area that indicate that women will come together to make this land work.

"Given the state of the world, it's necessary to live out our visions," Ioota added.

Some women envision some separatist (women-only) space, with other areas open to men who are visiting women on the land, as long as the safety of women and children can be maintained. Some women are envisioning a community of older women living there, but Alverta, an older woman, expressed concern that "we might need to be closer to services, which almost always requires living in a city." Some women are thinking about contacting ArcheDykes, a group of lesbian architects at MIT, to plan any construction that takes place on the land.

Remembering the intense time that
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Ladies Night Wednesdays

Boys Night Out Thursdays

135 Pearl Street Burlington