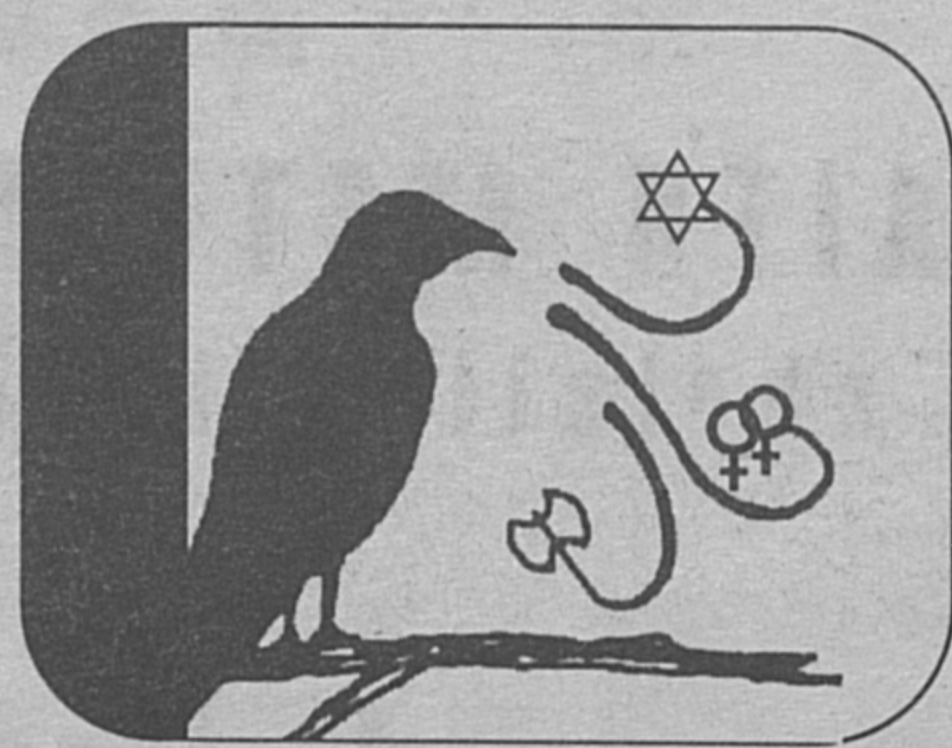


CROW'S CAWS
by crow cohen



Activism Lives

I was thrilled with our Vermont Supreme Court's decision to grant our community equal rights.

Of course by the time this article comes out, I'm sure the backlash will be in full swing. Hopefully, like good martial artists, we'll be able to use the momentum of the opposition's insanity to our advantage. Congratulations to all those activists who are sticking their necks out to face the hate head-on so that this monumental shift towards fairness can come about.

Vermont has a long history of responding to activism. I started thinking about the early days of the women's movement in Burlington and would like to share some of the memories of our community activists back in the 1970s, which I've collected on tape.

This was a time when the media were not paying much attention to us, nor did we have the money to launch campaigns or hire lawyers. What we lacked in resources, we made up in fervor. One of our earliest grassroots organizations was called WAR – Women Against Rape. We were just beginning to make the connection that rape is not just an isolated sexual crime that befalls unfortunate individual women, but a symptom of the global determination of men to dominate all women. Rape is about power, not sex. It is a tool of male oppression.

According to one lesbian I interviewed, radical feminists, who tended to be in the forefront of the movement at that time, used "the formation of that organization as a testing grounds for our politics that we were forming about patriarchy and domination in the context of [personal] relationships, which is interesting if you think about it – to form a politic around rape." We weren't yet creating a social service agency, but forming an identity. "Some of the motivation was an attempt to build the lesbian nation," said another lesbian. "I was uneasy about that." She was not alone. We tended to push and prod whomever walked in the door. Our goal was to charge into new territo-

ry.

This radical activism was created in a ripe environment. "It was an interesting progression from leftist politics [that emerged] from the Vietnam War," explained a lesbian, "where mostly the men had been the mouthpiece, to where suddenly the topic was rape. I fell into the rape organization because that's what was there, not so much because that was a compelling topic for me. I was learning how to be political, how to work collectively which began to be defined as feminist process. I remember finding a mimeograph machine at a yard sale, one of those old A. B. Dick's. That's how we [printed our literature]. You had to wind it and wind it. There were no Xerox machines, no computers.

Money was a perpetual obstacle. "We were all volunteers. We didn't have one dollar. We paid ourselves for the hotline service. We raised money for stickers you couldn't peel off. The sticker was a woman's symbol in the middle of a white square, which said, 'Women Against Rape' with the telephone number. We stuck those everywhere – every payphone, the doors in women's bathrooms, in every bar, all over the University."

The visibility of our politics helped some of us to release long suppressed pain. Some of those early meetings were held at the old Onion River Co-op site, which was basically a warehouse on Archibald Street. "I hadn't been part of the co-op, but I had been raped; and I saw the sign [for the WAR meetings]," remembered one woman. "I had never told anybody that I had been assaulted. I thought I'd go and learn how to counsel rape victims, and then I'd know how to take care of myself, which is the way I did everything. For four hours we sat on upended tofu buckets in the unheated co-op."

Forging a new lifestyle along with radical politics presented problems. We weren't really just talking to queers. We were trying to educate the cross-section of women who were survivors of rape. When training women to run the organization, we tried to radicalize them

without alienating them altogether – a fine line.

One lesbian said, "I talked to them about the politics of rape – not just how to run a hotline, because they certainly knew how to do that. I said, 'Be careful. Here's the history of this organization. Here's what we told the police, and here's what you have to be on top of around the politics if you're going to do education,' which is a big arm of what we did. We had to learn that you can't come on as a bunch of no-haired dykes and have these women think about their daughters rather than think about us."

As a matter of fact, a mother/daughter team, sheep farmers from out of town, were apparently not put off by our styles. "They came to a training that was held in one of our apartments on Grant Street with a baby lamb because they were farmers, and they were poor. The mother of the lamb had died, and they had to keep this lamb alive. When they showed up, left their farming boots at the door and came into this group of dykes, we thought, 'Oh my god. They'll never last.' But they did. [The mother] got sick and was housebound, so she became our 7am to 7pm daytime phone answerer. She was panicked. She was way out in the country, which took an hour to get to and didn't have the gas. We as a collective raised the gas money for them to come to meetings, because they were poor in a different way than we were poor. They had a mortgage, taxes and children in a rundown farmhouse where the indoor plumbing rarely worked."

It didn't take long for these activists to become inundated with the needs of victims of male violence. "We realized very soon some people were calling our hotline because they had been raped or assaulted by their live-in boyfriends or husbands, and there was nowhere for them to go. They didn't need an advocate to go to the hospital or the police, but needed a place to get away. So we were having women, and sometimes their kids, sleeping on the floor of our houses."

When the Burlington Women's Community took on an issue, it was easier in our small town to make a big noise. "About the time they created the Burlington Square Mall, there was a string of assaults against women in the evenings," said one interviewee. "The police announced that women needed to be more careful and shouldn't go out alone at night. So just on a phonecall tree, we showed up

with all our kids and all our big sheets made into banners painted overnight in front of the mall with a table with information about assault as a crime of power and violence, not a private, sexual matter. If men were assaulting women, that was a community issue and the last thing police should be doing was telling women to stay in. Isn't assault against women, assault?"

a vigilante group against him; and every one of us, whenever we saw him in the street, would stare him down, point at him and mouth the word 'rapist.' It eventually got quite difficult and dangerous."

Luckily, we also knew how to communicate effectively with Vermont lawmakers. "We went to the legislature in 1974 for the first time to testify about a proposed law, which stated

What we lacked in resources, we made up in fervor.

Sometimes our passion for justice spilled over into cowgirl tactics. "We made great strides in a very short time. We trained all the Burlington police, as well as the workers at the hospital. We had infiltrators in the police department who would even confirm when a woman pointed out on the street that somebody was a rapist who had been arrested and released. We actually had a dispatcher confirm it to us. Sometimes we went after him. Why wasn't this guy being jailed? There was no proof, supposedly, so we started

men couldn't rape their wives – spousal rape. It was finally passed in 1976."

I'm not sure back then we would have been pushing for the right to marry. We were generally focused on the damage that the institution of marriage has on women, but there is no question that our courage in speaking out helped pave the way for more visibility. Vermonters now know we are a political power to reckon with! ▼

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