

Transformation

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1997 Year End Report

Suzanne Pharr

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FOR THE FIRST TIME in our 16 year history, we at the Women's Project are presenting a public annual report. In 1997, as in other years, we wish we could have done more to fight off the punitive effect of selfish right-wing conservatism, have created more lasting and extraordinary social change, but we are also proud we have done strong, solid work and made the small changes that move us toward a world of greater justice and equality. Our three full-time and two part-time staff members and our 50 volunteers have given the best of their time and creative energy to ensure that the often silenced are heard, that violence never goes unacknowledged and sanctioned, that people move from exclusion to inclusion, and that we all build the relationships that sustain our deepest and most humane connections.

WOMEN'S WATCHCARE NETWORK

OF ALL THE WORK WE DO, it is the work of the Women's Watchcare Network that most intimately touches the lives of every woman, man, and child in Arkansas—across race, class, gender, sexual identity, physical and mental ability. We monitor biased violence against religious minorities,

women, people of color, sexual minorities and people with disabilities as well as the activities of the religious right and far right groups such as the Klan and neo-Nazis. In addition to our public education about violence, we work with communities to respond to violence and work with public officials to change policy.

In 1997, we have logged the murders of over 60 women and 35 children under the age of 21 and tracked racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic incidents. This is our first full year of gathering information about biased violence against people with disabilities. We are currently establishing an accumulative database of women murdered since 1989 which will list not only the circumstances of death but also the original charge, final conviction, and sentencing. This database will make our information more readily accessible for research and public policy work.

When Promise Keepers came to Little Rock to recruit African Americans, we sent out information to pastors and the press, helping them to understand the politics of the right-wing organizations that back this organization. We also attended a na-

(continued on page 2)

tional meeting of political activists and people of faith to create strategies to counter the organizing of Promise Keepers. In Arkansas, we tried to introduce a progressive voice by focusing on churches for training concerning biased crime and holding workshops for their adult educators.

We spoke at the post march rally at the National March of Solidarity Against Hate Crimes, which was held in South Carolina, worked with parents in Fayetteville whose children experienced homophobic violence, supported an environmentalist who was brutally attacked, and held a town meeting on hate crimes at the UALR Law School.

Our anti-violence work stalled in the Arkansas Legislature. We worked with a coalition to work against a same sex marriage bill—and lost; tried to tack on an amendment to another bill that called for employment nondiscrimination against lesbians and gay men—and lost; tried to move a bill to establish schools as hostility-free zones so all kids can be safe—and lost our sponsor. However, we did have a small success in the Medicaid debate with our attempt to get public officials to consider community-based services for people with disabilities.

Because there is only one staff member and a corps of volunteers working on the Women's Watchcare Network, we have to find ways to help as many people as we can in as efficient manner as possible. We spent a good portion of this year working on the revision of two of

our important publications which we provide for women who need assistance.

The *Handbook on Legal Rights for Women in Arkansas* covers common legal issues women call us about: divorce, child protection, abuse of children, adoption, domestic violence, sexual harassment, discrimination in employment, etc. We have updated it to reflect changes in the law.

The *Resource Manual for Women* is particularly for Arkansas women in crisis caused by such things as violence, coming off welfare, etc. It provides local information about resources such as domestic violence services, continuing education for literacy and vocational training, attorneys willing to go against the system in employment cases, support groups, hate crimes, rape and incest, HIV/AIDS, government assistance, housing and homelessness, medical and dental assistance, mental health, legal assistance, crisis hotlines, programs related to aging, disabled persons, lesbians and gay men, incarcerated women, and youth.

PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

OUR IDEA FOR DEVELOPING a progressive agenda and network came from our daily encounter with violence and discrimination in the Women's Watchcare Network. Because facing the grim accounts of murders and abuse each day exacts such an emotional toll, staff members are usually assigned to this work for no more than two years. Also, it is clear that monitoring and

teaching about violence is not enough: we have to find some way to change the world that creates it. This thinking led us to recognize that we need more bodies, more organizing, more strategies for creating a progressive agenda that is multi-issued and multi-cultural, built on justice and equality.

We set a goal to establish a network of individuals and organizations in Arkansas that promote a progressive agenda, that will support each other on issues, and will work collectively to make progressive social change. A half-dozen meetings have been held to organize the Arkansas network, to re-



cruit new members, and to grow the organization slowly and deeply. It has taken on a "Hate-free Zone" project which invites individuals, schools, businesses, and towns to create hate-free zones. The project had its kick-off at World Fest, a multi-cultural festival sponsored by the city of Little Rock. Members gave away signs and stickers which read "Hate-free Zone: Create One." The theme was taken on-stage of the festival, and the sign was the opening graphic for television coverage that night. The Network is currently working on a television public service announcement promoting the idea.

Building on the work we are doing in Arkansas, we also called a meeting of representatives of Southern states to discuss the idea of creating a progressive network in each state, with the ultimate plan to connect all of these groups in the region. People from seven states attended and agreed to work together to create a directory of progressive organizations in the South, to initiate networks in three states for each of the next three years, to share information, and to participate in each other's work.

At the Women's Project, we try to promote a progressive agenda through workshops, consultations, and technical assistance to people who are working to end discrimination and to promote inclusion and democratic participation. In 1997, we worked with a wide variety of groups on a broad spectrum of issues. We presented two eight-week classes on ethnic and gender dynamics at UALR; a workshop and panel on economics and lesbians and gay men; a training for white women working with women of color; organized a white women's reading group focusing on African American literature; organized an African American women's reading group; led a two-day queer institute for Western States Center; gave four workshops on adults/youth, power & sex; provided training on the Women's Project's organizational model for the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence; training for the Western State's Center's Advanced Leadership & Mentorship Program; anti-racist training for Oregon State University; homophobia work-

shops for Volunteers of America; an 8-hour intensive on white privilege for the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change Conference; workshops on coalition building for Montana Human Rights Network in three towns; motivation and confidence building

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shops for the Good Faith Fund in Pine Bluff; racism workshops for the Foundation of the Mid South; organizational and board development for Advocates for Battered Women; a workshop on economics for teenage girls. Speeches were given at the Men and Masculinity Conference; Oregon State University, Western States Center's annual conference; Deshutes Co. Human Rights Coalition; William Patterson College; St. Paul Companies; Red and Black Books; Gay Lesbian Straight Teachers Network conference;

Winona State University; Outfront Conference in Willmar, MN; In Other Words Bookstore; and the Atlanta Book Club.

OREGON OFFICE

IN PORTLAND, we organized a group to advise and support the work of the Women's Project in Oregon. A multi-racial group of 19 women, the Women's Project Working Group, meets quarterly to discuss politics, the activities of the Women's Project, and to plan events. Its focus this year has been on economics.

Much of our work over the last 16 years has been to support the formation and well-being of other organizations so that a progressive movement is built to bring about social and economic change. Therefore, we incubate some organizations and provide technical assistance and support to others. This year we provided 20 hours per week staff time to Oregon's Lesbian Community Project which was \$35,000 in debt and facing closure. We thought that its 10 year history made



it a strategic organization that showed much promise, and we were interested in providing a year's support toward its reorganization and renewal. We were particularly interested in the idea of a long-term organization

that has been based in identity politics and service provision

transitioning to an organization that maintains much of its identity but includes a multi-racial, multi-issued organizing approach to social change. Since LCP had already been doing much of this work, we wanted to help expand its organizing focus and take on new challenges. Such an organization could be a model for others across the country who are struggling to meet the political demands of the present moment.

In the 10 months we have provided staff support, LCP has accomplished these things:

- paid off \$30,000 in past debts
- developed a leadership team
- hosted 11 dinners which served both as fund-raisers and opportunities for dialogue
- sponsored forums on gender, cross-generational lesbian(queer) realities and a forum on gender as seen by those under 25
- sponsored and supported the Amazon Dragon Boat team
- greeted hundreds of well-wishers from the LCP Pride Day Float
- organized the annual Tournament of Choice Softball Extravaganza (450 participants)
- organized the Women in the Woods retreat with 149 women attending
- sponsored a week-end retreat for lesbians under the age of 30 (35 participants)
- held three dances
- published four newsletters.

The organization is now prepared to hire a full-time staff person, and the Women's Project's assistance will end April 1998.

PRISON PROJECT

SINCE 1988, we have been working with women in prison. This year we continued our weekly domestic violence group that runs for eight-week cycles. It is open to 20 women each session, and out of any group of 18-20, at least half of them are usually survivors of rape, physical abuse or incest. Then there are 7-8 women who are in prison for having killed their batterer. In almost

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every case, they have had restraining orders, called upon police and family, and still have not been able to get adequate protection. These women share their stories with one another, learn to identify domestic violence, and learn ways to live lives without violence.

We devoted two issues of *Transformation* to our prison work, and for one of those, women prisoners wrote about their experiences.

Our deepest concern this year has been about the plan to move women from their state-operated

prison in Tucker to a privately-operated prison in Newport. This move triples their distance from us, places the prison in a white community rather than a racially mixed community, and isolates most of the women even more from their families, due to distance. It will be very difficult for us to offer services now. However, we are planning to provide training for the Newport battered women's shelter to continue the domestic violence work in the prison.

We began offering domestic violence classes for men in prison because incarcerated women told us that they wanted their male partners to learn the same things they have learned. They said that maybe such understanding would lead them to be able to have healthy relationships when they got out of prison. That request led us to offer sessions with men at Tucker and Wrightsville prisons as well as at the Benton Service Center. We work with men to identify what domestic violence is. The men are open to this information and often say they knew something was wrong with their relationship, but they just did not know what. They welcome the chance to talk. We talk about healthy vs. unhealthy relationships, the effect of abuse on children, denial, women as property, and women as equals. Recently, we have begun working with men in the Little Rock community to develop a group to address domestic violence.

Additionally, we provide HIV/AIDS education for the men once a month. In the women's prison, we give this training twice a month,

and once a year, we give a 19-hour course for 20 women to train them to be peer educators. With this training, they can do not only the work in prison while they are there but also in their communities once they are released.

MIWATCH

SINCE 1990, we have worked with United Methodist Women to transport the children of incarcerated women to visit their mothers once a month. Since its beginning, there have been over 100 volunteers involved in the project. This year we transported 73 children to see 28 incarcerated mothers. An example of this work is a group of young couples from a United Methodist Sunday School class in Blytheville who transport children of five families on a long trip to Tucker, provide two meals on the road, develop relationships with the children and their caregivers, and provide holiday presents for them. United Methodist Women from all over the state collect personal hygiene articles (shampoo, deodorant, etc.) that many women do not have the money to purchase in prison. Thousands of these articles are distributed each year.

A new development in 1997 was that we began working with the Central Arkansas Community Punishment Center in addition to the women's prison.

The biggest problem that MIWATCH faces is when prisoners have children living in towns where we do not have volunteers to provide transportation. Some of the

women have not seen their children in three or four years. It is a constant struggle to develop and maintain volunteers in rural areas who can commit to a Saturday or Sunday a month as well as an ongoing relationship with families and children.

Another problem MIWATCH faces now is the new private prison in Newport where the women will be moved in January. It requires a new system of relationships with

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authorities, new rules, and new distances to travel.

ECONOMIC PROJECT

OUR ECONOMICS WORK focused on two issues: trying to slow and shape the repeal of welfare, and advocating for and working with women who are losing their welfare benefits.

We worked with the Kids Count Coalition which is made up of 14 organizations that

monitor the welfare laws and their changes and hold strategy sessions to create ideas to improve the work of the Department of Human Services. We tried to get the legislature to postpone the two year limits imposed on welfare recipients. To do this, we provided testimony to the legislature—personal stories, accompanied by real facts about what it costs a family of three to live. We advocated for recipients of welfare to be at the table to help make the decisions that would affect their lives. To shape opinion on this issue, we did press work and wrote articles.

As part of the Welfare Working Group, we looked at the results of changes in the law. One of our tasks has been to try to trace the women who are coming off Transitional Employment Assistance to see the impact on them as they are living today.

For three years we have been working with women living in public housing in Marianna, preparing for the demolition of welfare. This year Women for Social Change celebrated the first anniversary of the food bank they created together.

Five women work at the food bank which feeds 68 families in this small town. This year they set up a library with books donated by individuals and the Central Arkansas Library. When one family lost everything in a fire, they

were inspired to establish a perma-



nent clothes closet for emergency use. The goal of this project is to teach job and leadership skills such as bookkeeping, inventory, team building, communication with the public. As each woman is trained, she is expected to train another.

FUNDRAISING

THIS YEAR WE RECEIVED funding from our membership and pledgers, major donors, book sales, fees for service, special events as well as from these churches and foundations: Public Welfare, Astrea, Gill Foundation, Ralph L. Smith Foundation, Bert and Mary Meyer Foundation, Veatch, Levi-Strauss, United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, Chicago Resource Center, Share Our Strength, Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, Fund of the Four Directions, and Threshold. Our 1997 budget was \$236,600.

We have created a fundraising group, "Friends of the Women's Project." Its purpose is to diversify and increase our sources of funding. It is made up of board and community members. Currently it is working on setting up house parties, membership renewals, strategies for a major donor campaign, and more visibility for the work of the Women's Project.

A significant part of our fundraising comes from the sale of books. We sell *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (expanded this year and printed in a newly designed second edition) and *In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation* by staff member Suzanne

Pharr, as well as books from our traveling bookstore. The funds from the latter are used to support our lending library. Chain stores have cut into our business but we continue to sell alternative books that are hard to find in book stores. We maintain the store in our office but

Many of our library users are high school and college students doing research, and we have many African Americans and lesbians who check out books for pleasure reading.

also take it on the road to events that allow people from rural areas to purchase books.

PUBLICATIONS, EVENTS, GROUPS, ETC.

FOUR TIMES THIS YEAR we published *Transformation*, a newsletter of political analysis and ideas.

We sponsored ten coffee houses which featured national and local artists performing music that ranged from folk to country to

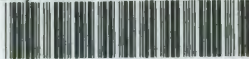
rock and poetry, comedy, and short stories.

The Lesbian Network met monthly enjoying such events as the second annual butch-femme potluck, a Valentine's Day party, 2 camping trips, a homemade ice cream social, a film, a Thanksgiving potluck—as well as discussions about job discrimination, safer sex, transgender issues, holiday stress ("the birth family blues"), legal issues, and creative writing.

Women continued to visit our office to use our lending library of over 4200 books, 200 videos, 20 periodicals, and 50 audiotapes. Many of our users are high school and college students doing research, and we have many African Americans and lesbians who check out books for pleasure reading. To our surprise this year, we learned that we have one of the country's best collections of articles on lesbian battering.

We sponsored "A Piece of My Heart," a play about women's experiences in Vietnam, and a reading by Shelly Roberts, the "lesbian Erma Bombeck," and of course, held our 16th annual women's retreat which drew 90 women. At our annual meeting in June we gave the Evangeline K. Brown award to the MIWATCH volunteers, and we finished the year with our annual holiday party. ■





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Our Mission...

Our goal is social change or, as the poet Adrienne Rich writes, "the transformation of the world." We believe this world can be changed to become a place of peace and justice for all women.

We take risks in our work; we take unpopular stands. We work for all women and against all forms of discrimination and oppression. We believe that we cannot work for all women and against sexism unless we also work against racism, classism, ageism, anti-Semitism, ableism, heterosexism and homophobia. We see the connection among these oppressions as the context for violence against women in this society.

We are concerned in particular about issues of

importance to traditionally underrepresented women: poor women, aged women, women of color, teenage mothers, lesbians, women in prisons, etc. All are women who experience discrimination and violence against their lives.

We are committed to working multi-culturally, multi- racially, and to making our work and cultural events accessible to low income women. We believe that women will not know equality until they know economic justice.

We believe that a few committed women working in coalition and in consensus with other women can make significant change in the quality of life for all women.

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Letters to the editor are
welcome.

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Yes, I would like to join the Women's Project.

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