

A legacy of activism: Iowa City Feminist Reunion recalls struggles, triumphs



Susan Birrell of Iowa City gets an out at first base for the Bluestockings during an exhibition softball game against the WRAC Rats at the Iowa City Feminist Reunion at Happy Hollow Park in Iowa City on Sunday, July 16, 2017. The three day event reunited around 70 women who were involved in the feminist protest movements of the 60s, 70s and 80s in Iowa City. (Cliff Jette/The Gazette)

IOWA CITY — Decades since they first gathered to plan their revolution, many of the founding members of the Iowa City Women’s Liberation Front gathered Saturday in Happy Hollow Park for one more softball game.

The game was the culmination of a weekend-long reunion of Iowa City feminists of the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s. The players, long since scattered across the country, are the founders of organizations still making an impact today — places such as the Emma Goldman Clinic, the Rape Victim Advocacy Program, the Domestic Violence Intervention Program and the Women’s Resource and Action Center.

More than 100 registered to attend the reunion, which included visits to the Iowa Women's Archives at the University of Iowa, a tour of an exhibit dedicated to their work in the UI Main Library Gallery, and a banquet at Old Brick, along with panel discussions and other activities.

One of the reunion's organizers, Jefri Palermo of Iowa City, said seeing her old friends and fellow activists gathered at the softball game was a gift, one that honored the work they did and continue to do.

"There's a need to play together and see one another," she said. "I can't imagine this many women would have come from all over the country for this if there wasn't a need to claim it and affirm what we did and that we're still here. People needed this to happen."

The women who gathered for the reunion got their start in places such as women-run housing and child care collectives, a women's-only cafe called Grace and Rubies, the feminist Plainswoman Bookstore and the Iowa Women's Press, which they used to print not only books but also newsletters and magazines such as "Ain't I a Woman" and "Common Lives/Lesbian Lives." They founded the press after a local printer refused to print their illustrated how-to guides for women to do self-gynecological exams, calling them lewd.

"We realized we needed to have control of printing what we needed to get out in the world, or we weren't going to make it," said Joan Pinkvoss, one of the Iowa Women's Press founders.

Several of the women at the reunion also became carpenters and plumbers and mechanics so they could write how-to manuals for other women, in the meantime paving the way for women to work in the trades.

"I was the first woman to complete an apprenticeship with the International Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners in the United States," reunion organizer Dale McCormick said. "I have a lot of firsts, because of the generation I was born in."

She recalled how her stereotypically male name helped her get into the union. She had a male friend pick up an application for her, and they didn't question it when he said it was for "Dale." When she showed up to turn it in, she had to convince the aghast union officer she handed it to that it wasn't for her brother or father. He eventually relented and agreed she could apply.

Swapping those and other stories, reunion attendees recalled protesting the Vietnam War, occupying campus housing to demand child care and busing students from the dorms to a Planned Parenthood clinic in Des Moines to pick up birth control when UI Student Health would prescribe it only to married women. They got arrested for civil disobedience and attracted official scrutiny for printing a letter from an underground leftist revolutionary group.

McCormick said at the time she couldn't have pictured holding a reunion some 50 years later, because she didn't think she would live past 30.

She saw the Vietnam War, student protesters being shot at Kent State and violence against women, and said she simply couldn't picture the future.

"Everything was a crisis," she said. "But we were so committed to change."

Francie Hornstein agreed. She now lives in Oakland, Calif., and helped organize the reunion, but recalled her days as an abortion rights advocate before abortion was legal. She helped train the founders of the Emma Goldman Clinic after the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973.

"Every step of the way, we never knew what was going to unfold. Some of us thought there would be a revolution, and that never came to be," she said. "But in some ways, it did."

She sees the fruits of their movement's labor in LGBTQ rights, reproductive rights and other advances. But she also sees how those things can't be taken for granted.

“We still need to have some political will and method of organizing not to lose these things we’ve gained,” she said.
“Young women today need to be out on the streets.”



Deb Tiemens of Iowa City hits the ball for the Bluestockings during a exhibition softball game against the WRAC Rats at the Iowa City Feminist Reunion at Happy Hollow Park in Iowa City on Sunday, July 16, 2017. The three day event reunited around 70 women who were involved in the feminist protest movements of the 60s, 70s and 80s in Iowa City. (Cliff Jette/The Gazette)



The WRAC Rats dugout watches Deb Tiemens of Iowa City pitch the ball for the Bluestockings during a exhibition softball game at the Iowa City Feminist Reunion at Happy Hollow Park in Iowa City on Sunday, July 16, 2017. The three day event reunited around 70 women who were involved in the feminist protest movements of the 60s, 70s and 80s in Iowa City. (Cliff Jette/The Gazette)



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WRAC Rats player Susan Beckett laughs after fielding a hit by the Bluestockings during a softball game at the Iowa City Feminist Reunion at Happy Hollow Park in Iowa City on Sunday, July 16, 2017. The three day event reunited around 70 women who were involved in the feminist protest movements of the 60s, 70s and 80s in Iowa City. (Cliff Jette/The Gazette)



Kathy Junz of Iowa

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The Bluestockings are at bat against the WRAC Rats during an exhibition softball game at the Iowa City Feminist Reunion at Happy Hollow Park in Iowa City on Sunday, July 16, 2017. The three day event reunited around 70 women who were involved in the feminist protest movements of the 60s, 70s and 80s in Iowa City. (Cliff Jette/The Gazette)