

Sisters Against the System

Remembering the Chicago Women's Liberation Union

March 4, 1999 By Cara Jepsen

Jenny Knauss's awakening came when she taught at Mundelein College in the late 1960s. Because she was close to the age of her students—and most of the other teachers were nuns—she found herself being approached by often desperate young women in need of advice. “The number of people who asked me to help them find out how to get abortions or to get information about family planning was overwhelming,” she says. “I heard about an abortion being performed in one of the residence halls, and at one point some students asked if they could use my kitchen. I was extremely concerned. It wasn't only young women who were Catholic who didn't have that information—it was widely not known. I felt like I had to do something.”

In 1969 she helped found the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, a group devoted to promoting legal abortions as well as equal rights for women. The group was also aligned with other causes of the era, such as the gay liberation and antiwar movements. “All of these things were fizzing up at the same time in the late 1960s,” says Knauss, who is now the executive director of the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health. “The women's union was one way of trying to deal with all of those issues in an organized way. It was very important that we linked all of those issues together in people's minds. Otherwise we would have had a lot of little projects doing good work but not explaining how the absence of reproductive rights was linked to imperialism and poverty and economic issues.”

The CWLU, which moved from an office on Cermak to Lakeview and eventually ended up in Logan Square, was an umbrella organization that focused on education, social service, and direct action. Knauss taught a class on women's health in the CWLU's “liberation school,” which also offered courses on “everything from fixing cars to Marx and Freud,” says Diane Horowitz, another member. Estelle Carol, who had joined the the group after quitting the U. of C.'s chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society, helped start the CWLU's Graphics Collective, which trained women to silk-screen posters, which the group then sold. Their most popular works included an orange and green poster that said “Women Are Not Chicks”—it featured an image of a dead bird—and a yellow and black “Women Working” sign. Carol ticks off other poster subjects: “Women's history, women's theater, women's sports, various lesbian-themed posters, Cuban solidarity, third world solidarity, farmworker solidarity, African solidarity.

“People brought up ideas and we tried them,” she says. “We structured it by work group. If anybody had an idea, we'd start a work group.”

One of the work groups included the abortion-referral service Jane (which was already in existence when its founder, Heather Booth, cofounded the CWLU). After abortion was legalized,

the CWLU's Health Education and Referral Service was formed to steer women to safe and respectful clinics. There were other work groups on child care, job discrimination, and gay and lesbian issues. One organized students in high schools and community colleges, and an "antiwar/anti-imperialism" group was in contact with a women's union in Vietnam. Someone even put together a rock group—the creatively named Chicago Women's Liberation Union Rock Band.

Sue Davenport was studying film at Columbia College when she and another CWLU member, Jenny Rohrer, learned about plans to close the Chicago Maternity Center, a home-delivery clinic on the south side that had been operating since 1895. "We went to Kartemquin Films to see if they would help us," she says. "Neither of us knew how to make a documentary. We were learning it at school but didn't have any equipment or anything. They were really interested, and we became part of a cooperative in which people like us learned skills while filming together."

"We sort of had our fingers in everything," says Horowitz. But she doesn't see that kind of broad collective activism today: "There doesn't seem to be linkage and connection between various projects. The women's union attempted to link the projects and see them as part of the struggle for women's equality and social justice. We cared about the war and the issues of race and economic justice and democracy, so that the women's union as an organization—even though it was a separate, autonomous women's organization—saw itself as part of a larger social movement."

CWLU member Marie Leaner was part of a work group that spent two years preparing for a trip to China, though they weren't sure they'd ever get permission to travel there. They studied the language, history, and culture, as well as the role of women in that society. "We were watching the broadcast of Nixon's tour of China when we got a call from the Chinese embassy in Vancouver to say we could stay for three weeks," she says. "We thought it was a hoax.

"They had this expression, women hold up half the sky," she goes on. "We thought China's position on women was far more progressive than that enjoyed by women in our society. I was struck by the fact that there were women performing all different kinds of jobs. There were women bus drivers. That seems commonplace here and now, but it wasn't back in 1973."

Leaner, who's African-American, was one of the few minority women involved in the CWLU. Membership was almost entirely white and college educated. "There weren't many working-class women either," she says. "There were many discussions about that. It was primarily a non-possibility kind of conversation. African-American women were disinclined to participate. The same was true for Hispanic women. In cultures where the men have been under attack, as in the African-American community because of racism, to support a white feminist agenda was akin to some kind of disloyalty.

“It was a difficult struggle oftentimes to be the person to raise the issue of diversity and inclusiveness, which were not the words we used back then. It was difficult to consistently be one of the handful of people that would raise it as an issue and not have it taken on as a real campaign.”

Leaner and others formed the prison-project work group, which visited the Dwight prison each Saturday to assist the women there, who were mainly of minority backgrounds, to improve conditions and to win the right to see their children. They also taught the prisoners how to do legal research and helped one of them win a lawsuit against the prison before the group’s members were banned from visiting altogether.

Sexuality, of course, was a hot-button issue. “You got ridiculed as a bra burner or a dyke if you took any position that was prowoman or pro-choice,” says Leaner. But, members say, there was never a division between gay and straight members of the CWLU. Davenport, who also edited the group’s monthly newspaper, *Womankind*, says, “As an organization we maintained gay-straight unity. That was very important in writing the newspaper. We were careful that we edited every article to make sure we were evenhanded about that.”

At one point the group’s dues-paying members numbered over 500. But there was never much of a budget. “We worked and put money into the organization,” says Horowitz. “We didn’t get grants. It’s not like now, where you develop a project and go to a source for funding. It was a movement and we just did it.”

The CWLU broke up in 1976. “To understand why it disbanded, you have to understand the collapse of the new left in general in the mid-1970s,” says Horowitz. “SDS had collapsed. People involved in the antiwar movement were floundering around. Dr. King had died. The Black Panthers were alive and well, but it wasn’t clear where the civil rights movement seemed to be. I would say that the women’s union was part of the general crumbling of a lot of leftist institutions.”

The unresolved issues of race and class accentuated divisions within the group. So did the increasing prominence of some members. “By ’75 or ’76, for whatever complicated set of reasons, the organization wasn’t strong enough to deal with differences,” says Horowitz.

Estelle Carol, who now runs her own graphic-design company, is putting together a Web site detailing the history of the CWLU, but many of the group’s papers are in an archive at the Chicago Historical Society that’s been difficult to get access to. For the past year or so a group of alumni, inspired by a chapter about Chicago in an essay collection called *The Feminist Memoir Project*, has been meeting for breakfast to discuss ways to preserve the group’s history; on Thursday night some of them will discuss the legacy of the CWLU at a panel moderated by Paula Kamen at Women & Children First bookstore. There is also talk of publishing a book.

“A lot of people think all the old radicals became stockbrokers,” says Horowitz, who teaches sociology at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills and continues to work as an advocate for female students. “It’s important for young people to know that most people did not give up, and in their own ways are still plugging around. There’s a lot of staying power even though there isn’t the same kind of movement there was then. A lot of projects that are around today can trace their origins either directly or indirectly to the CWLU. In many ways it was a forerunner of what everybody takes for granted today.”