

Challenge still there for feminists

By Ann Butler

The Pittsburgh Press

IN 1973, JUDY VOLLMER was a reporter who usually wore Army fatigues on assignment for The Wilkesburg Gazette. One day she went to interview Anne Pride. She cannot recall why.

"Are you a feminist?" asked Pride.

"Well . . . yeah," replied Vollmer.

"So, what are you going to do about it?" demanded Pride.

In that challenge it all clicked for Vollmer, who today is a poet and professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh Greensburg campus.

For Anne Pride, the moment came in 1968, when, she says, she was "a housewife with two children, trying to do it right." One night feminist Robin Morgan was on television talking about how women were equal to men. "I thought it was absurd . . . but it sunk in.

"I started looking for the women's movement and I couldn't find it," says Pride, who today manages a midwifery birthing center — work she views as part of a continuum of activism that began in 1969 when she was an editor at KNOW, the nation's first feminist press, and continued

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at Pittsburgh Action Against Rape.

For Susanna Downie, the click of recognition came in 1969: "I had just returned from Europe. I was founding, feeling I had to relate to men. But there was a communication problem. And yet, when I would say these same things to women... Men were telling me I was crazy and women weren't."

Downie started a consciousness-raising group. "All these suppressed stories started coming out. Within six months my life had changed." Today, she is a writer and activist who recently completed her doctorate with a dissertation on Emily Dickinson.

A rich history

For each of these women the Moment of Truth came during the period of turbulent change in the late '60s and early '70s that most of us associate with the women's movement in America.

It was a heady, visible phase sparked by Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique" and the John F. Kennedy Commission Report on the Status of Women in 1963. It was fueled by the establishment of the National Organization for Women in 1966 with its goal of "taking action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men."

But it was not the beginning.

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS & SISTERS

In the early days

The women's movement in America was born in July 1848 when 300 people gathered in Seneca Falls, N.Y., for the first Women's Rights Convention — five days after a tea where Elizabeth Cady Stanton had poured out the torrent of her long-standing discontent.

At the Regent Square home of Anne Pride, nine rabble-rousers from the late '60s met recently to share a cup of tea or coffee and reminisce about their organizing days 20 years ago.

"Don't Iron While The Strike Is Hot!" was a slogan of the first national Women's Strike Day on Aug. 26, 1969, says Barbara Evans Crawford, co-chair of the local strike. She also smiles to recall the time a reporter chastised her daughter who was picketing outside the White House.

"What would your mother say?" the reporter asked the young woman.

"Why don't you ask her?" her daughter replied. "She's right over there."

More battles to win

In 1969, it was a bold step to identify yourself as a feminist, recalls Susannah Downie, who was a graduate student at Pitt then.

"The movement has grown tremendously. It's diversified. We've won the battle of public opinion on pro-choice, on the ERA. Nationally, we have 1,200 women's shelters and we didn't have any. But maybe we still need 1,200 more. We still have more battles.

"Child care is the biggie. The economic issues are the most important in the long run — women bearing the double burden of bearing children and supporting children and not being paid the same as men."

Reflects Anne Pride: "What we haven't done is stop to celebrate the victories because there are always more battles to be waged."

But whether a woman takes a stand today or whether she stood with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the 1840s or with the suffragists of the 1910s or the feminists of the 1960-70s — there is something that connects her with every other individual in the women's movement. It is that moment of recognition, that moment of truth.

Indeed, writing 70 years ago, Emma Goldman envisioned:

"True emancipation begins neither at the polls nor in the courts. It begins in woman's soul."



Bill Wade/The Pittsburgh Press

Feminists since the '60s include, from left, back, Judy Vollmer, Ann Begler, Phyllis Wetherby, Betty Jones, Anne Pride and Paulette Balogh; front, Barbara Evans Crawford, Cynthia Vanda and Susanna Downie.