

WOMEN POWER

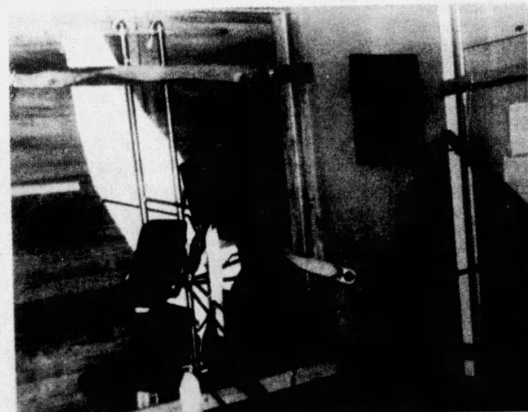


A snapshot taken in the offices of the UMass Daily Collegian during a takeover by about 50 women in May 1978. Protesters, led by women's news editor Julie Melrose, were demanding a number of pages in the student newspaper each week that would be under Melrose's control.

Why a student protest still matters 30 years later



Those who took over the Collegian offices published two issues of an alternative paper during the 12-day occupation. The Collegian was produced by staffers elsewhere on campus.



The protesters used chairs and chains to barricade themselves inside the newspaper offices in the Campus Center.



From left, Jean Esther, Maureen Carney, Karen Levine and Margie Magraw were among the women involved in the occupation who held a reunion at the Florence home of Lore Detenber to mark the 30th anniversary of the event.

By Judy Van Handle
Photos by Kevin Gutting

The chill and overcast skies of a lingering winter had finally yielded to the warmth and sunshine of early spring, the perfect afternoon for some old college friends to gather at a home on a quiet street near Look Park in Northampton.

As the gathering grew, it became clear that this wasn't a run-of-the-mill reunion, despite the hugs of recognition and peals of laughter framed by the hazy recollection of who was and who wasn't in old photos that had borne up remarkably well. The memories tumbled out along with memorabilia when boxes of collected ephemera were cracked open.

Soon, the women were poring over a table covered with old newspapers, yellowing telegrams, clippings, fliers, leaflets and photos. Some of them were wearing T-shirts, which had been tucked away long ago, emblazoned with the words "Both Feet In The Door" on the front.

They had come together to take note of the 30th anniversary of the historic event they were a part of – a student action that had gripped the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and gained international attention.

In May 1978, a group of about 50 women barricaded themselves inside the offices of the Daily Collegian, the

campus newspaper, for 12 days. Angered primarily by the refusal of the paper to grant women's editor Julie Melrose four pages for news under her editorial control each week, the group forced the Collegian staff to produce the paper elsewhere, both on- and off-campus. An agreement was finally reached that ended the takeover just as the semester was finishing.

For the women congregated at Lore Detenber's house, recollections of those heady days came easily.

Deb McCulloch, 55, who now works in computer support at Amherst College, remembered how the occupiers rigged a back door from the inside so they could surreptitiously sneak occupiers in and out and also accept deliveries of food and other necessities. Others spoke of an audible, if not visible, threat – men with baseball bats hovered outside the Collegian doors one night, yelling epithets. And a copy of a letter found early one morning after being slid under the door threatened the women with harm in explicit language: "You [expletive] lesbians and radicals have gone far enough!!! You shall cease this now!!! We will give you until noon today before we break down your doors."

EVEN FOR A CAMPUS – and a newspaper – that was no stranger to student activism, the women's takeover was unique. It lasted the longest of any similar action at

UMass, and the occupiers published two copies of a newspaper, "Both Feet In The Door," which they also called "The Massachusetts Daily Occupied Collegian," containing updates on the takeover.

The occupation attracted national media coverage and public support from feminist icons Gloria Steinem and Simone de Beauvoir. Robin Morgan and Andrea Dworkin, well-known for their books "Sisterhood Is Powerful" and "Woman Hating," respectively, spoke at a rally supporting the occupation. Women's groups in London and Paris were among the dozens of organizations which backed the takeover.

As a historical event, the occupation has found its niche. Melrose was asked to write about it for Ms. Magazine and served on its college advisory board. The takeover is mentioned prominently on the Web site of The Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press (WIFPP), based in Washington, D.C., and occupation-related documents are housed in Harvard's Schlesinger Library and UMass' W.E.B. Du Bois Library. Dworkin's speech at the rally, "The Power of Words," is included in her book "Letters from a War Zone."

Melrose had asked for guaranteed pages for women's news because she was unhappy with the Collegian's coverage of women's issues and felt a lack of respect from the paper's other editors. Today, she says, "I'm very glad we

took action, though I wish it hadn't been necessary. At the time, we considered ourselves part of the women's media movement."

IN ESSENCE, THE WOMEN'S takeover was an important chapter in the long history of UMass occupations. Beginning in the late 1960s, protests were common at UMass; issues including the Vietnam War, African-American concerns, the presence of CIA recruiters on campus and union organizing all prompted student actions. Whether they lasted a day, a week or nearly two weeks, the occupations' common denominator was simple – students blocked access to campus departments or buildings in an effort to effect change.

The first sit-in at UMass took place on Feb. 13, 1969, when 34 protesters organized by the local Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) chapter took over the Whitmore Administration Building for 12 hours before being arrested by state police. The takeover, regarding the school's affiliation with the Dow Chemical company, had negligible impact on school policy.

But that spring, black students occupied Mills House, then a dormitory, after being chased to it by a group of fraternity men who had been known to harass black students on the CCEBS (Committee for the Collegiate Education of Black Students). After barricading themselves in the dorm, they asked white students who were not supportive to leave, and with more black students arriving from elsewhere on campus, the takeover began.

After eight days, the occupation ended. The Faculty Senate voted to recommend the establishment of an Afro-American Affairs department, and Mills House became the New Africa House, which remains the headquarters of the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies and also houses the Augusta Savage Gallery.

The Mills House takeover ushered in a wave of protest that earned UMass a reputation as a politically charged school. More protests surrounding the Vietnam War in the early part of the 1970s – including a takeover of Memorial Hall in spring 1970 – had helped spawn the activism, which as the decade unfolded took up causes far removed from military concerns.

Ralph Whitehead began teaching journalism at UMass in 1973 after a stint as a reporter in Chicago in the late 1960s, covering student activism. Add a year spent in graduate school at both Columbia University and the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Whitehead had been afforded a kaleidoscopic view of some of the most important student protests that ever raged on college campuses.

So when he and his wife, Barbara Dafeo Whitehead, arrived in town 35 years ago, she exclaimed, "The '60s aren't dead, they just moved to Amherst."

The Whiteheads were about to re-experience an era whose seeds had been planted a decade earlier, 3,000 miles away. From the time that Mario Savio and his supporters in the Free Speech Movement staged what is considered to be the first college sit-in, at the University of California, Berkeley almost 45 years ago, student protest had established a foothold on campuses.

The escalation of the Vietnam War and the formation of groups such as SDS and the Weathermen (an SDS splinter group that advocated revolutionary acts against the United States) ratcheted up the intensity and, in some cases, violence in the campus protests. In 1969, Whitehead covered the "Days of Rage" in Chicago, which came on the heels of the violent Democratic Convention the previous summer. The Weathermen protested the U.S. involvement in Vietnam with three days of violence, during which



Esther and Magraw admire Detenber's vintage "Both Feet In The Door" T-shirt which refers to the occupation. The photo below shows Detenber wearing the shirt back in 1978.

property was damaged and hundreds of arrests were made. SDS eventually unraveled due to infighting, and the Weathermen went underground after a homemade bomb killed three members in 1970.

BUT UMASS REMAINED a cauldron of protest. At any given point in the '70s, it wasn't unusual to see, for example, a protest of a film called "Truck Stop Women," judged to be degrading to women by feminist groups, or boycotts of Coors beer for its anti-gay and anti-labor stances. Picket lines even appeared with less-likely participants, such as nursing students and UMass basketball fans and cheerleaders, calling attention to their causes (which were, respectively, saving the nursing major from a threatened 1976 budget axing and protesting the Minutemen's exclusion from the 1975 ECAC basketball tournament).

"The Pioneer Valley has always been a bit of an exception," says Whitehead. "In the 1970s, there was a force and momentum that you didn't see in other places."

From a feminist perspective, that meant Northampton as well as Amherst. Two decades before Northampton was to be called "Lesbianville USA" in a National Enquirer headline, the underpinning for that reputation had been established.

Several businesses that catered to and/or were owned by lesbians were already up and running prior to the Collegian occupation in 1978, including Lesbian Gardens, a discussion space/coffeehouse; the Greasy Gorgon Garage, an auto repair shop; the Common Woman Club, a restaurant; Megaera Press, a publishing company; and a bar called the Gala. At UMass, a burgeoning women's studies curriculum, soon to become a full major, and the Everywoman's Center were among the first in the country. Many of the occupiers were women's studies majors in the BDIC (Bachelor's Degree With Individual Concentration) program.

The Collegian had been taken over briefly by 30 black students in 1976 to protest the firing of two black affairs editors, resulting in the establishment of black affairs pages. So a precedent had been set for Melrose's request for women's pages. When she first asked for them in mid-April 1978, the Collegian's board of editors said yes.



But that came after a brief sit-in by her supporters and a threat from the Student Senate to repossess the Collegian's equipment if the pages weren't granted. Soon after, though, the board's decision was overturned by a 98-28 vote of the paper's staff.

It was then that Melrose and her supporters decided to take over the Collegian offices.

"It seemed like a very radical and risky idea at first, but we had really tried everything else," she says. "An action that would call attention to the situation on a large public scale was the logical next step."

"I was one of those present who pushed hard to move our protest from a sit-in of the Collegian offices to a lock-out of the Collegian staff," says Deb McCulloch, who like

Melrose remained in the office for the entire occupation. "All my friends supported the action and many helped."

The women succeeded in securing the offices, located in the basement of the Campus Center, in the early morning hours of May 1, following a sit-in that had begun the night before while Collegian editors were putting out the paper. The occupiers barricaded the doors when the staffer left behind to guard the offices went for coffee.

During the 12-day takeover, the Collegian was produced in staffers' apartments and the home of the journalism department chair before settling into temporary quarters at Goodell Library. Meanwhile, the women say, besides the written and verbal threats of violence they received, the administration warned the seniors involved in the protest that they would not be allowed to graduate (a threat that did not come to pass).

After negotiating teams from both sides brokered an agreement that set up a fact-finding commission on women's news that would make nonbinding suggestions over the summer, the occupation finally ended on May 12.

NONE OF THOSE inside knew what to expect when the doors swung open. They were greeted by a sea of flashbulbs and assembled media. "I felt empowered because we chose to occupy the Collegian, stuck together and followed through, and were able to bring attention to the situation," recalls Linda Shaw, 53, of Northampton.

"We had accomplished as much as we could with the occupation," says Melrose, 51, who lives in Amherst. "The semester was coming to an end, and although some people might still disagree with me, I believe we didn't have the person power or resources to maintain the occupation over the summer."

As it turns out, the fact-finding commission's recommendation that the women receive guaranteed pages was rejected by the Collegian board of editors.

"At whatever point I found out that the [former] Chancellor [Randolph Bromery] had declared the future recommendations non-binding, I knew they wouldn't be followed," says Melrose. "It was predictable that if the recommendations backed up our demands, which they did, the board of editors at the Collegian would simply vote not to follow them."

FOR WILLIAM SUNDSTROM, who was the Collegian's editor-in-chief in 1978, the occupation contained many shades of gray.

"At the time, and to this day, I have considered myself a feminist, so it was not an easy episode for me," says Sundstrom, 49, now an economics professor at Santa Clara (Calif.) University. "Regarding the occupation, and my role in the whole affair, I do look back upon it as one of the formative experiences of my life. We were young then, and with hindsight I wonder at how I could take some things so seriously, when in

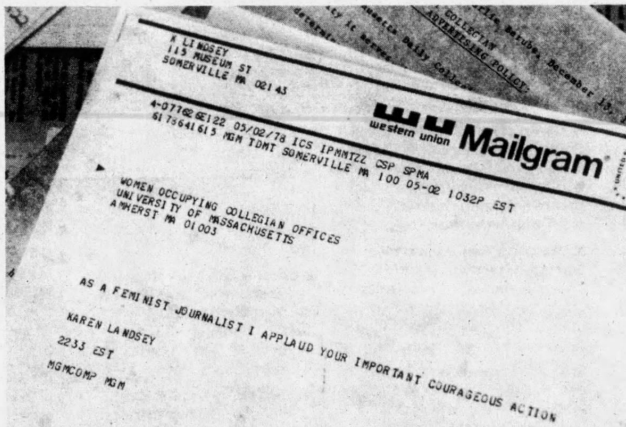
some sense so little was at stake."

Perhaps ironically, Sundstrom has developed a reputation as an advocate for gender equity while chairing a major study of gender climate for faculty at Santa Clara.

"I can't help thinking that a lot of the energy expended during the various protests of our day at UMass was largely misdirected," says Sundstrom. "Compare that to the issues that students have taken up on my campus in recent years: an unnecessary war in Iraq that has cost hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives; persecution of Latino immigrants... These students have their priorities right, in my judgment."

BUT THE WOMEN gathered for the 30th reunion of the Collegian occupiers say they had their priorities straight, too.

For Deb McCulloch, it was standing up for fairness. A basketball player and star golfer at UMass, she points to her athletic career as a reason for joining the



While the women say insults and violent threats were hurled their way, they also received national and international support. The above telegram is one example of that.

occupation.

"Today, I think the nature of being a woman athlete may be apolitical but that nature also includes an intense regard for fairness. It was the blatant unfairness of the situation that brought me into [the] occupation," says McCulloch.

Maureen Carney, 50, who was a junior and a night editor at the Collegian, says the protest influenced her future. After leaving the paper the semester after the takeover, Carney was among the founders of the Valley Women's Voice, a newspaper based first at UMass, then in Northampton, that published until 1991. She says her position as Northampton's Ward One city councilor, as well as a career spent as a teacher, electrician and labor activist, were directly affected by the occupation.

"I take seriously my responsibility to listen to a varied constituency, to think carefully and critically about my community, and to provide informed leadership that improves community well-being," she says. Those qualities, she says, were shaped by the occupation.

Even those who weren't inside for the duration of the protest found it inspiring.

Beth Kaplowitt, 49, of Easthampton, a sophomore at the time, got involved because she knew some of the organizers. She stayed inside the Collegian office only a

Scenes from an occupation

A student protest isn't always a humorless event, and a nonviolent occupation that lasts as long as 12 days provides even more of a chance for a lighter side of the struggle to emerge. As Beth Kaplowitt, one of the participants, says, "College is an exciting time for everyone. In a sense this was just a cool adventure."

Herewith, a short list of funny and otherwise interesting curiosities:

✓ The Collegian occupiers drew much support from feminists in the United States and Europe. Some of the support was delivered in the form of telegrams, that now bygone way of communicating quickly before email and instant messaging. One elected official was among the supporters - Rep. Elaine Noble (D-Boston), who became known as much for her quick, irreverent wit as the first openly lesbian or gay elected official in the country. Noble's telegram lived up to her reputation. "Dear Julie (Melrose) There can be no progress without confrontation and struggle. I am with you always. Sisterhood. P.S. Next time take over a bank. Elaine."

✓ The Chancellor's Commission, established to come up with a framework to resolve the issues between the Collegian and the occupiers during the summer following the takeover, was chaired by Jean Bethke Elshstain, a member of the department of political science. She now is a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School. In her years since leaving UMass, Elshstain has developed a reputation as a neoconservative and a proponent of maternal feminism, in which traditional family roles are seen as keys to society. She also supports the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, and two years ago was appointed by President George W. Bush to the council of the National Endowment for the Arts.

✓ Senior Lindsay Whiting was a supporter of the takeover who made the choice not to join the occupiers: "I wanted to graduate." She also had once been an assistant sports editor at the Collegian but grew disenchanted with the newspaper's coverage of women's issues. Thus, when she joined a group supporting the women in a protest outside the chancellor's office and was approached by "someone wielding a video camera who shouted questions, I stepped into the frame to state my piece: I had already been on the Collegian staff for three years, and we were getting nowhere fast. Yes, I supported the occupation." Later, the video was to run on a continuous loop at the Student Union. One of those working on the video project was Nancy Cohen, then a UMass student and now a reporter for WNPR in Connecticut and an adjunct professor in the UMass journalism department.

✓ On the occupation's first night, a female security guard had joined the women at the administration's behest, according to (then women's editor) Melrose. After the women locked themselves into the office when a Collegian staffer posted outside left, they told the guard she could leave at any time. After she informed her supervisors by radio that the doors were locked, she stayed for a while. "The girls are very nice," she told her bosses. "Many recipes were swapped before she left," said Melrose.

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day or two, but continued to offer support from outside.

"College is an exciting time for everyone," says Kaplowitt, a silversmith and photographer who recently returned to the Valley after three years in Hawaii. "There are fabulous new ideas. Feminism became a part of my life."

IN THE SHORT RUN, the women's occupation of the Collegian may not have achieved its goal of acquiring guaranteed pages, but it was emblematic of a shift in the nature of student protest.

"Unlike the movements in the 1950s and 1960s, such as civil rights and the Vietnam War, identity movements, like gay rights and feminist issues, started appearing [in the 1970s]," says Whitehead.

By the 1990s, "identity" movements and a new protest theme, which one observer calls "pocketbook issues," were front and center. A six-day occupation of Goodell (by then an administration building) by ALANA (African-American, Latino, Asian-American and Native-American) students over financial aid and affirmative action issues took place in 1997. Among the tools of the protesters: a Web site that contained updates of the takeover.

And it was a "pocketbook issue" that wound up calling a halt to UMass occupations. When demonstrators occupied the Whitmore Administration Building during a protest over unionizing resident assistants in 2002, campus police moved in and arrested 34 protesters.

The students were violating the campus's picketing code, instituted in 1986, which allowed demonstrators in

public areas as long as they did not disrupt normal business.

There is still activism on campus: In 2005, graduate student employees protested contract negotiations by picketing and marching. Organized protest also formed in recent years over issues such as UMass' ties to the war in Iraq and the granting of an honorary degree to Andrew Card, President George W. Bush's former chief of staff.

Still, it is nowhere close to the gold standard of the 1960s and '70s.

"The new generations just don't understand what happened [beforehand]," says Jean Grossholtz, a professor emeritus of history at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley who has been arrested dozens of times in various protests around the country.

Politics have tipped toward the right, says Melrose. And higher education administrators have become less tolerant of protests they consider disruptive, she says. They are quicker to have people arrested.

"Occupations are a much rarer occurrence on college campuses these days," says Bill Sundstrom, "and this reflects the fact that students are on average more conservative, more career-oriented and more consumer-oriented than they were back then. This is unfortunate, but it may be changing ... even on my socially conservative Catholic campus there are plenty of students working for progressive causes and heading off to poor countries to work for NGOs (nongovernmental organizations)."

Melrose agrees, crediting the Internet with maintaining activism in a new generation.

"What *is* true, I think, is that due to technological development, some protest action has switched to electronic

forms like online petitions (which is much more efficient for organizers, if less colorful and not as externally visible). Also, of course, students now have fewer role models of large-scale in-person student protest actions than we did in the '60s and '70s," she says.

A quintessential cyber protest surfaced recently at Washington University, where students organized a protest of the St. Louis school's plans to bestow an honorary doctorate on Phyllis Schlafly. Schlafly, a longtime conservative activist, was confronted with protests organized through the social networking site, Facebook, which drew over 4,000 people to oppose the award to the notorious antifeminist. Over one-third of the graduating class turned its back to her when Schlafly was honored by the school May 16.

In 1978, nothing resembling Facebook, emails or even the Internet was available to occupiers, but with what now might be considered antiquated techniques, they did more than just protest a college newspaper's editorial policies.

"When we came out of the offices and were cheered by supporters it all just hit me in that moment that we had accomplished something important as a group that went well beyond our group, forming a larger community," says Linda Shaw.

"The feminists at the Collegian proved that change can come with students," says Grossholtz, a supporter of the occupation and a founder of the now-defunct Valley Women's Union in the 1970s. "In the process, they can change the atmosphere." □

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