

Women meet to learn, enjoy, debate

By MARY FORAN
Of the Emerald

It was a gathering of like and unlike minds, a "women's cultural celebration," an "open forum for discussion and action towards equal rights and opportunities for women."

"It" was WOMEN ON THE MOVE, an annual Oregon Women's Conference held last weekend at Portland's Lewis and Clark College.

An estimated 1,100 women and men were exposed to more than 90 issues of special concern to women in workshop sessions and panel discussions, notably "Help for the Displaced Homemaker," which featured the conference's keynote speaker, Laurie Shields of the Older Women's League (OWL), and State Rep. Nancie Fadeley, D-Eugene, who sponsored recent legislation for displaced homemakers.

There was something for everyone, from an open rap "For Women Over Forty — What's Next on the Agenda?" to a panel entitled, "Lesbians on the Move: Out Front Political Integration With Non-Gay Women."

The workshops covered every aspect of a woman's life in overwhelming variety. Among the issues discussed were the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), abortion, corporate exploitation of women's labor, the problems of

Third World women, child abuse, violence against women, women's health care, child care legislation and women's sexuality.

After a crowd-pleasing interpretation of Sojourner Truth's speech 'Ain't I a Woman?' by Poet Cyndy Hilden, and a rousingly humorous keynote speech by Laurie Shields, the eager crowd converged on the dining room for high-spirited conversation and a low-spirited lunch.

But food seemed to be the last topic on people's minds as discussions ranged from the inequities of Social Security for women workers to eager anticipation of the Sunday celebration with the Ursa Minor choir.

"It unifies all women to see them gathered here like this," said one of the younger participants. The dining hall was filled with women of all ages, faiths, classes, colors and sexual persuasions — a range reflective of the wide reach of the women's consciousness movement.

Out of the myriad of workshops being offered, conference participants were asked to select two. In a first-session panel discussion on minority women in the women's movement, conference coordinator Pina Williams commented on the organization of the conference.

"Being a token isn't always bad," she said. Minority women



Photo by Mary Foran

Displaced Homemaker crusader Laurie Shields tells 1,100 women at the Oregon Women's Conference in Portland that "being older is being better." Shields, who calls herself a "late-blooming feminist," says age and sex discrimination effectively shut out the middle-aged homemaker trying to find employment.

worked in registration and at an "interest group" table in the lobby, but at the recent Third World Women's Conference the attitude had been different, with minorities not "having to demand space" in a white-structured conference, she reflected.

Other members of the panel representing Asian, African and Native American women agreed, saying that the Third World Women's Conference had helped them develop resolutions and a foundation to build on. But with such diversity of interests and perspective, all was not harmonious. By Sunday there were rumors of disruptions from an anti-abortion, anti-gay rights, anti-ERA faction.

"This is an open forum for women to discuss issues of concern to women, said Kathy Ruthruff, conference coordinator and Oregon Council for Women's Equality president. "We can no more exclude the EAGLE (the anti-ERA group) forum than we could exclude NOW or the (Oregon Women's Political) Caucus. Any group that applied was accepted."

Ruthruff said that a workshop entitled "A New Look at the Old Eve", seemed to cause the most controversy as Catholic, Protestant and Jew dealt with those stereotypes of women closest to the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

But Christina Fritz, Conference chairer, felt that the positiveness of the weekend outweighed the minor exceptions of attempted disruption by "two or three women." The purpose of the weekend was "to examine our similarities with respect to our differences" said Fritz. "We've got to work on the positive things."

The evening entertainment, produced by Womens Energy, a group of women who consider themselves "cultural workers" in the emerging women's culture, was certainly a positive facet of the weekend, both musically and emotionally.

"The response was incredible," Fritz observed. "After two encores and a standing ovation, no one wanted them to leave."

The group Fritz was referring to was called "Sweet Honey in the Rock." Their a cappella music was described as a unique combination of intensely personal feelings with the political realities of their lives as blacks and as women.

The women's music concert began with the country western style of Mary Rose & Althea, who soon had the audience singing along to words like, "I'm no one's old lady and no one's baby, I'm my own woman now."

This set the mood for Betsy Rose and Cathy Winters, who took the crowd's heart with their

excellent vocals, poetic lyrics, humor and musicianship.

Betsy Rose's piano solo, "Degas Dancer," was inspired by the Degas paintings of ballerinas, which she says never show the sweaty reality of dancers "whose feet bleed" inside their fairy-tale toe shoes.

This was followed by a song which got the audience clapping and laughing, in which a male employer wonders, "Whatever will we do when all the secretaries demand what they are worth? I haven't made a phone call since 1945. I'll fire her — if I can find the form."

They ended with a song done in sign language, after teaching the audience the signs and asking them to "sign along." The lights came up and the audience joined the singers in this last silent song. The applause that followed them off center stage was truly deafening.

The whole weekend was an outstanding success and an energizing experience, according to Fritz.

Persons interested in planning for next year or finding out more about task force groups which were formed Sunday should contact the Oregon Council for Women's Equality at P.O. Box 8186, Portland, OR 97207.

"I only hope we can continue this energy for next year," Fritz concluded.

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