

Backwater barricades

The anti-choice organizers had stoked up the loonies and purposefully sicked them on us

B Y L E E L Y N C H

I have demonstrated in New York and San Francisco for gay pride; I have marched in Washington, DC for a woman's right to have an abortion; I have rallied in New Haven to take back the night; I have helped seize a radio station for feminism; I have circled against racism; I have been among those who have flooded plazas and parks with their protesting bodies; I have chanted and been maced, fled and bled for peace.

THE AMAZON TRAIL

Never, never have I been so verbally abused, physically confronted and obviously despised as I was when I stood recently with Lover and a hundred plus others on the steps of a Women's Club Auditorium in rural Southern Oregon. We were defending NOW president Molly Yard's right to speak about keeping male legislators' opinions off our bodies.

Lover and I had imagined being two of a very few pro-choice people who would show up. We parked several blocks away because for once all the parking spaces in town were full. We read bumper stickers on the way: *Don't Believe the Liberal Media. Powered by Prayer. Jesus Is My Co-pilot.* We expected the worst.

When we'd threaded our way through the yowling picketers and signs depicting butchered fetuses, we found that the hall was packed full. Over one hundred would-be listeners stood on the steps, turned away. Would they slink off to cars whose bumper stickers read, *Arms are for Hugging and Freedom of Choice* and *If You're Not Talking Recycling, You're Talking Trash?* We stayed on the edge of the crowd waiting for it to melt away under the heat of hostility. But they didn't leave.

The Yard protestors' signs read *Stop NOW!* This injunction was all too apt. When our hardy group of mostly non-gay women and men on the steps began to shout, "Equal Rights!" the so-called pro-lifers booted viciously, very obviously more emphatically than they had at anything having to do with abortion. Their agenda was clear: keep the women pregnant and in the kitchen.

This made sense as most of the demonstrators were male, up to 80 percent by one tally.

The so-called pro-lifers lined the main street of town that hot Tuesday evening with hate-twisted faces, threats and curses. Here are a few of the words they shouted: *"Murderers!...Why do you want to kill babies?...Stop sleeping around!... Get married!... You'd love a child you had by rape!...Go out with me; I won't get you pregnant!...Freaks!...Lesbians!...Stay away from the lezzies, they'll give you AIDS!"*

As if by design, we veteran marchers formed what amounted to a protective half circle around the high school kids, the young pregnant women, the white middle-class women and men, mothers and daughters who looked as if they'd never been through anything like this before.

When the immoral minority tried to take our space away by crushing us together, we stood our ground. When they harshly shoved us, we dug in our heels. When they bellowed hatred in our ears, we remained silent, backs to them. Now and then, they engaged the kids in our crowd in shouting matches and lurched forward to silence them. With the help of the police, we held back their terrorizing, fury-charged bodies. My knees never stopped shaking, and the police finally had to circle our circle to protect us, but it felt damn good to be back on the barricades refusing to put up with bigoted bullying.

Though we were there only to attend a lecture, the anti-choice organizers had stoked up the loonies and purposefully sicked them on us, as it were. The Saturday before Yard's appearance, a group called A Few Good Men bought a full-page advertisement in the local paper. It accused NOW of using "marketing deception" to promote "a totally bizarre moral code and political agenda." The ad took out of context and printed ten quotes. Here's one: "The simple fact is that every woman must be willing to be identified as a lesbian to be fully feminist." (National NOW Times)

Talk about marketing deception. Ironically, many of the people on the steps with us came in response to the ad which goaded their sense of decency.

We pro-choicers repeatedly thanked the police, who did their job well. They'd obviously been trained with crowd-control methods developed against us in the sixties. Isn't it ironic that, in 1990, it should be easier to face 500 screaming fanatics, to say what I believe, from within a police cordon.

After a while, demonstrators began to leave. Perhaps they were the more rational in the crowd, disgusted by the ignorant behavior of their allies. As they left, they discarded the *Stop NOW!* signs. People on the steps tore the signs in two, displaying the bottom half: *NOW!* All night, cars had been driving by, horns blaring to support the protestors.

When our signs went up, the horns blared for us! We cheered the proof of our strength which had been hidden until this night.

As we lingered on the steps while the audience, charged by Yard's speech, emerged from the hall, a friend stopped and said she'd heard all the noise outside.

"We thought it was the anti-choice people," she said. I imagined how she must have felt, packed into a small, hot building, sweating and anticipating walking into who knew what after the program. "We heard them yelling, *Molly go home!* But then we heard another chant: *You go home!*" She grinned. "Our side was out there!"

Very out there in this fundamentalist stronghold, which is no longer quite so strongly held. Three weeks later, the voters trounced a ballot measure, sponsored by A Few Good Men, which would have required parental consent to give birth control information to minors.

Victory is sweet, even on these backwater barricades.

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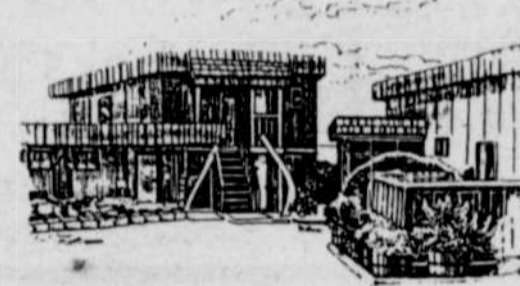
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