

## PROFILE

# That's the SPIRIT

*A new organization helps women of color and low-income women of all sexual orientations stand up to oppression*

by Suzanne Sigmund

The office headquarters in North Portland of Sisters in Portland Impacting Real Issues Together is cluttered with an energetic mishmash of objects. Multicolored children's art festoons the doorway near a poster of Malcolm X; dried roses in an old jar at the window are juxtaposed with various photos of young African American women with arms linked, sporting triumphant smiles.

A splash of black, red and gold bursts from one corner: a poster of the film *Set It Off*, with Queen Latifah gazing at you in proud defiance. And there's the straight-to-the-point banner in big red letters, "Youth in Action." The wallpaper may be peeling and a fresh coat of paint wouldn't hurt, but no matter, this is an office poised for purposeful action.

SPIRIT's prime mission is to empower women—straight, lesbian and bisexual; women of color and low-income women—helping them to deal effectively with sexual and racial harassment. Giving them solid tools, both internally—encouraging a don't-mess-with-me, can-do attitude—and externally—with hands-on self-defense training—so they can develop a sense of personal safety and control.

Chris Kelsaw, 30, found out about SPIRIT about a year and a half ago, attended some of the self-defense classes and found them "very powerful."

As an African American lesbian, what initially interested Kelsaw enough to check SPIRIT out?

"Basically, the fact that it's the only organization in the Portland Metro area that deals with young women of color and low-income women," she says. "The self-defense class has helped me empower myself to set boundaries and feel safer, knowing I have the power to protect myself verbally as well as physically. Being able to communicate what you don't want and being able to diffuse situations before they escalate to where you'd have to use physical force."

According to coordinator Amara Pérez, SPIRIT often collaborates with Movements in Change, a local self-defense organization that has been training SPIRIT instructors in effective self-defense.

"I think the thing about SPIRIT is that we have really incorporated anti-racism and anti-sexism into our self-defense classes," says Pérez, "We incorporate homophobia into our classes, and talk about the fact that domestic violence happens in same-sex relationships with the same frequency as it does in heterosexual relationships."

Role-playing is one method that SPIRIT staffers and members use to confront thorny issues assailing lesbian, bi and straight women. Sometimes it's a girl-to-girl role play, dealing with the challenges of being in a lesbian relationship where you're experiencing dating violence. Sometimes a role play about coming out



A bulletin board in the SPIRIT office chronicles efforts by its Young Women's Committee to educate girls about dating violence.

is more timely, or dealing with a situation where your partner wants to have sex and you're not ready. Other times, a role play about homophobic teachers or straight students making fun of a lesbian teen at school might be most needed.

"Incorporating it into the role play that we do and in the language that we use," asserts Pérez, "so there's not this perception that we're talking about a straight world; that these experiences extend beyond straight life."

Kelsaw nods her head in accord. "Yeah, I've been in the audience for many of the role plays and seen the reaction of the youth and how the discussion afterwards has always been really good," she says.

Pérez, a pragmatic leader whose political rhetoric is open and direct, leans forward in her chair, nodding, as another important point comes to mind: "And how do institutions deal with that differently, or don't deal with it at all. What is challenging for people who are in those relationships [is] to access resources and help when there's a double burden there because you're in a relationship that is not really taken seriously, number one,

especially lesbian relationships. And then feeling like you can access the same resources as straight women, when they themselves have a hard time accessing it."

Focusing on the common ground for women in violent relationships across the board, no matter what their sexual orientation, is one important piece of the picture. And lesbian or bisexual women experiencing domestic violence or dating violence can often feel stigmatized.

"Part of it is just gay, lesbian and bisexual people being able to name it themselves," says Pérez, "because there's this perception that women don't beat other women."

SPIRIT also collaborates closely in this area with Bradley-Angle House, a domestic violence shelter in Portland that offers support groups for women in same-sex violent relationships. Pérez adds that the Bradley-Angle House is currently trying to integrate gay violent relationships into their efforts to combat dating violence.

Pérez feels that lesbian, gay and bisexual people need to recognize that homophobia is a type of oppression that, while not completely similar, is

like racism and sexism in the way it's been used to break down communities and oppress people in general.

"Even for girls who aren't gay, lesbian or bisexual," says Pérez, "to be aware of where homophobia fits in the work that we do and being able to use the word 'homophobia.' We've got 12-year-old girls saying, 'We don't want homophobia in our schools.' And you know, I didn't know what that word was when I was 12 years old. It's like the fear of and the discrimination of gay, lesbian and bisexual people. And if they can say [that] in the same breath as saying that we believe that everybody has a right to just live their lives and feel safe and feel good about themselves."

Right now, SPIRIT is working with Tri-Met on a new safety brochure to address the very real issues of gender and racial violence on buses and on MAX. Tri-Met's old brochure, Pérez maintains, is unrealistic and outdated, talking about things like "keep your hands inside the windows."

After going door-to-door and surveying in the community about people's typical experiences surrounding these issues, Pérez and her cohorts asked Tri-Met to create a new brochure addressing homophobic and racially motivated hate crimes. Tri-Met agreed, and the new brochure is now in the works. It is slated to be completed sometime in the next few months and will be distributed throughout the city.

The concept of gender is a critical issue at SPIRIT headquarters. As Pérez relates, gender is one way that people make assumptions and oppress people. There's the old "boys should act like this, and girls should act like this."

Sound familiar? Cultural gender stereotypes leap to mind: girls wear pink, boys wear blue; girls don't do auto mechanics, boys don't do ballet; the only "normal and natural" relationships are between members of the opposite sex. Uh-huh.

Adds Pérez, "And when they act outside that box, what are the consequences? How are they targeted? And what this does to young people's identity, not only development of identity but sexual identity."

Pérez, clasping her hands together, leans forward, her expression intent: "Our main work has been getting institutions and individuals to realize that safety is a broad concept. Not only being safe from racism, sexism and homophobia, but feeling like we can experiment and explore our sexualities. We should not allow those oppressions to divide us; we should be working together to make changes."

For more information about SPIRIT, call 283-5340. To contact Bradley-Angle House, call 281-2442. For information about self-defense training, call Movements in Change at 790-2131.

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