

GROUPS

Let's get radical

Feminist crusaders take on injustice wherever they see it

BY MEGHAN GARRITY



The beloved Portland Power during the heyday of the ABL

"No alcohol, no drugs, no lesbians." The echo of these words from a Penn State women's basketball coach still rings loud as the fight for equality in athletics continues, even after Title IX. Though we have "come a long way, baby" since women were expected to wear corsets and high heels while playing sports, much work remains to be done about homophobia, objective media portrayal, insufficient public support and low pay for female athletes.

These issues and many more were discussed at last month's meeting of Radical Women, an organization dedicated to exposing, resisting and eliminating the inequities of women's existence.

When they do receive media attention, female athletes often are portrayed as decorative, not athletic, and reports from players reveal their coaches tell them to decline interviews immediately after a game and wait until they are more "presentable." An unspoken rule requires players and coaches always to present themselves as heterosexual, as the six coaches who lost their jobs between 1994 and 1997 for being perceived as lesbians could attest, discussion moderator Jennifer Laverdure explains.

"Athletes cannot be seen as lesbians or perceived as lesbians," a participant adds. "They literally had to be posed with men on their arms while traveling."

Another major issue under debate at the meeting was the demise of the ABL from women's professional basketball. The league

was created by women for women—the world-class athletes were paid \$80,000 a year, and the stands were packed for every game.

Its success did not go unnoticed by the NBA, which formed its own women's league. The two seasons overlapped for one year, and the ABL ultimately folded because of poor funding and support. The ABL players had the option to take the new salary scale the WNBA offered for a much shorter season—between \$26,500 and \$32,500 annually—or quit U.S. basketball.

"Working people are left to fight over the crumbs after the top officials get paid, and women get the fewest crumbs," Laverdure says.

The meeting attracted a group of about 25 women and men. They discussed the complexities of how to support these female athletes while opposing the WNBA's treatment of them.

"We live under capitalism, and we are encouraging exploitation as spectators," Laverdure says. "...I think our role is to support them at this point so they can get their foot in the door."

The general consensus at the end of the discussion was that the progress women can make in a capitalist society is limited and that things will remain the same until the system is changed.

Radical Women believe the only way society can work as a team is to stop discriminating based on sexual orientation, race, gender, class, disability and age. The oldest organization of political socialist radicals in the United States,

it was formed in 1967 after a women's studies course at Seattle's Free University brought to light for several students the injustices all women face.

The civil rights movement in the '60s demonstrated to activists the undercurrents of sexism throughout society as men filled leadership positions while women were shuffled into back rooms to do paperwork and menial tasks. They were ready to serve as leaders but needed an organization to show them how to step into roles formerly denied them.

"They founded Radical Women to serve that need—to train women about what real leadership is, to stand up and say what you think in a room filled with people who don't agree with you," says Adrienne Weller, an executive committee member.

The group instantly distinguished itself from other movements by battling not only sexism but heterosexism, racism, ageism, poverty and repression of all types. "That we were multi-issue way before anyone else...made us unique," Weller adds.

Since the creation of Radical Women's Portland branch in 1977, it has been at the forefront of major political battles in the United States and around the world, working with other chapters in Australia, Canada, Washington, California, New York and New Jersey. Members continually are fighting for sexual minorities, women's reproductive rights, police accountability, juvenile crime measures and Cuban sovereignty and against the Oregon Citizens Alliance, the World Trade Organization and Ballot Measures 9, 11 and 13, to name just a few.

"We have always been active wherever the right wing raises its head. We're there to tell them to get lost," says Jordana Sardo, a Radical Women organizer. "Learning from Nazi Germany, you need to stop them immediately."

In yet another example of history repeating itself, Radical Women are battling the OCA once again. In 1992, they helped defeat Ballot Measure 9, an initiative to prevent sexual minorities from receiving "special rights."

Today, Radical Women are fighting the OCA's latest anti-gay measure, the Student Protection Act. Through a campaign called Bigot Busters, supporters are taking grassroots action by meeting with voters and educating them on the facts and repercussions of the initiative, which is designed to keep any mention of homosexuality out of schools.

"We are winning the right to educate voters

as to why they should not support the OCA," Sardo says.

During the past few months, Bigot Busters struggled for the right to campaign wherever the OCA collected signatures for its petitions. The public malls and establishments where voters were approached are considered private property, which forced the activists to receive permission from the companies that own the sidewalk even to be there, Laverdure explains.

"The big corporations aren't concerned about our rights," Weller adds.

Bigot Busters are gaining ground every day and will continue hitting the streets with information until the Student Protection Act is defeated, Laverdure promises.

In addition, Radical Women are making headway for the rights of sexual minorities through an association with the Freedom Socialist Party, which aims to inject the socialist movement with the revitalizing ideas of Trotskyism and feminism. "The teams that win are the ones that work together," suggests Brian Barnett, a member of the political organization.

The Freedom Socialists are engaged in a lawsuit with the secretary of state to get the party on future ballots. Current law states no

two political parties can share the same name, and because the Socialist Party already is on the ballot, the Freedom Socialists cannot be.

"If left alternative parties can't get on the ballot, it holds back the rights of sexual minorities," Weller says.

Both Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party are composed of women and feminist men, gay and straight, of all colors and nationalities, old and young, working together for freedom and respect of all peoples around the world.

"Socialism is a transformation process," Sardo says. "As you transform, from there you can go forward. And as people work together, they become a very powerful force."

■ RADICAL WOMEN study groups meet 10 to 11:30 a.m. Sundays in Room 359 at Portland State University's Cramer Hall, 1721 S.W. Broadway. Monthly discussion groups are held at the Northwest Neighborhood Cultural Center, 1819 N.W. Everett St. Call (503) 228-3090 for more information.

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— Jennifer Laverdure

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