

Preparing to march on Portland

Behind the scenes, the Women's March on Portland wrestles with issues of race, feminism, leadership

By SHASTA KEARNS MOORE
Portland Tribune

If Saturday's Women's March on Portland draws the expected 30,000 or more participants, it could be the biggest demonstration the city has ever seen.

And it almost didn't happen.

The real story behind the march isn't completely known even to its lead organizer, but in many ways it is a familiar one.

The march is a reaction to the election of Donald Trump, and nearly all of the forces at work to upset politics in the 2016 presidential race were also in play in organizing the Portland march: social media, race, gender, the urban-rural divide, generational concepts of feminism and, most of all, lots of people feeling like they weren't being heard.

Like so many stories in our modern American discourse, how you see it depends on where you are standing.

Unlike many of the stories in our modern American discourse, the main players are calling for unity despite their sense of betrayal.

Fractures appear

It all began on Nov. 11, the Friday after Trump's election.

Four friends from Eastern Oregon wanted to join the national movement to march after Trump's inauguration but didn't see anyone stepping forward in Oregon.

"Why did we do it? Because nobody else was," says one of the women. The former lead organizer does not want her name or hometown used because she works for the federal government and fears retaliation, so the *Tribune* will call her Sandy.

"Eastern Oregon is pretty much white and mostly red," Sandy said, alluding to skin color and the Republican party. "People of color feel unsafe in Portland; well, people of left-leaning politics are not safe in rural Oregon."

Sandy and her friends wanted a big march for all of the women of Oregon, so she opened up a Facebook page announcing a march on Portland. She watched it explode — thousands of people saying they would come in a matter of days.

They got to work on fundraising, permitting and all of the myriad organizational tasks for an event this large.

But fractures soon appeared.

People started pushing for their specific issue to be represented; others pushed back. Sandy grew frustrated.

The march, she said, was supposed to be about "women's rights." To her, "it didn't matter what color you were, who you identified with. It was about the bigger picture."

Sandy had organized about 600 volunteers through a Facebook group — anyone who offered to do something was immediately deputized, she said.

The online relationships meant organizers didn't see anything but each other's



Women ride a bus to Washington for the Women's March, Friday in Minneapolis, Minn.

Renee Jones Schneider/StarTribune via AP

profile pictures. Asked if there were any people of color in leadership positions, Sandy responded:

"I think so. I'm trying to think," she paused. "Because we didn't pay attention. I know they were asked. It's not our fault if they say 'no' or don't respond."

Sandy said she had lined up a woman to speak about transwomen's rights and was changing the march to provide a safe way for Black Lives Matter to be able to stage a "die-in."

She said they were trying to make black people and their allies feel welcome.

But the online chatter intensified.

In November moderators began deleting comments — which would often delete entire threads of conversation — and blocked contrarian commenters. That made people angrier.

"Just because one person does not have the issues that you have, does not mean that you should demean them and that the issues that they have are not important, and sadly we have seen a lot of that going on," she said.

Sandy said moderators were deleting only personal attacks.

But that wasn't how it felt to Constance Van Flandern, an artist and activist in Eugene who is the state's official liaison to the national Women's March on Washington.

"These women were overwhelmed by people coming to their Facebook page and asking about issues of diversity," Van Flandern said. "It was just delete, delete, delete."

Van Flandern says people were getting blocked in droves. Spies started infiltrating the site, reporting back to those who had been blocked. Counter-protests were announced.

"It was getting to be crazy. Just crazy," Van Flandern said.

Major allies such as Planned Parenthood and the NAACP Portland chapter

decided they wouldn't participate. The march was falling apart.

Women's lib

"Portland's been hijacked," Van Flandern kept thinking. She was losing sleep over what she saw as the almost-certain likelihood of chaos and division. "This is such a terrible wasted opportunity. It's going to be this horrible march about how we can't get our shit together."

Van Flandern reached out to the national organization to ask for help resolving the conflict, but she said she was told: "We'd love to, but this scenario is playing out in places all over the nation."

Indeed, a Jan. 9 *New York Times* article detailed how divisions over privilege are sparking these conversations and frustrations in marches all across the country, including the national march.

The conflict lies in how different generations view feminism.

In the 1960s, the women's liberation movement pushed concerns such as equal places for women in the workplace.

In the newer version, called "intersectional feminism," women are expected to recognize the advantages and privileges they have and proactively use those to elevate the concerns of those less fortunate. Believers of intersectional feminism view the old way as "white feminism" because it stopped short of liberating women of color, who remain even less advantaged than white women in equal pay, reproductive rights and other measurements that the largely white, middle-class baby boomer feminists didn't consider.

A hostile takeover

It wasn't until Dec. 27 that Van Flandern realized she could stage a hostile takeover of the Facebook page.

She started a new one, called Women's March on Washington: Portland, and invited nine women who had been complaining to her about

the lack of inclusion on the other page.

"At the very least, that can be the page for the voice of Portland and at least Portland can talk to each other," she said.

The women invited their friends and within hours they had 1,000 people on the page, Van Flandern said.

"At that point, I started seeing (Sandy's) site as the Death Star," Van Flandern said, making a Star Wars reference. "We're like the rebels."

Their one-in-a-million X-wing Starfighter shot? Margaret Jacobsen, a compelling writer and photographer with a large social media presence on issues such as parenting while black, being a victim of sexual violence and living as a nonbinary gender polyamorist.

"This woman is a natural

leader," Van Flandern said. "She's strong without being aggressive. She's like a genius."

Jacobsen (who uses gender-neutral pronouns) joined the new movement Jan. 4. Soon after, they were stunned to learn what was going on with the leadership struggle. Jacobsen wrote a post that went viral and people started messaging Sandy's page and getting blocked, according to Van Flandern.

Sandy reached out to Van Flandern the evening of Jan. 5 to ask for help in leading the march.

"I was sort of watching her on the one hand spinning out, and on the other watching people get so excited," Van Flandern said.

Van Flandern agreed and quickly took over the Eastern Oregon women's page with

new administrators, changing the graphics to match the other page.

Sandy said she asked for help because the unusually snowy weather was making it tough to get to Portland, not because she was worried about the opposition. She declined to speak further about the conflict.

"If people want to lie about it or whatever, we all know what happened," she said, "and I know they all feel strongly about it and I hope it's a successful march, done safely and peacefully and nonviolently."

Jacobsen does feel strongly about it.

"I think I'm just happy now that people feel safe attending," they said. "Safety of like: Are there cops there to protect me? Am I safe there as this woman even though I don't look like you?"

Who is included now?

Van Flandern said the weekend after they took over the original page and unblocked everyone, thousands more people said they would attend the march while only two dozen have been so put off by the discussions to say they won't come.

"I think that the Portland march right now is a beautiful example of growth," she said. "They've become a leader for other sister marches to look up to."

For example, Jacobsen, who is able-bodied, is advocating for accommodations for people with disabilities to attend the march.

This was something the current organizers felt Sandy and her friends weren't doing.

"There was part of me that was so angry at her and part of me that was so sympathetic," Van Flandern said. "She had all these great intentions. She didn't mean to hurt anyone. It's a really good example of (what happens when) your intentions and your actions, they don't align."

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