

Heather Booth hboothgo@aol.com

Chicago Women's Liberation Union: If we organize we can change the world. But only if we organize!

This paper was presented as part of "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s," a conference organized by the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, March 27-29, 2014.

A saying on one of the posters of the Chicago Women's Liberation Graphics Collective that Estelle Carol convened, was "Sisterhood is Blooming: Spring time will never be the same." And that is just how I feel. About the women's liberation movement and about this wonderful conference and being here with my sisters. And certainly those on this panel.

To understand how amazing women's liberation was—and the CWLU was in its early days—we need to remember what life was like before women's liberation.

At my college, a friend of mine was raped at knife point in her bed, in off campus housing. We went with her to student health to get a gynecological exam. She was told that student health didn't cover gynecological exams and was given a lecture on promiscuity. We sat with her. Of course, because people organized, gynecological exams are now covered by health insurance. Of course, we still have a long way to go, with the push back on women's health denying contraception insurance coverage in many places and legislation to

limit or prohibit abortion (introduced as X laws in Y states over the last two years). But we make progress when we organize.

The CWLU The Chicago Women's Liberation Union, (CWLU) was always committed to developing a vision and organizing for action. We had home groups that were the place for reflection on the society, on our work and on ourselves. And we had work groups that were the place for carrying out action—The liberation school, JANE, youth organizing, organizing janitresses, the Graphics collective, the rock band and more. We believed we needed both a political home for our internal reflection and planning to develop large scale social change efforts with and for women in the broader society.

Several of us wrote a strategy paper, Socialist Feminism, that we adopted at the CWLU and tried to share around the country. We argued we should organize based on three principles:

1. To win improvements that concretely improve people's lives (something they can see, touch or taste—so that social change was not just an abstraction, but that our progress would be measured by the real changes we made, not only the more abstract debates we had.
2. Give people a sense of their own power, by involving people in direct action organizing.
3. Change the relations of power, make the structures and institutions more accountable and build our own organization to have the power to fight another day.

We then applied these principles in action.

One of the groups that I helped organize was the Action Committee for Decent Childcare—ACDC (we thought that was clever). I was a young

mother with two kids (one born in 1968 and one in 1969). There was no publicly funded child care in Chicago. Millions of women were re-entering the work force to make a living for their families and to find work that was meaningful for them and needed childcare. We tried to set up a child care center (we wanted to be called the Sojourner Truth ChildCare Center) and found the city licensing for child care was designed to support two large contractors and not women and their children. We had to make 32 stops to get a city license, if we could get it at all. And centers in church basements (one of the most convenient places) were not allowed because nothing could be “below land grade” and would need its own generator for kids under 3, as well as other requirements that were not necessary for safety and welfare of the kids.

So with two friends, Day Creamer (now Day Piercy) and Kate Blunt, we set up an organization. Our slogan was free, 24 hour, client controlled childcare. We wanted a revision of city licensing laws, with services overseen by parents and child care operators (not bureaucrats) and funding for childcare. The organization had many thousands of supporters and hundreds of activists, that was nearly 50% white and 50% African American (the Latino population of the city was relatively small in those days).

A key part of the organizing was helping women gain confidence and leadership, who had never taken collective action before. To help them learn how to stand up for themselves and their communities.

One action gathered about 30 mothers and their children to go to city hall to meet with the person who should have been overseeing childcare. Because we were getting no answers to our demands from

the city, we asked for a demand we thought they could not refuse—to have a study about childcare services—what there was in the city and what was needed. We received no response so we were going downtown to meet with them. Many of these mothers had never left their neighborhood without their husbands (and certainly not without their husband’s permission). We had a meeting scheduled with the department head, but when we arrived she was not there. So we waited. We started singing row, row, row your boat, and ended up singing We Shall Not Be Moved. The kids needed diaper changes. First we were sheepish about what we do with the dirty diapers. Then we decided to put it in a pile on the administrator’s desk with a note saying “You gave us the poop, now we give this to you.” The kids were restless and started to rifle through the files. At first we tried to stop them then we joined in and found the very study we were looking for. We called the press. As they start to show up, the Department Head arrived and in front of the press agreed not only about the study, but to hold hearings around the city in our communities (where we could then organize) to hear community concerns about childcare. At the same time the governor’s race was on and we helped make child care one of the two leading issues in the race. The result was that within 8 months we won: 1) A child care licensing review board to revise the city childcare code to make it more children and family friendly, 2) it would be composed 50% of parents and 50% of childcare operators and 3) we won \$1million of city funds for childcare—which in 1972 (?? DATE) was real money.

So this was the kind of way that CWLU integrated theory and action, our core women's liberation effort and organizing in the larger society. Sisterhood is Blooming and Springtime will never be the same!

10 min.