

## THE LIBERATION SCHOOL FOR WOMEN, A PROJECT OF THE CHICAGO WOMEN'S LIBERATION UNION

*"What we don't know, we must learn.  
What we do know we should teach each other"*

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Women's Liberation in Action: Theory, Practice and Organization March 28, 2014**

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When a small group of progressive young feminists decided to organize the Chicago Women's Liberation Union in 1967, we wanted to build as broad and inviting an organization as possible, initiating and uniting projects that reached into the city's neighborhoods to recruit new women to the movement. We wanted to build a pluralistic, inviting, non-sectarian organization where different approaches to liberating women could exist side-by-side. We opposed the private property-based, capitalist economy and generally supported a socialist alternative. But we also knew that women's oppression was real and life threatening and that organizing to liberate women was revolutionary.....as was working for a more egalitarian economic system.

Little did we know that there was a social movement building amongst women around our age that would bring hundreds of women to our door. The Liberation School for Women was born out of the need to connect to the many women calling Women's Union office wanting to get involved. Our very first orientation meeting attracted 120 women (pretty amazing for a Chicago winter night in a church basement); for our third orientation 220 showed up. It was the only experience in my lifetime as an organizer when we put out a few flyers and consistently underestimated the turnout.

We offered introductory classes (Our Bodies Our Selves; History of the Family; Women in Literature), skills classes (auto mechanics, Lamaze, driving skills, karate, organizing) and study/action groups (Racism and Women's Politics, Women and Religion, High School Women). This was the early 1970s when these subjects weren't available in colleges and high schools; the first national women's studies conference wouldn't be held until 1979.

The school was run by the Liberation School workgroup that picked the classes we wanted to offer and also responded to class suggestions from our students and CWLU activists. Each class was supposed to have a syllabus and provide ample opportunities for discussion and engagement of the students. From evaluations we did each session, we learned that the quality of the classes was very mixed. We repeated classes that got enough signups and discontinued others. Auto mechanics consistently had the highest enrollment.

To reach a diverse mix of students, classes were sometimes offered in poorer neighborhoods, near community colleges or for special groups like older women or high school students. Although women of

color attended Liberation School classes, the general sense at that time in the progressive movement was that whites should be organizing in white neighborhoods and Black and Latino women would build their own organizations.

Our students were service workers (cashiers, babysitters, secretaries), professionals in primarily female identified jobs (teachers, nurses, caseworkers), students and homemakers. Many had attended little or no college.

The strength of the Liberation School was its connection to the Chicago Women's Union and the many projects and campaigns that the Union was involved with. The school was a major part of the education/theory part of CWLU's overall organizing equation. The other parts included providing critical services to women to meet their immediate needs (like abortion and rape counselling) and action campaigns to change the institutions and policies that were oppressing us (like the Action Committee for Decent Childcare and anti-Vietnam war organizing). The Liberation School, like the other projects, was represented on the CWLU steering committee and participated in decisions made by the overall organization. In addition it was expected that each CWLU member would be in a chapter/consciousness raising group, which also got representation on the Steering Committee. All this work was done by volunteers. There was no nonprofit structure or outside funding beyond what we raised from each other.

Because we had an organizational structure we were able to run a speakers bureau to respond to the growing requests for women's liberation speakers. CWLU adopted the commitment to train each other as public speakers and so offered speaker workshops for our trainees. When speaking requests came in, they were assigned on a rotating basis to those who had agreed to participate, and each person had to prep herself on the specific topic requested. Sometimes another CWLU member went along for moral support. Many a terrified activist found her public voice through this challenging process.

The collective nature of the speakers' bureau meant that the most charismatic CWLU speakers didn't get most of the high profile speaking gigs, a policy that was somewhat controversial given our need to get the women's liberation message out and the uneven level of speaking skills. But we stuck to it.

The strength of the Chicago women's movement lay in our unity and vision of a pluralistic movement that reached out actively to broaden the base of participants; that trained us in skills and leadership; that kept us engaged with each other through a decentralized organizational structure; and that built alternative institutions to demonstrate our vision of a different world for women. This model of a decentralized organization with a commitment to leadership development and maximum involvement in decision-making at the project level reflects feminist inclusionary values and has helped influence contemporary organization theory through the present day.

(CWLU has an active website built by Estelle Carole, who founded the brilliant Chicago Women's Graphics Collective, which the history and vision of CWLU alive and available to younger generations. Anyone interested in doing research on the Liberation School can find student surveys, class rosters and lists of offerings from the CWLU archives in the Chicago Historical Society which has all the papers of the Women's Union.)

