Grass Roots Women's Studies: Wisconsin Women in the Arts

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By lucky accident, in September 1974 I saw a brochure announcing a conference to be held that October in LaCrosse, Wisconsin—a city 250 miles across the state. After I rubbed my eyes and looked again, the brochure still said that Elizabeth Janeway and Miriam Schapiro would be the featured speakers. Although I knew nothing about the brand new sponsoring organization, Wisconsin Women in the Arts (WWIA), I resolved to attend. I had assigned Janeway’s book in my course that fall and I knew Schapiro by reputation, though I had never seen even a print of her painting, and I had never spoken with any recognized woman artist about her own work. For me, as well as for many of the 212 people who attended that conference, the opportunity for face-to-face contact with these inspiring women was unprecedented. Schapiro showed slides not only of her own paintings, but also of work by other historical and contemporary women whose names we had not yet heard. Janeway’s lecture on images of women sparked fruitful and sometimes heated discussion about the artist’s responsibility to create new imagery for women. The conference also offered 15 workshops dealing with a broad range of practical, interpersonal and philosophical issues, led by professional women from all over the state; in addition, there were ten short performances in the media of dance, film, music and theater. The quality of the lectures was fine, as I had expected, but the excellence of the workshops and performances by Wisconsin women was even more influential. For many of us, the conference changed our lives, our patterns of commitment, our understanding of the place of the arts in society and our sense of what we might accomplish. Women returned from the conference with new energy to organize art exhibits, symposia, radio programs and other opportunities for women artists. One woman summarized the effect of the conference in a word: stimulating. She added “Makes me want to work harder than ever. Our women are so talented.”

Before we left LaCrosse, the new members of WWIA elected a governing board including officers and a representative from each of nine regions. In the past two years, the board has written a constitution, secured money for a talent registry and a slide tape presentation of members’ work, published a monthly newsletter, organized the regional chapters, created a committee structure to plan the annual conference and made arrangements for the organization to become financially independent. With more than 400 members, WWIA is now on its way to becoming a permanent alternative institution. But before I say more about these accomplishments, allow me to clarify how WWIA began.

The first conference at LaCrosse could not have occurred without a great deal of hard work, ingenuity and financial support, much of which was provided or secured by Linda Heddie, the first executive secretary. As art editor for Arts in Society—a first-rate journal (published by the University of Wisconsin—Extension) which is about to die because of state budget cuts—Linda had been involved in organizing a conference on women in the arts jointly sponsored by the Johnson Foundation and UW-Extension, held at the Wingspread Conference Center in fall 1973. The idea for an organization called National Women in the Arts was generated at Wingspread and a six-person steering committee for its first chapter, WWIA, was formed there. UW-Extension continued to support the idea by paying Linda one-half her salary to be the executive secretary and by contributing office space, secretarial services, postage and such necessities. In the summer of 1974, Arts in Society published an impressive issue devoted to the Wingspread Conference; this helped Linda and the first steering committee to attract the speakers, workshop leaders, performers and financial supporters for the 1974 conference at LaCrosse. They were able to set very high standards on a very small budget, a total of $2,253.13, $1,500 of which came from the Wisconsin Arts Board, the remainder from the Extension and the $2 conference fee. The event was planned and publicized to attract a cross-section of people interested in the arts, including students who might not be able to pay at all and for whom scholarships were arranged.

The roots took hold in 1975 and the second conference was, by some standards, even more successful than the first. The theme was women’s creativity. Marge Piercy gave a stunning lecture on collective ways of overcoming barriers to creative work and the graphic artist June Wayne came for several days and participated in every aspect of the event in addition to delivering a major talk. A juried show with prizes donated by local patrons provided a much needed opportunity for visual artists. Workshops and performances again featured the talents of 20 or more Wisconsin women. The 1976 conference will focus on the future; if all goes well, Kate Millett and Judy Chicago will be there, the juried show will be expanded, awards for outstanding achievements will be given and the workshop leaders will be paid a small honorarium for the first time.

The monthly newsletter now contains notices of regional meetings where still more discussions, performances and collaborations take place. For example, the Madison group did the ground work for a weekly feminist TV series, “The New Machine for Winding Up Ladies.” The newsletter also creates an information network concerning grants, publications, exhibit opportunities and activities of interest across the nation. A Milwaukee member is producing a professional slide-tape program showing Wisconsin artists at work. It will be used as an educational tool for those who don’t yet believe that women can be serious in their pursuit and support of the arts. The talent registry, funded by the Wisconsin Arts Board, will provide a data bank for our own events and it will also enable us to provide recommendations to those who are seeking our talent. The increased activity of the organization will mean increased costs: the conference fee will be $10 this fall and the modest dues ($5) will surely be doubled soon.

WWIA’s activities and achievements over the past two years are dazzling—especially in view of the diversity of the membership. Although many of WWIA’s members are involved in the visual arts and most are college educated women between the ages of 21 and 49, the group as a whole yokes together many people who might otherwise never speak to each other. Members are professional, student and amateur artists from most of the fine and popular arts; they are educators, critics, patrons, managers and administrators. Indeed, the constitution states that “Any woman with serious intent and interest and with some system of discipline for participation in the arts is eligible to join.” Men are also welcome if they embrace the organization’s purposes, which range from the practical, immediate aims (to encourage women in the arts, to publicize their capabilities, to develop new audiences, to develop communication among artists, to promote better opportunities for work) to long
LIVING/LEARNING IN WOMEN’S STUDIES

You may never have heard of Capital University (2500 students, affiliated with the American Lutheran Church), but I can introduce the character of our campus very quickly: located in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, founded 125 years ago and drawing the majority of its students from Ohio. Befitting its location in this conservative area of the Midwest, the campus too is highly conservative. Nevertheless, in this environment a sustained and dedicated effort has been going on for the past four years to bring a feminist perspective to our campus, to encourage and keep feminist students and to develop a solid core of women’s studies courses. Despite some faculty and alumni opposition, we now offer a number of women’s studies courses on a regular or semi-regular basis in a variety of departments, taught from a variety of approaches, but all incorporating a recognition of the feminist viewpoint. Our most innovative program, considered extremely experimental on our campus, will go into effect this fall: a three-term (two semesters, one interim) living/learning experience in women’s studies.

A sister faculty member and I (representing the English and ethnic studies departments), in cooperation with the student life and counseling staffs, have arranged for one small corridor of a new women’s dormitory to be designated the Women’s Studies Corridor. Seventeen women can be accommodated and 17 have signed up. Additionally, we allowed a small group of commuter students to register for the course, and following a number of calls from off-campus women, have determined to maintain an open class. Faculty and student women from nearby campuses as well as women from the community will be welcome to sit in on as many sessions as they wish and to contribute to the learning/sharing environment. For the convenience of off-campus participants, most of our classes will be held evenings in the corridor itself. There will also be a browsing library on the floor; we have ordered several feminist newspapers and periodicals, plus a varied selection of the most important feminist books. One of our decisions centered on whether the corridor should be one which is physically closed off or one which joins the rest of the dorm. For better or for worse, our consensus was to choose a closed corridor, our reasoning being that this might stimulate greater closeness and community among the women. Indeed, building a sense of women’s community on campus is a major goal of the program.

Will this corridor create an academic ghetto? One needs to comprehend the peculiar nature of our campus to understand the need for such a program. Many of our feminist students have, with justice, complained about the lack of support outside the classroom and about the separation of interested women as they are scattered among several dorms on campus. There are other reasons which will prevent ghettoizing: the women come from three undergraduate classes and they have many close friends who are not living on the corridor; each semester they will be taking a number of other courses in the traditional academic structure; and among the 17 women, there are 13 different majors represented.

First semester, the course will be a general introduction to women's studies, multidisciplinary, team and group taught, and will include assertiveness training, films and tapes, as well as readings on such topics as racism/sexism, the older woman, women and work and life styles. The optional interim term (month of January) will consist of a series of field trips to investigate other women’s studies programs in the state, at large and small, public and private, community and technical schools. Second semester, the students will enroll in a course entitled Survey of Modern Literature, which will be taught from a feminist perspective and will engage many different resource people. Among other things, we will be using our own loose-leaf textbook for the course, since no current anthology meets the specific needs of this group.

Despite some overt hostility toward the program, much of the response has been positive. Several faculty members are excited enough to have volunteered their services (i.e., a 45-year-old woman wants to discuss what it means to be middle-aged in this youth culture, a male psychologist wishes to explore his expanding awareness of the different psychology of women): the student life staff is exuberant; my team teacher and I are excited about the possibilities for the emergence of a strong women’s consciousness on campus; the off-campus community response has been enthusiastically supportive and the students are highly energized.

Judith Ann Sturnick
Capital University

GRASS ROOTS (continued)

range goals for cultural change. In all of the planning meetings and regional or statewide events I have attended in the past two years, the sense of shared purposes has enabled us to transcend the usual barriers caused by differences of age, philosophy, artistic training and professional roles.

WWIA’s strength lies in diversity. Because of it, we can work collectively on several levels at once: to achieve financial support for women artists, to provide a testing ground for ideas and works, to share knowledge of creative processes, to broaden the base of appreciation for our works. But there are also difficulties in diversity. Weavers, painters, actresses and writers often have separate personal/professional needs, and WWIA has not yet found a way to serve the function of, say, a professional association of weavers at the same time it plays its unique role in supporting all Wisconsin women in the arts. There are also practical difficulties involved in travelling up to 50 miles for a regional chapter meeting in below zero weather on a thick carpet of snow. Nonetheless, the organization has proved its soundness by the projects it has generated and if it can survive the transition from its shelter in the UW-Extension to total financial independence this fall, it could be an historic achievement in a movement to enlarge the spaces for art and women in society.

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