

Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence Speech

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Three Decades of Sheltering: Now Where are we going?

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35 years ago the founders of the battered women's movement were unabashed feminists, formerly battered women, women of color and lesbians. We talked and planned and created our own herstory. We struggled together, arm in arm, against steep odds and constant criticism to make the world safer for all women and children. There was no road map for us so we made it up as we went along. We were fearless mostly because we didn't know any better. We didn't know how radical our ideas sounded...and we were determined...very determined and persistent. We were frequently characterized as the bra burning, man-hating, radical lesbian feminists who were breaking up families. Most of us were pleased to wear the radical label, as feminists or Alice Walker's "Womanists." We were proud of our radical commitment to peace at home, to diversity and our commitment to women and children. Those of us who were straight women began to wear the lesbian label with pride as an affirmation of our good work! We all cared about the plight of women! We were upsetting the male paradigm. We even talked about revolution, a revolution that would make women and children safe to walk down the streets even at night, a revolution that would end the violence in our lives and in our families.

We saw woman battering, not as individual pathology, not as a mental health problem, not as an addiction problem, not a stress problem and not a little problem of communication between couples but as enforcement of the full blown intentional and collective oppression of women. In our consciousness raising groups (the precursors to what we call support groups today) we talked about how our fear of violence on the streets and at home stole our freedom, our identities and our very lives. We talked about the oppression of sexism and racism and heterosexism and anti-Semitism and ageism and ableism. We listened to the children and child advocates and to the realities for rural women. While we didn't always agree on the details, we gave powerful voice to our work for battered women. We shared a common politick that women were being systemically and systematically battered by our partners, our husbands, our lovers supported by a violent patriarchal system. Our revolutionary fervor was collective and political. We were the battered women's movement.

Has anyone in this room been doing this work for 30 or more years? Would you please stand or raise your fist. How about more than 20 years? Would you please stand or raise your fist. How many have done the work more than 15 years? Please stand or raise your fist. Let us applaud our sisters, some of the mommas of our movement. Some of us have become old women doing this work together. Now if you'll sit down and lower your fists.

Now anyone who has done this work more than 10 years, please stand or raise your fist. More than 5 years. More than a year. Let us applaud the younger women who are standing today and raising their hands who are our future.

I see there are women in this room who remember as much or more than I remember. Together we opened shelters in urban and rural communities. We converted rooming houses and convents and old motels and we tried to keep our locations a secret. I remember once being asked if we moved our shelter location every month and had visions of putting wheels on our three story house and pulling it down the street in the dark of the night. I just smiled and said, oh, of course, to a man who must have never moved because he had no idea how impossible it would be to move once a month and keep it a secret.

Our crisis lines mostly evolved out of campus rape crisis lines that were operated, like our shelters and safe houses, mostly by dedicated volunteers. Sometimes a battered woman came in to shelter on Monday and by Thursday she was answering the crisis line.

Volunteers and an occasional paid shelter worker learned from shelters in neighboring counties and we began to work together in coalitions. Churches and synagogues were and still are, at the same time our worst enemies and our best friends. At CASA, where I work, the late Sister Margaret Freeman was our founder in 1977 and she was also a signer on the articles of incorporation for the Refuge Information Network later renamed the FL Coalition Against Domestic Violence. I can also remember a battered woman in our shelter with a strong faith and the minister in her church told her to go home and make dinner and give her batterer good sex and he would stop battering her. She did and he didn't and she was back in our shelter in a few weeks.

Our early state coalitions had no staff and now with the funding crisis, some of us are returning to operating mostly with volunteers. Even so in FL our coalition has sponsored an annual conference for at least 30 years sponsored by a different shelter every year. Working in coalition has been the basis of our strength. If you look around the country at the strongest, most influential states with the most funding, Texas, Florida and Pennsylvania, we have had strong coalitions since almost the inception of the second shelter. We knew that we would be stronger in our fight for our very existence and our fight to save women's lives if we worked together.

The definition of coalition is a combination or union; an alliance of factions or parties for some specific purpose. Those coalitions that have been the strongest truly understood that we did not necessarily have to be in perfect accord to work together for a shared specific purpose to save women's lives...all women's lives. Sometimes we had to agree to disagree in order for us to move forward in a common direction. Sometimes those disagreements were brutal and women walked away from the table and never returned. Sometimes whole programs left the arms of the coalition and never returned. We were not always kind to each other and especially not to those who stepped forward to lead.

Some disagreements became full blown divisions in a few states, especially around race and class issues; leadership of lesbians or government control of our message and mission. (Story about NCADV and turning back Federal \$\$ because couldn't say battered women or even mention lesbians). Some states failed to peacefully agree to work together with these intense national discussions and some coalitions split in two forever after intense dialogue and disagreement over fundamental issues. Some state coalitions split apart and that bitterness remains today. Some states still have no organized coalition and some coalitions split and came back together years later. The bottom line is that states with the most progressive laws, most funding and largest

programs for battered women have the strongest leadership of the strongest coalitions. Working in coalition is never easy but it remains the best way to accomplish many goals together. We find our strength in each other because we are certainly not going to find strength from the men who wanted to see us fail.

In FL, for instance, there are 42 domestic violence center members of FCADV and we have agreed not to go to Tallahassee, where our State government operates, separately for increased funding for any of our centers or for even a revision of a specific law without the full coalition's support and backing. It makes us very powerful with our legislature. When we want something we can organize hundreds of phone calls and emails from around the state until the legislature begs us to stop because we are clogging their lines! As a coalition that is organized and has the discipline of our collective, sometimes hard-won agreements, we are a powerful voice. FCADV now manages all of the state funding and most of the federal domestic violence funding. FCADV has the second largest contract with the state Department of Children and Families. When the state began privatizing its work, some of which I personally don't think SHOULD be privatized, FCADV was ready to step up and manage the contract for us for \$22 million. Mostly that has been a good move for us and makes us a powerful voice. Whenever there are discussions about children and families in FL, FCADV is at the table. We are at the table in small private planning meetings with the governor and major public meetings as well. It is a powerful place to be and we wouldn't be there if we had not worked in coalition. For Louisiana, can you collectively agree on an agenda that you can accomplish for the women of this state?

Lest you think everything is rosy in FL there ARE some down sides that I'll talk about.

Simultaneous with the beginnings of state coalitions, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence was organized. Many of us volunteered to represent our state as members of the NCADV Steering Committee. We met three times a year for a week at a time and we made decisions by consensus. Many others like me (when I was still working in Gainesville, FL) had to take vacation time to be able to represent our state at NCADV because our local Boards of Directors did not understand the importance of national work to our local programs. Many of our local Boards did not understand we were part of a movement. Many of us still don't understand the power and importance of our movement work nationally and even internationally.

The work of NCADV was to bring many voices to the table that was not always represented when a national voice began to emerge.

Women of Color TF
BFBW TF
Lesbian TF
Rural TF
Child Advocates TF
Jewish Women's TF

NCADV Conferences became so much more visibly diverse that I can remember that some straight white women were so uncomfortable at NCADV conferences because they did not feel the perks from their accustomed privilege of being white, heterosexual, urban, Christian. I overheard women talking about forming a married white women's Task Force!

Nationally, we made a decision to work on safety for women in intimate relationships as a legal issue. When I first trained police, we taught them to tell Joe or Jose or Yusuf to walk around the block or go spend the night with his mother. Most domestic violence was considered a misdemeanor and police had to witness the violence before they could arrest. Most batterers didn't call the police and invite them to watch them beat their wives. We worked in coalition to pass preferred and mandatory arrest laws and police learned about probable cause arrests. We passed laws that created civil protection orders in FL for battered women who did not want their abusers jailed and especially for women of color who did not trust the criminal legal system for obvious historically painful reasons.

...And for every law we passed, we dealt with the backlash. Mandatory arrest laws resulted in more women being arrested. The myth that battered women cowered in the corner while men beat them was confusing when women were strong and they fought back...sometimes physically. The police began to make dual arrests, leaving behind children that were picked up by the state, yet another way for a batterer to punish a woman! So we passed primary aggressor laws and trained police about the difference between aggressive injuries and defensive injuries. Sometimes that helped.

Batterers raced their victims to the courthouse for protection orders and the impatient judges rewarded them by awarding them dual protection orders upon request. We made dual orders illegal. Abusers could still apply for protection orders but they had to obtain them on their own merit instead of asking for a mutual protection order. We found funding to hire legal advocates to go to court with women and some of us were even able to hire real attorneys,

Our coalitions held lobby days in our state capitols and we learned how to advocate with the legislators. I remember the nervousness I felt the first time I went to Tallahassee and later to Washington, DC to meet with my legislators until I discovered that mostly I met with aids that were even younger than I was (MUCH younger in Washington) and knew little about domestic violence. I learned to couch the issues in law and order terms for conservative legislators.

We lobbied legislators for funding for state and national funding. FL was one of the first states to tack a fee on marriage licenses to fund domestic violence centers. At first that funding could only be used to serve women who were married or formerly married to their batterers so we went to the United Way for additional funds so we could serve women who were not married including lesbians and gay men. Later when we went for an increase in fees, legislators made us also tack a fee on divorces which we had opposed because we felt battered women paid divorce fees. We became a formidable force with legislators even though they still saw us as a "special interest" group. I've always wondered how we can still be called a special interest group when women represent over half the population. We rarely, if ever, hired paid lobbyists but we were a force to be reckoned with, nevertheless. We asked the governor's wife to invite the legislative spouses (mostly wives) to have lunch with us in the governor's mansion. When we couldn't get legislators to listen, we spoke to their wives and domestic violence legislation became their pillow talk at night. Even more effective!

On the national level since domestic violence was now considered a real crime in most states, our domestic violence shelters or centers as we call them, were eligible for

Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding. We passed national legislation for Federal Family Violence funding. Later we worked together and triumphantly passed the Violence Against Women Act or VAWA. The trade off for these relatively small pots of federal money was huge funding for law enforcement and the courts, street lighting for cities and other tangentially related funding. There was a proliferation of "victim advocates" who worked for the police, sheriff and city or district attorneys. We had to remember that their first allegiance was to the chief or the sheriff or the district or city attorney. When a police department victim advocate picked up a woman she had brought to our shelter a couple of days earlier and took her to the police department under the guise of needing additional information and the woman was arrested because the vehicle she escaped in had his tools in the trunk and she was charged with grand theft!

In the late 80's and early 90's we began to hear from battered women in prison. We needed to do something to help them too. Clemency work began around the country to advocate for the release of women who had defended their own lives or the lives of their children. We owe a great debt to Sue Osthoff and the BW Justice Project in Philadelphia. When the battered and formerly battered women's caucus started clemency work in FL we were not supported by our Coalition at first. We were, after all, no longer serving victims, they said, but perpetrators. Those of us who knew we could have ended up in prison ourselves persevered and reminded the coalition that we were not victims' rights organizations but a battered women's organization. While we worked in coalition with victim's rights groups, battered women were sometimes lethal in defending their own lives. More than 30 battered women have been freed under some form of clemency in FL as a result of our work beginning with Kimberly Soubielle.

In the mid 90's we began to look at domestic violence as a health issue. A few county health departments hired violence prevention staff and began to assess the effects of violence on women and children's health. This helped us to convince courts that violence affected children. Many courts had taken the attitude that unless the children were physically battered themselves, they were unaffected by the abuse they witnessed of their mothers. Under this theory judges sometimes even awarded custody to a batterer because he was the breadwinner and appeared more stable than a mom that had moved in and out trying to escape the abuse. (Talk about sitting across from the Judge and his award of custody to a batterer because he appeared more stable.) Simultaneously, the system began to become more aware of child abuse and we successfully convinced judges that children were affected by simply witnessing the violence. To our surprise mothers began to lose their children to the system because they had submitted the children to the risk of abuse and its concurrent health problems. Domestic violence advocates began to hear about mothers being charged with "failure to protect" their children.

As funding increased, shelters became more "legitimate." For some that meant becoming more like a social service or a mental health agency and battered women as advocates were replaced or paid less than staff who were therapists, clinicians and social workers. Formerly battered women were replaced by case managers and clinical directors. The addiction model seeped into our language and we talked about women who loved too much and co-dependency. We talked about treatment plans and women working the program. Some shelters did random drug testing of women in shelter and women were screened out if they said they'd had a couple of drinks in the past 24 hours. We made copious lists of legal drugs women said they were taking in our phone interviews and we kept a PDR (Physicians Desk Reference) or DSM IV to decide

whether she had mental health problems and should not be admitted. We told women they could not have a drink while they were in shelter because the children might be affected. Women could not contact their abusers while they were in shelter and they had to sign out when they left and tell us where they were going and when they were coming back. Sometimes we forced women to give up their jobs and we put them out if they failed to attend group. We told them when and where they could eat and when they had to sleep. We refused to shelter male children over 12. We set curfews and made rules like three strikes or three demerits or three write ups and you were out. Women called themselves inmates! We kept "do not admit lists" and branded women as shelter hoppers. We put out women who challenged us, disagreed with us or disobeyed us.

Some of us began to think more deeply about what we were doing in our shelters. We recognized the women we were serving were adults just like us. We adopted empowerment models and eliminated rules that we couldn't follow or feel good about enforcing ourselves. There were only three or four rules we absolutely had to have:

1. No violence
2. No illegal drugs in the shelter
3. No smoking (inside)
4. Maintain others' confidentiality

They boiled down to respecting us and others. We talked about the fact that the shelter belonged to the women and not the staff or volunteers who had their own homes. We encouraged women to work together and support each other and the shelter became place where women could safely make mistakes and try out new ways of communicating with each other. CASA's work with various outreach programs: ERT; Peacemakers; Substance Abuse; Mental Health; Community Law; Visitation Center; Legal Advocates; Outreach for elders and WOC; Police reports; clothesline project; thrift stores. At CASA we developed a Peacemakers program for children to teach them how to get along with each other, resolve their differences effectively and peacefully.

We are not DONE yet. We need to make more opportunities to have deep conversations with each other about what we envision for our future. Our world is more regulated and more complicated today. I think at least some of us are serving more challenging women in our shelters. Battered women like me don't need shelter any more because our abusers usually get arrested, We can apply for civil orders of protection, get help from legal advocates and go to support groups. The battered women we are serving in shelter today have significantly more addiction, poverty and mental health issues. How do we serve them best? How can we collaborate with local mental health and addiction programs to help battered women without disempowering them?

Some of our success happened because we made opportunities to get together in small groups around the country to set the national agenda. We did that because there were so few of us and no one told us we couldn't. We aren't doing that today. We need to think about leadership succession. Barbara Paradiso in Denver with the University of Colorado offers practically the only Master's Degree in domestic violence in the country. The mothers of our movement and those of us in this room who have been doing this work for 20 or 30 years are not getting younger. Some of us might actually like to retire from the stress of running shelters and other programs. Who will take our places? Will they be men and women with MBA's hired to run a non-profit business or will they be the

leaders of our future setting a feminist agenda? Will they have the passion and compassion to remember that battered women should be leading us and teaching us?

In the beginning I asked you can you collectively agree on an agenda for Louisiana that you can accomplish for and with the battered women of the state. Can you initiate that bigger dialogue with each other and those in depth discussions that will produce and agenda that will drive you forward?

Agreeing on an agenda means looking at the lessons we have learned from the past from Louisiana, FL and other states and noting that in coalition we do not necessarily have to agree on everything or work on everything all at once. We need to develop a process to recognize and honor our differences without splitting ourselves in two. Five years from now, 10 years from now, what will we be talking about, struggling with or celebrating? Whatever it is will it have empowering battered women at the heart of it? I hope so! I hope so! Will YOU make it so? I'd like you to take those raised fists and stand if you can and clasp hands with your neighbors in a promise that no matter how much we disagree, we will work together to come full circle to make this world safer for women and children. That IS the revolution we have talked about.