

Right then, I became a feminist. I didn't know what it was, but I knew somehow the treatment was never going to be the same, if you were a girl.

Great story
of becoming
aware of the
unfair treatment
of women.

Laura Waterman Wittstock

Laura Wittstock, 55, is president of Migizi Communications, a media production company. Migizi means "eagle" in the Ojibwe language. Her company offices are decorated with Indian paintings, Hmong needlework, photographs of Albert Einstein, and Japanese prints. Laura, wearing a T-shirt and slacks, relaxes behind her spartan desk.

Gaining
identity
through
mother
vs.
father

I come from the Seneca nation, which is part of the Iroquois Confederacy, and which is matrilineal still today. You gain your identity not from your father, but from your mother. So I had an unfair advantage over lots of other women, of never having to shed the father domination.

My mother was my role model. At the age of 63, she founded the San Francisco American Indian Center. This was during the relocation period when Indians were being seduced into cities with promises of jobs and training. They were beginning to die in those cities, and families wanted the bodies sent home, but there was no money. So my mother formed a women's sewing group, and they did what they knew how to do. They made beautiful things out of cloth and yarn, then sold them and paid to send the bodies back.

I first identified as a feminist in 1975. I had done an article called "Little White Dove"* about the groupie women who follow male Indian leaders around. Some of them actually were Indians, sad to say, chasing after these men. And a few years earlier, I had been asked to review the draft of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.** I felt really privileged to do that. I instantly recognized it as an important work. But I didn't really

* A reference to a country-western song in which ill-fated Indian lovers drown trying to reach one another.

** By the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (1973).

see the potential of women until I attended the International Women's Year conference in Mexico City in 1975.

One thing that hit me right between the eyes was, these women from other countries, women of color, thought that Indians had it soft. They didn't separate Indians from the "ugly Americans." We were considered pets of the "ugly Americans" because we lived in the fat country. And there we were in Mexico City, where there are Indian beggars on the street, Indian people starving.

Then I realized that many of these women were high officials in their countries. I was more or less a peasant, and these women were more or less the elite. For them to be talking about Indians in that way, I realized it was a political statement. The northern European women were very educated, they had written numerous books. They were extremely rude, extremely arrogant. Even in those early days, in 1975, the stratification of women was apparent.

But our major themes were very much in agreement: the more "civilization" that occurred, the more the deterioration of women. In earlier times, almost everywhere, the marketplace had been a place for women. But with industrialization, men were taught to drive the big trucks, men were taught agribusiness, and the women were subjugated. Women were made into the childbearers, the beasts of burden, and the prostitutes.

There were 10,000 women at that conference! And despite all the tensions, I recognized the tremendous potential. There actually was a great deal of accommodation that took place, a lot of eagerness to understand one another. In terms of an awakening, I realized then that you have to seek out ways to work with other women. It's not going to come naturally or easily. But the potential is there.

One practical thing that came out of that conference for me was, I never again had a secretary. All that stuff has nothing to do with efficient work. It's everything to do with prejudice and the willingness to enslave others. Unfortunately, as women took over men's roles they also took over men's prejudices, class distinctions like not typing and pretending not to know how to use a copier.

Thirteen years later, in April 1988, I went to the pro-choice rally in Washington, D.C. A million people walking is an intoxicating, rejuvenating experience. I saw all kinds of women there—Indian women, Asian women, Hispanics, European-Americans. It made

me realize that the pro-choice issue isn't only about a woman's right to choose. It's about women being allowed to be human, fighting the power of the elite to call the shots. At times I felt like we were almost angels, transcending the veil of control. Then at other times, I felt we were lab rats—thinking that we have something to express, but that nothing will really change.

Optimism / pessimism about pro-choice movement

We have got to do something about the racial question. Right now, the discussions I've been in, some women are saying, "I didn't cause your pain. I wasn't there when Columbus stepped on the first Indian's neck." On the other hand, women of color need to say what they need to say and they have to be heard. I think there's right on both sides.

There are plenty of women of color who are conservative, who would not share my views at all. But simply by virtue of having color we are manipulated by people in power. They say, "Oh look, we've got women of color and they think thus!" So the rest of us stand outside the window looking in.

The leadership of the national women's organizations has got to change color. They can't play the game of getting a few who have the skin color required, but whose philosophy is so close to that of the leadership that it's indistinguishable. They have got to get people up there who don't agree with them. I don't mean on choice. I mean on strategy.

I've also seen diversity within the European-American culture that isn't getting heard: rural women, older women, farm women. Poor women, those that are on welfare, those that have to struggle with issues like single parenting. Think about welfare people who have to spend hours in their day just maintaining their poverty, standing in line for this, filling out that, answering to the various authorities about your children, and so on. Being poor is a time-consuming job, and getting women in poverty involved in decision-making is very tough.

Some of my views have been considered too radical for native people, which is understandable. Native culture is conservative, that's one of the ironies we have to deal with. You don't have a society that has been around for a hundred thousand years without it being con-

Racial tension between white women European attitudes

Enthusiasm

women adopting when it's not their own

power + race

servative. And when something like feminism comes along, it has negative connotations to a people who are used to a thousand years not being a very long time.

The whole idea of individuals over groups is the idea of the dominant culture. In native communities, it's group over individual. So feminism is seen as a betrayal. But it's only a problem, it isn't an impossible barrier. It's a problem of, How do you work in the context of groups to advance women?

There's also what I call the cowboy mentality or the playboy mentality. That is, native groups have readily accepted, without knowing it, the male domination which comes from the external culture. Now we have to understand and restore that balance of men and women, because it is out of whack. *Natives accepting male dominated culture from external culture.*

For example, there's the treatment of lesbians in native culture. In the old days, homosexuals of both genders were celebrated throughout the native cultures. There's almost no record anywhere of them being persecuted in any way. But now they are outcasts in the community. It's bad enough to be a woman and be assertive, but to be a lesbian . . . So that's part of the playboy mentality that has turned Indian culture on its head. People that were once considered to have unusual abilities, once cherished by the group, are now being ostracized.

Feminism is very unpopular. To look through the eyes of women is considered abnormal. So in addition to being a minority as a female of color, to be a feminist is another way to be a minority. That's a burden that many women of color don't want to take on. Understandably. It's bad enough as things are, why make it worse?

Sara M. Evans

many women of color are reluctant to take part in feminist movement because they feel they are already ostracized enough.

At 48, Sara Evans is chair of the history department at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and the author of *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (1979). She describes herself as "southern, white, activist, feminist."

Feminism is seen as individualism in Native culture. Homosexuality is not accepted in Native culture. It is under attack from New England.

Mary Ziegenhagen

Mary Ziegenhagen was out of the United States during most of the 1960s as a Peace Corps volunteer and as the wife of the Peace Corps director in Samoa. She returned to the country in 1970 to find the women's movement in full swing. She was an early co-chair of the Minnesota Women's Political Caucus, started a successful string of suburban newspapers from the basement of her home, and later was the first woman editorial writer for the Minneapolis Star. She is 55.

I remember the moment when I changed my mind on abortion. In my medical-records training, and in my work in hospitals, and in my own Catholic background, I had considered abortion a grievous sin. Truly murder. When I was 19, I had quit a job at a hospital because they did therapeutic abortions. I mean, it required three or five doctors' approval and all kinds of medical screening—but they did do them. I quit that job because I couldn't be part of that. It made me physically ill.

Then later, when we were back from Samoa and I was pregnant with our second child, I read in the *Washington Post* a really good, fascinating, long story of four women who had found a way to get illegal abortions and who wound up in the hospital with real injuries and infections. I remember those women's stories, which I read when I was pregnant, as being profoundly moving. It convinced me that we had to get them into hospitals . . . *(Her voice remembers.)* I remember what I was wearing the day that happened, I remember what the light in the room was like . . .

It could be that my feminist consciousness started then. At that

time I was extremely interested in what women were doing in the United States, but I'd been out of the country for most of the '60s. I came back, and I was really confused by it. I was interested in what these women were doing, but also frightened by it.

At that time, probably one of the most profound experiences I had was . . . We were new in our house, a new family, just back from overseas. I was very much in the culture of the early '60s. I had on a polyester dress, and I sprayed my hair and teased it. And my sister, who is 10 years younger and was in college, came over with four or five friends to see me.

They wanted to see our house, they wanted to talk about Samoa—they were interested especially in the sexual habits of Samoa. *(Laughs.)* I remember I didn't like them at all. They had long scraggly hair and they wore army boots and they sat on the floor. They didn't use the furniture, which really bothered me. I thought they ought to sit up on chairs.

And then they said "fuck." They said it a lot. I thought, "Who are these terrible people?"—although I thought they were doing really interesting work. They were setting up a health directory of some kind. The next morning, my sister said, "Wasn't that fun last night?" And I said, "I thought it was just awful. Who are these awful people?" My sister and I had a frank talk, with my saying, "Well, it's important to be civilized, it's important to be a lady," and she just took me on.

I realized that if I were in another country, in the Peace Corps, I would be saying, "How curious that the younger women dress differently from their mothers, and talk differently, and their behavior is so changed. What is that about?" I would be much more analytical about it.

Arvonne Fraser* helped me understand what it was all about. There was a story in the Minneapolis paper about her getting together with a group of congressional wives to talk about "this woman thing." I wrote her a letter and said I thought that was so interesting, and I certainly hoped she was including *my* congressman's wife in her group. Arvonne wrote back and said that what she found useful was women, *right* in their own neighborhoods, just getting together with some others. Saying, "Why not come over and we'll talk about this women's thing?" She said, "If you do it, I'll come and be part of it."

So I did. I got a group of women together—in June or July of

* A founder of the Women's Equity Action League and wife of Congressman Donald M. Fraser. Her story begins on page 75.

1971, I think. I was in a brand new neighborhood in the suburbs, everybody was in brand new houses and most of us were first-time occupants. Most of us had young kids, we had created a baby-sitting cooperative. Just so we could somehow get some time for ourselves. And it was a way to get to know people.

Out of all that, I found a couple of others who were interested. We said, "Gee, we've got to tell more people." We set up a meeting over at the little Lutheran church out here, they seemed to have interesting things going on there. So I asked, "Could we use your hall for something we'll call 'Mother's Morning Out?'" They said yes. So then we went to the Presbyterian church and asked, "Could we have a little seminar for mothers and women? We'll call it 'Women Awakening.'" Yes, sure.

We'd take a coffeepot, and we'd put something in the church newsletter, and we probably had some political lists or something. There was some way we got people to know about it, although there wasn't any community newspaper then. But there was a woman reporter on the county paper, and the first story to appear there about the women's movement was my being interviewed. The headline read, "Mary Ziegenhagen Spearheads Women's Movement in Dakota County." (Laughs.)

We had consciousness-raising groups. Various ones got started. I'm not sure I stuck with one very long, there were all kinds of odd little dynamics. I remember one in St. Paul where three of the women would always knit. They would never make eye contact, and that was uncomfortable.

In my own neighborhood, out in the suburbs, there were a couple of ongoing ones. But usually they only lasted five or six times. Then women would more or less decide what they were going to do. Some of them got divorces, some of them went to college, some of them had another baby, some of them ran for school board. They didn't need much. People were ready to move, and all they needed was any teeny little group that would say, "Good for you, go do it."

We read books. We read *Sisterhood Is Powerful*. And I ran off all kinds of copies of "The Politics of Housework,"* and Gloria Steinem essays. That was the format I used most often—to have lots of stuff to hand out that were quick reads that would get people thinking. There

* An essay by Pat Mainardi in *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (1970), Robin Morgan, compiler.

women using groups for encouragement

wasn't anything like year-long book groups or anything. I'm not sure we really knew enough about supporting each other. It was a time when women were very much alone.

It was about this same time that Koryne Horbal* had these little panels of women, called the DFL Women's Caucus or something. I went along on those. I remember loving the work because I had generated a talk about the history of women in America. Koryne, when she introduced us, would say, "Now, this isn't any of that women's liberation stuff. We're just talking about women in the DFL. We're just talking about needing our share."

I'd think, "Why does she say this isn't that women's liberation stuff?" This is that women's liberation stuff. As I think about it, at that stage, there were enough women being safe that I sort of pushed the boundaries a little. I remember once being on television, talking about the Women's Political Caucus, and this charming afternoon interview guy said, "Why, you don't look like one of those women's libbers." And I smiled proudly and said, "Oh, but I am." I had little Mark along, this little freckle-faced kid along, so I was purposely trying to say that traditional women in traditional roles have a place in this movement too.

conservative white middle class women making small yet significant change

white associated w/ women's liberation even when they actually were?

Rose Chaltry-Minar

Rose Chaltry-Minar is 50, a legal secretary. She is curled up on her sofa, wearing a hot pink T-shirt and white painter's pants, nursing a beer. She's a founder of West Side Women, a neighborhood pro-choice group, as well as being active in Women Against Military Madness and president of her neighborhood time-watch group.

I became a feminist when I was living in the bush in Canada, 200 miles north of Thunder Bay. The only way to get there is by water or by air, there aren't any roads.

I had been corresponding with a man who built a log cabin there.

* State Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Party chairwoman and a founder of the DFL Feminist Caucus. Her story begins on page 222.

lence, the drugs, it's very scary. But at the same time, I believe this stream of awareness is happening among people. It's like the women who used to sit and make quilts while the men were out shooting people and animals. The women just continuing, stitch after stitch . . . and I think that's still going on.

Carol M. Robertshaw

Carol Robertshaw's voice is familiar to many radio listeners in the Twin Cities, not only by the distinctive tone but because hers was one of the few female voices heard on the radio for many years. In the early 1970s, she had a show on the university station, KUOM: five minutes of women's news, twice a week. Later she had a daily one-hour show interviewing women, "Equal Voice." She is 44.

I didn't become a feminist until about a year after my marriage. Up until then I did not hold women in high regard. I knew that I was equal to any man, but I didn't think all women were. I thought most other women were empty-headed, only interested in having kids, not capable of . . . They tended to be manipulative, to live vicariously. I wanted to identify with men because it seemed they got a better shake in life. I did not want to be thought of as an insignificant human being. I wanted men to think I was more like *them* than like those . . . (heavy sarcasm) . . . women.

In 1971, my husband and I had a roommate who was a feminist. Actually I thought it was kind of a silly thing to be involved in. At that time I did not take it seriously, I really pooh-poohed it. But it was during that time for some reason I read *The Female Eunuch*.^{*} That was the first time it ever occurred to me . . . I wasn't alone. I honestly can't remember what it was in that book that triggered this recognition, that I had really cut myself off from half the population by ignoring and devaluing women.

From that experience I began to become involved with some con-

^{*} By Germaine Greer (1970).

sciousness-raising groups. I became involved with Women's Clearinghouse, which was doing a women's news broadcast on the university's radio station. I found out that indeed the other half of the world had a great deal to offer me.

Do you remember feeling part of a larger movement?

Oh, yes, very much so. At that time there was a huge march for abortion rights. College women, older women, women from—I don't know where they all came from. I can remember feeling the power of this mass movement as we marched down Summit Avenue toward the capitol. I can remember walking past the St. Paul cathedral, and of course I'd been raised Catholic, so (laughs) . . . this would be a significant moment for me.

I also remember the first Take Back the Night march^{*} here in 1979. How powerful I felt. Just the idea that we could walk right down the middle of the red-light district, down Hennepin Avenue, and just glare into these men's eyes. Just feel so—I can only think of negative emotions. A sense of "getting back" at them, or spiting them. That to me was really cathartic, to be able to say, "We are powerful," and there isn't a damn thing you guys can do about it."

I was active in Women's Clearinghouse, a radical feminist organization tied to the leftist group in the Twin Cities, Bread and Roses. But I never totally identified with them. They were too radical. They defined themselves as a collective, but it was not a very effective structure. After a time, I became Women's Clearinghouse. I had gotten a student-announcer position at KUOM, and the collective had more or less fallen apart. I still believed in the notion of women's news, so I continued to do it.

It was a women's newscast twice a week, a five-minute newscast. We felt that the broadcast industry at that time was not representing this burgeoning women's movement. By and large, if the media dealt with it at all, they dealt with it in one of two ways. Either as silly little bra-burning "libbers," or as having something to do with the sexual revolution—which they took much more seriously because mostly they were men. (Laughs.)

There were few models for me. I do remember seeing the first female anchor on local TV. She was anchoring a noontime newscast. I

^{*} An annual march to protest violence against women.

can remember the first time I saw that . . . and it was such a powerful image. What that did to me personally . . .

I think one of the largest disservices that the media have done is to create a situation where issues always have to have a "pro" and a "con." The result has been that the women's movement, in order to get the word out, has had to define the world in those terms, too. To a certain extent, of course, we have a dualistic world. There are men, and there are women. And that was at the heart of the movement, the idea that we divided ourselves in that fashion. So it was "us" against "them," to a certain degree. *Dividing, men vs. women etc. as*

I've always had difficulty with that. I think the biggest disservice the women's movement did to women was to foster that polarization. Was to fail to get at the core and find the common ground. To recognize that the common ground is children. Or motherhood. I feel that now. I don't think I felt it before because I wasn't a mother. Nobody in the women's movement early on ever told me that motherhood could be such a positive thing. *Motherhood viewed negatively. Don't*

I don't know if there's a women's movement left now. It's hard to find these days. The movement pointed out certain needs, and those needs began to be addressed. They began to be taken seriously. As a result, certain agencies were created, certain institutions were created. That has resulted in a kind of falling out of popular culture of the women's movement.

The women who identified with feminism continue to be involved, but I don't see the kind of passion that was part of the movement in the '70s. I miss the excitement, the sheer momentum of people getting together and doing mass actions . . . I'm real sad that's gone. That was so powerful.

More examples of power drawn from unity among women.