

**The Scholar and The Feminist XIX**  
**Women as Change Makers:**  
**Building and Using Political Power**  
**Saturday, April 24, 1993**

**Afternoon Panel:**

**16. The Politics of Direct Action**

?: \*\*\* and the other was to be a mother. And I really tried to follow those two paths. \*\*\* most of my teenage years, I got into trouble, and you know, I'm still sort of fighting with those two contradictions \*\*\*. I just would like my daughter, who's now 8, and all her friends to have a few more interesting choices than that. \*\*\*

*(Music and tap dancing here.)*

**Sarah Safford:** Okay, so this demonstration is to give you a little flavor of Carnival Knowledge, which has always approached reproductive rights and sexuality issues from the humorous, kind of fun, kind of standpoint. This is one of our new \*\*\*

And so you want to talk a little bit about that as a strategy. Why we chose carnival as a medium to explore that, as a way of trying to draw people into it who might otherwise be turned off to issues like abortion, as a way of trying to invite them in, attract their attention, show them some other ways of looking at it possibly. Kind of family entertainment is what we try. And carnivals in America, I mean, there's a wonderful history of gypsy travellers all through Europe, but in America it's been very much church bazaars and, you know, out there on the street at community functions and there's the bake sale part of it, raising money. Carnival Knowledge would sell \*\*\* boppers and hand-painted diaphragm boxes. So...

And here are a few slides of some of the events we did. [This was a] big, big carnival which was called "Bizarre Conceptions," and it was at the New School of Social Research and it was on the day of a huge international woman's year march in the early '80s, '81, I think. So the march sort of ended at the New School. So...That was part of our early success as a \*\*\* joining up with organizations like the planning committee for that march and \*\*\*This was...it was a real carnival for the family with gangs who bought tickets and played. This was the Working Woman's Wheel of Misfortune, without economic injustices on the job. This is the Jerry Falwell Kissing Booth. With Jerry Falwell? It was back then, way back then.

These are the Get to Know Your Right-to-Life Legislature and it's hard to see, but each of the legislators had two blue balls and you squeeze them and it would blow...you know, those New Year's things that shoot out...? \*\*\* A woman named Susan Frazer coined that phrase. \*\*\* at what stage these people came from so you knew who your enemies were and then there was a chance to write letters.

This was Feminist Fashion.

Then this was a performance called The Medicine Show, about different forms of \*\*\*. \*\*\* how to use different methods of birth control and it involved a group of --what were they, 12-year-olds, or so? -- We were doing workshops with them doing tap dancing and being able to talk about sex in an open, fun way. There's nursery rhymes and we wrote them and tap danced and talking about sex.

This is out on the street. We set up a Facts of Life Peep Show and [there] was a whole, you know, turning, cranking thing with all sorts of things about the Human Life Amendment. This was in 1984 and inside the peep show you saw Ronald Reagan as a pregnant woman because life would be very different if our major politicians were women.

And this, we went out to Coney Island and we had people fill out questionnaires about reproductive rights issues and we drew their portraits for free. Very popular.

This is at the Second Coming, which was the next big event. There was a festival about trying to define a feminist pornography. \*\*\* and there was a lot of different performance events where they worked with a group of porn stars.

This is a saxophone stripper. She had a beautiful saxophone painted on her naked body in glitter and she went into the audience and had them play her. And based on how people would touch her she would make the appropriate noises. Very funny.

\*\*\* Here was a living room and on the furniture was written a story about two women and a man who met at a house, strangers, they came in from rain storm at the beach, and what they did in front of the fireplace. It's sort of like if furniture could talk it would tell the stories of what events took place. And inside this room you see a t.v. set out there and we showed pornographic videos that artists made, feminist artists, pornography.

This was another piece. One of those plastic blow up dolls that you can get on 42nd Street with the mouth cut up and made with a pink shower curtain. When she was lying on the couch it looked like a plastic blow up doll that was masterbating and there was a fan underneath that would blow her up and a giant penis would emerge. And it was sort of like women taking over sort of 42nd Street \*\*\* and this woman's fantasy. There's the woman in the back and so there's text talking about her sexual fantasies.

I think that's it for \*\*\* keep missing some of the slides. But there were many, many...there were over a hundred artists doing pieces in the Second Coming and quite a number of people \*\*\* first birth control \*\*\*

**Q:** When was the Second Coming?

**?:** When? A long time ago. 1983.



Q: \*\*\*

?: Well, we missed pro-choice \*\*\*. What sort of happened...tell a little bit more about the history because \*\*\*. The first event I said that we were doing was working with \*\*\* reproductive rights organizations and we had a lot of support and broad involvement \*\*\*. And then the street fair in Boston there was still a lot of that energy.

The Second Coming, we really did \*\*\* organization and we got some funding from \*\*\* to do this one specific project and as a group of 10 to 15 \*\*\* we worked for a year. But because we didn't have a larger support base, it was just a lot of work and after that event people were just completely burnt out. And it's a lot of \*\*\* some feminists who thought this was not politically correct, some of this stuff is not right, it was family-oriented. So that started a period where nothing happened for a few years. And we tried to sort of get back together on a smaller level, some of us \*\*\*. And we did a few Christmas fairs, selling Christmas cards that were safe sex messages \*\*\* reproductive rights and just didn't get the same kind of energy going. So with Ms. Pro-choice I think what we tried to do is really get back to reaching out into other organizations and trying to get involvement from NARAL, from Planned Parenthood. So far \*\*\*. No concrete interest \*\*\*

You know, one of the things is it's specifically reproductive rights and sexuality issues and how we never \*\*\*.

**Prof. Natalie Kampen:** Maybe at that point we should move to Women's \*\*\* and come back to the larger issue that you both were talking about before we got started, about our tendency to talk only about the successes and not about the difficulties and even some of the failures and the need that we have in this kind of relatively protected environment to talk about that. \*\*\*

?: First, I want to start I guess, by talking about a little bit of the history of the work that I've done around the city with relation to direct national campaigns and other issues. I was the staff person and one of the co-founders of the Reproductive Rights Coalition and we were very active in 1988, 1989, and 1990. We came together particularly around a response in New York City to the pending Webster decision, the case before the Supreme Court. We had done a number of activities. We met on an incredibly regular basis and we did a number of large direct action activities. And as a matter of fact the committee -- we must of had like 20 committees because there were hundreds of women who were participating in the coalition -- and the direct action committee evolved into the Women's Health Action and the mobilization group. So we had a really strong component of folks who were clear and who were dedicated to the issues of direct action as a component of any kind of organizing you would do around reproductive rights issues.

My particular task that I was charged with and the issues that I brought to the table were the fact that so many of the groups around the country and throughout the city who were working on reproductive rights issues, were almost entirely White women.

And the people who were most impacted by what was happening at the Supreme Court at the local, federal, and state level were women of color or working class White women, none of whom for some reason seemed to be involved in the memberships of these organizations, even when they were "really grassroots settings," not the NARAL or NOW kind of memberships.

And it was a really interesting time, I met a lot of really wonderful women who I continue to work with on a lot of issues, but I will say that people still are not clear about issues of race, class, and gender. So after about a year and a half of struggle, and it really was intense struggle, I just threw up my hands and said, "Fuck it. I'll go back to my own community and do what I know is really important," like trying to keep St. Luke's Hospital open and providing services to women of color in that community.

So it was really interesting, but I also recognized that one thing that is different I think than communities of color who utilize direct action strategies and more mainstream groupings of White folks, whether it's men or women, is that often times strategies are not based and rooted in what a local community's struggle is. And it makes a lot of difference to people, to the quality of their lives, and the nature of the work they do, that they can see a direct cause and effect relationship between the direct action campaign that you're engaged in and the issues that they have to deal with on a day to day basis.

And I found that, for instance, I organized two big huge demonstrations that we did around the Webster decision that, you know, even though I live and work on a daily basis in a community of color I could not make the connections for folks as to why they needed to come from their communities, down to Union Square Park or down to Foley Square to participate in those actions when we had our own struggles going on in our own hospitals and in our own community clinics here. And I tried to bridge those and have those discussions with folks and people were really caught up in the euphoria of being involved in direct action. And when you're on a roll, and we were certainly on a role in '89 and '90, people really get charged and electrified by participating in these mass actions and somehow they can still look around the room and see that just about everyone in the room is White and not have a problem with that or just about everyone in the room somewhat gets paid to come and deal with some of these issues and they don't have a problem with that. Although I did really, really enjoy the work that we did, but there was a really fundamental component of it that was missing; that the women really whose lives were hanging in a balance around Webster, if a fraction of them had participated we would have had hundreds of thousands of women in the streets as opposed to 10,000. Ten thousand is great. I'm not complaining. 10,000 was great, but I just would have liked to have seen it be a more ephemeral experience for a lot of women in this city whose lives were really hanging in a balance. So part of it is how do you make the connections to people's lives in terms of what you decide what your actions are? Why do you decide to engage in these direct action strategies?

On a more local level I'm the co-founder of a group called West Harlem Environmental Action. And West Harlem, for those of you who don't know, includes the neighborhood that we're sitting in right now. It's the western portion of Harlem, that is everything from Morningside Avenue over to the Hudson River from 100th Street to 155th Street. And while Columbia likes to carve out this place called Morningside Heights, it is in fact on anybody else's map, we're sitting in the middle of Harlem. So we deal with issues, particularly issues of the citing of environmentally hazardous facilities in our community. [There is] a preponderance of the citing of those facilities in our community predominantly because the community is a majority of people of color and majority of poor working class. This is a phenomenon that has been identified and documented and analyzed and researched all over the country; it is a phenomenon that we identify as environmental racism.

And we began to do a lot of work around those issues. There's [the] North River Sewage Treatment Plant, which I'm sure many of you have passed on the West Side Highway. If you don't know what that big monstrosity is, it's a sewage treatment facility that treats 170 million to 200 million gallons of raw sewage everyday from the entire West Side of Manhattan. And it comes through our community. It has created a tremendous air pollution problem for the people who live in West Harlem because it sits right across the street on the other side of Riverside Drive from where we live.

We engaged in a number of activities over the years. The struggle actually has been going on since 1968 in a very formidable way in the community. I became a part of a kind of second or third wave of activism in the community in 1986. We attended hosts of meetings, we dealt with the various city agencies, the state agencies, the federal agencies, trying to negotiate a relationship between these agencies and the community where there was a general level of mutual respect for the rights of the people who live in this community. We gained a lot in that the rec center...but in 1986, '87, '88 it was as if these people had no idea what they were talking about. We were a community that for the most part did not exist as far as city government under Ed Koch was concerned. And while we would be smelling the effects of 170 to 200 million gallons of raw sewage a day, everyday, all day, 365 days a year, the city administration told us that in fact there was no problem with the North River Sewage Plant, and in fact, people were making it up. It was really a figment of our imagination. And, you know, if you've ever seen the facility you know that it's kind of hard to image something that's half a mile long \*\*\*.

That is one of several facilities that are in our community. So we went with the normal process that many communities go through. We engaged our community board, half of the members live in West Harlem and have been active around this issue for 25 years. We engaged some local elected officials, we dealt with the various bureaucracies, and we engaged in about two and half years worth of pro-active deliberation, the end result of which was that we were making it up, which was what people told us.

And then David Dinkins was elected mayor and while the mayor certainly has a

tremendous number of short-comings, the one positive thing he had going for him was that he was a resident of West Harlem. And his political career started as a grassroots community activist in West Harlem. And he was out in the streets in '68 protesting the citing of that facility in our community. So we knew he was one advocate and in all the city government we had one.

And he was very responsive and got the city administration to be very responsive, but they still wanted to talk you to death and they wanted to talk about, "Let's analyze this. Let's do research studies. Oh, but the city budget is in such a period of retrenchment that we don't really have the money to do the kind of quantitative research that we would need to do to find out what the impact of these facilities are on you. We acknowledge that it's a problem, but, sorry, there's nothing we can do about it right now."

So we decided after this tremendous number of years of struggle around this that we needed to engage in some direct action strategies to broaden the discourse beyond City Hall and the West Harlem community, but to make it more of a city-wide issue. And we did a demonstration on Martin Luther King's birthday in 1988 where we blocked traffic on the West Side Highway and stopped traffic from coming down or up the highway and stopped people from getting off and coming down Riverside Drive to get downtown. And I have never seen more angry White commuters in my entire life. I mean these people... One woman actually tried to drive...to knock me down in a Jaguar which would have made for an interesting picture, but there were a whole bunch of people out there so she was in the wrong neighborhood to be acting arrogant. But, you know, we tried just to make the point to people that every day they drive through our community for commuting purposes, they create more pollution that hangs over the community where I live, and they never even stop to acknowledge that there are people who live in that community and that we're more than a transit thoroughway.

And we got a tremendous amount of attention about that and it happened to be on the same day...there was a Day of Outrage activity going on. There was a demonstration by 1199 downtown, I guess in honor of Martin Luther King's birthday, for civil rights and social justice. And it just wound up being a day of mass activity among working class people and people of color in the city. And our activity was from 6:00 to 8:00 in the morning, so we were kind of like the first event, the kick off, and people heard about it on the news all day. It was real interesting.

It had some real interesting dynamics. One of which was in the morning there was an ice storm and so all the streets were covered with this sheet of ice and we had all these senior citizens out there with us who lived in the community and we had to kind of tip-toe about a half a mile up to the point of Riverside Drive to block the traffic. And people got soaked and drenched and then we came back into the community center where we had been meeting. By the time we got back, the folks who had been arrested had been released and given desk tickets. But Vernon Mason and a number of other people, all of a sudden had materialized and shown up at the point where we were

coming back, wanting to know if we needed any help. And the amazing thing about this is that Vernon Mason lives on 145th Street and Broadway, exactly 1000 feet from the North River Sewage Treatment Plant, and at no point did he ever think that it was perhaps necessary to give this community some support and be involved in the activity. Timothy Mitchell showed up, I mean, you know, Al Sharpton sent us a telegram. Everybody and their mother was all of the sudden concerned about what was happening in the community. And it was really a very interesting dynamic.

And I started to think, I said, "This is why people get so caught up in direct action as a strategy," because all of a sudden you get all this media attention and all this media focus and it's very easy for you to get side-tracked from the mission and the issues that you originally came together to address. So we, at that point, it became really clear. And I just have this thing about Al Sharpton, I really don't like him. So I wanted to make sure that he would not get caught up in side-tracking the issue and the issue had been going on for at that point 26 years with no resolution. So that we would use direct action as a control strategy only at the point where there was absolutely no other way that we would be able to negotiate with the city or the state or the federal government, some of the mitigation measures that the community desired.

The other interesting thing that happened: When we decided to implement direct action strategies all of the White elected officials who had been actually quite supportive of the community, decided that they no longer wanted to have anything to do with the community coalition and it coming together because it was obvious that we had decided that we weren't going to negotiate anymore; that we were going to take it to the streets and we were going to negotiate from that point and not from the position of weakness that we had been in prior. And when we decided to make those decisions for ourselves, a lot of people who had been supportive kind of disappeared or, you know, would say that, "Well, you know, these folks can't be controlled, we can't tell them what to do anymore, we can't direct their strategies so we don't want to be part of what they do." Which kind of sharpened the contradictions and the focus of what we needed to do.

We did a number of other demonstrations over a period of time. We also at the same time really stepped up our focus on issues of public policy, advocacy, and really getting the community involved in strategic places of who makes policy and who makes decisions in New York City whether it's in the Planning Board or the Planning Commission or whether it's at different commissioner levels in city government. And it's amazing when I think about it now, but a lot of people who were founding members of that coalition now are actually deputy commissioners and commissioners of agencies and their political growth started in that community struggle. But we made a conscientious decision that we should be in positions where those decisions are being made about people's lives; that we should be in those positions.

And so we have done that, but we continue to do direct action when we feel it is necessary. And it's probably going to become necessary again on the 27th of May



when the governor comes to our community to do the ribbon cutting to open the River Banks State Park, which is a state park on top of the North River Sewage Treatment Plant. And I'm sure I don't have to describe to this group what an absolutely insidious concept a state park is on top of a sewage treatment plant that has never operated properly. The state park is going to open on the 27th of May and in my very not so subtle way I keep telling every group in the community that I talk to that we need to seriously focus on how we are going to beat the governor on the 27th of May. Now I'm not telling people what they should do, I'm just getting them prepared for the fact that we need to do something and that something is not stand out there and take pictures with Mario Cuomo, but to let him know that we are not happy about what has happened in our community.

So what we have done in terms of direct action is made it an integral proponent of the community organizing that we do, but to use it sparingly, at those strategic points when it really makes a difference of having your community in the streets as opposed to having the community at the Planning Board. And you really have to be conscientious about when those places are and strategically when those places are, particularly when you don't have a whole lot of people. I think the difference between what happens in our community and in perhaps all of us who work around reproductive rights issues is that it's easy for some reason...you know, we have been struck by this blow, this assault to our bodily integrity and our rights as women, and so we really come out and respond to issues of reproductive rights. But when they tried to close down St. Luke's Hospital and remove all the neonatal and post-natal and women's obstetrics units and women and babies' hospital, we could barely get 50 people out to talk about that. We talked to NARAL, we made it an issue for the whole reproductive rights coalition, but people could not see the relationship between an assault on reproductive rights at the federal level and the taking away of women's basic rights to healthcare and health services on a most local level. And if we can't be clear about the assaults that women face everyday in their community space, every day, then we don't need to be out here organizing around the big picture because we're losing on the local level every day.

And I think that was one of the lessons that I've learned from Webster [and from] the level of politicization that went on in this country around the Webster decision, it was kind of like this bell weather experience, for the reproductive rights movement that we're at the nth degree here. We have to do something. But all along on a local level the elimination of rights was happening every day, it continues to happen every day and so we have to make sure that we stay focused on what's happening to people where they live, in the communities where they live, in the communities where they're based. That they come or they come home to a demonstration at Foley Square and then they come back and they need to go to the hospital the following few days and there's no longer a hospital there. You know, that has a lot more to do with their daily lives than whatever demonstration we did at Foley Square, at Union Square.

So I try to make that connection for folks because there's got to be a real broad based concept of rights, of social justice, of social justice, of human rights and they really



start at the most local level to the international level. And we have to be clear about what all those levels are and bring local communities into processes where they can probe what happens to their own community, thereby they can control what happens in other venues of their life. So that's in a nut shell kind of the work that I'm engaged in.

?: Okay, Hope?

?: I guess it's my turn.

?: I just wanted to say, this is the t-shirt \*\*\*. I believe that I have a box in my old office at the Center for Constitutional Rights.

?: Lynn also has t-shirts like that and they have black on them.

?: And the whole concept was Asian women, Latina women, English speaking women, you know, that we were talking about the rights of all women, that language should not be a barrier to how we communicate with each other. I actually love, love, love this t-shirt. I really, really love this t-shirt.

?: Do you have more of them?

?: I believe there are more under my old desk at CCR. \*\*\*

Q: What time on May 27th, do you know?

?: When is the governor coming? I don't know yet.

Q: We can reach you at...?

?: At 281-0711.

?: **Women's Health Action Mobilization (WHAM):** Okay. I haven't really...Okay, I'm going to start from the beginning with a little bit of history with what Bernice was saying. WHAM evolved out of the direct action committee for the Reproductive Rights Coalition in 1989 along with members of ACT-UP who were looking to get more involved in -- women from ACT-UP specifically -- who were looking to get more involved with reproductive rights which was not ACT-UP's focus at all so they sort of drifted away from that and looked to the activist-oriented elsewhere.

WHAM's real initial theory, I mean, WHAM's mission statement is very short and all it says is that WHAM is a direct action that's committed to demanding, defending, and securing absolute reproductive freedom and a quality healthcare for all women. And WHAM's base of operations is very much specific to healthcare issues and reproductive rights issues, which of course fall under health.

But the problem that we've been having and you're talking about both successes and

failures, WHAM first came on the map, so to speak, in 1989 with ACT-UP at the Stop the Church action, which \*\* about 5000 people opposing the Catholic Church's approach to both AIDS and to reproductive rights. That particular event became rather infamous in terms of direct action history to the point where it was discussed by George Bush in a presidential debate, which nobody could possibly comprehend, like it was beyond everyone's belief that that kind of far reaching element could happen. He was thoroughly outraged, he thought it was horrendous, but hey...

But what WHAM has also done is following stuff like that WHAM began getting involved with clinics in New York City. WHAM's main and continual source of action on a week to week basis is that every Saturday morning at 5 clinics in New York, two in Manhattan, two in Brooklyn, and one in Queens, WHAM escorts women into clinics past anti-choice demonstrators who are at clinics all over the city every Sunday [sic] morning. We're not clinic blockaders. I was explaining this to somebody earlier today and there seems to be some question, what is the difference between clinic escorting and clinic defense? Clinic escorting is a week to week thing that you do that has nothing to do with the clinic being blockaded. The clinic is not under attack by blockaders, they are being picketed by people who yell things at the women who walk in. They're in a pen that's kept by the police, they're not in danger of closing the clinic down. And what WHAM does, it has 4 to 5 people, sometimes 6 sometimes a little more, in vests, identifying themselves as clinic escorts and walking women into the clinic passed the demonstrators to divert the attention of the demonstrators onto them. So the demonstrators will yell at me instead of the woman I'm walking in with or I can divert her attention away from them and talk to her to keep her attention on me so she doesn't have to listen to them. That's one thing that WHAM has been involved with continually since then and still does it today. Matter of fact, [we'll be there] tomorrow morning.

Clinic defense is much more along the line of when you're dealing with a lock and block situation and someone from Operation Rescue has locked themselves to a clinic door and we need to wrench them free from it. That's a much more violent, kind of difficult, situation.

WHAM has had a problem, I think, in being very aborto-centric, which is a problem because we definitely have far-reaching interests and interests that reach far beyond that. Women's health, as far as we're concerned surrounds not only the right to have an abortion, but to have access to an abortion when you want one and a hospital when you need one so that your doctor can tell you you can have one if you want to. It has to do also with breast cancer, with the fact that breast cancer is a growing huge epidemic, continually a problem that gets almost no medical attention.

Also now as things move on we've also started evolving and this has been a slow process because we realized, I think it was like a year ago around the time of the first Chain of Fools action... Does anybody know...? Life Chain, which is this group of supposedly peaceful -- yes, they're peaceful, but they're annoying -- right-to-life people

who stand lined up in a cross form down 5th Avenue with signs that say "Abortion Kills Children," on the back of the sign they have -- they each get these signs for a buck -- and on the back it says what to do to deal with us. Have you ever seen this? It says on the back, "Don't speak to them. Do not meet their eyes." They're afraid we'll hypnotize them. very frightening. So WHAM organized a large 5000-person counter-demonstration in '91 and that was the first thing I ever went to, first WHAM thing I'd ever gone to, first activist-oriented thing I'd ever done, and I was really shocked by how much fun I had. I said, "Wow, this is great. I could do this every day."

So I was like, "Alright," I went to a WHAM meeting, we sat down \*\*\* and I was like amazed about the amount of information that's imparted in a direct action situation where you have people working on many, many different things. And WHAM was realizing at that time that we were abortio-centric and that we needed to get involved in things that had to do with other women's health issues because we were a women's health organization and it was a problem. And in '92 when Life Chain came back to New York again this past October, I organized the Chain of Fools demonstration sort of really personally because it made me feel really good about having become heavily involved with WHAM over the course of that year and having it really mean something to me to go back to where I had started to see how far I had come personally in terms of my own activism. And I realized that it was a great thing and it is still a great thing, but it is also...people love to go out and demonstrate and very few people love to come and really sit down and do the necessary work that's involved in getting people rights, getting people access, getting people interested, and getting people what they deserve and what they need.

So WHAM's now sort of branching. We have a thing called the Herbally Aroused Gynecological Squad, the HAGS. The HAGS put out a zine called *The Urban Herbalist*. The HAGS are very...concentrate specifically on keeping women out of the gynecologist's office. Self-help, they are very involved in herbology, involved in self-cervical exams, they are involved in teaching women how to use the speculum so they can look at their own cervix so you can tell when you are in your own cycle, where you are...what's wrong with your body, what a yeast infection looks like, what signs are signifiers of AIDS, signs are if you're pregnant, everything like that up through but not including always things like menstrual extraction, which really aren't legal, but can be taught through self-help groups. And self-help groups form for WHAM all the time and the HAGS are very involved in making sure that women can get this information. *The Urban Herbalist* can be gotten by calling the WHAM line which is 713-5966 and somebody will get that message and send you a copy.

Also, another thing the that the HAGS do is they do Weed Walks several times a year and they pick weeds. We do teach-ins several times a year on the floor at WHAM meetings about what herbs are best for what and where to get them, what they're good for, what they're not good for, and we also do a lot of work on present legislation which is threatening to make herbology illegal including vitamins. Go figure.

So another thing that WHAM is also working towards now, two new working groups that we're working on, specifically because WHAM is a very young group. The age range for WHAM averages between 16 and 24. I'm 24 years old and I'm one of the oldest members of the group. It's true and it's very much people, a lot of women who are involved with WHAM are directly affected by things that women who are a little older than us are not necessarily affected by.

Specifically, we're starting now to move very heavily into body image and eating disorders because that's women's health obviously because men don't really get them \*\*\*. But we're working right now on a repasting and stickering campaign -- although we don't repaste; it's illegal we don't like that sort of thing. Never. -- It's really never been taken on by a direct action group before. We're very excited because nobody's paying any attention to it and we're trying to garner support for that right now. Also Lupus, which high incidence in women is something else that WHAM is spending time on now. In addition to things like environmental issues that have become a very big central part of WHAM in terms of what kind of, what the different things that are going on in our environment are, everything from EMFs to sewage plant and everything involved in that, that effect how your body works and what happens to your body. Also demanding women being used in clinical trials for breast cancer medications. Does everybody know that breast cancer medication test groups are all male? It's like that's another thing that we get involved in.

Direct action, another thing that is a thing, WHAM does every sort of facet of direct action, as wide-reaching as the direct action definition can be, I think. I think a lot of times we argue over what the definition is. You know, get a whole bunch of us in a room, we're going to argue. How could we not? And when you have specifically 18 to 24 year old women who have never done stuff like this before, you're dealing with a situation where there are, "Writing letters to your senators, that is not direct action." Really? It gets there. If you send a lot of them, you get a lot of them out, it makes a difference. People make laws, we have to talk to people who make the laws. If a direct action group directly affects someone who makes the law that's direct action. Calling your senator, fax zaps, great fax zaps. Fax zaps are fabulous. 1-800 numbers, calling them and leaving the phone off the hook, also fabulous. I mean, that's all direct action so is getting out on the street with 5000, so is doing clinic defense, so is dropping a banner from the Statue of Liberty, which WHAM did in 1991, a banner that said, "Abortion is healthcare and healthcare is a right," draped the whole bottom of the Statue of Liberty. I mean, we rented a helicopter so we could take pictures of it. That banner of course disappeared, we have no idea where it is.

But, you know... And it's things that are \*\*\*. We do a great lot of work with ACT-UP. The women who are in WHAM are mostly in both ACT-UP and WHAM. A lot of women in AIDS research is starting now, it has been so ignored even by us that it needs as much attention as we can possibly give it over the course of the next couple of years. As the balance is shifting, so is the majority of people who will be HIV infected in the next 10 years; it will be more women than men. And to try and get the CDC to

change the definition. It's a lot of stuff like this.

WHAM does, I would assume, guess, WHAM does three or 4 small actions a month and maybe a huge, large action every two or three months. And we just did the Universal Healthcare action \*\*\* with a whole bunch of other people in the Universal Healthcare Coalition. We just zap \*\*\*. We're about to hit Mary Cummings and \*\*\* getting married, in case anybody was wondering what she's up to lately and we're going to give her wedding presents because we love her so much. And we're also doing a lot of work right now around the school board elections, which is, of course, important.

WHAM is also, I would say, 70 percent gay in terms of its population. Women who are just coming out, women who have come to WHAM to come out, women who are looking for a safe place to be both lesbian and hetero-oriented, to be feminists and to be gay, to be feminists and to be straight. It's a very gay-oriented group that is constantly I think in a struggle with its own definition in terms of, "Well, do we organize something around the march tomorrow because we're not a gay group." Well, okay, we're not a gay group, but we're a women's health group and that's one thing that has from time to time been a point of real contention because the question is, some people will raise their hand and go, "How do pro-choice rallies connect to gay rights?" And when you don't know that you go, "Oh my God! We have to stop right now and we have to talk about this because it's all interconnected."

And I think that is the main point of all of this stuff that WHAM does together. It's that these rights are interconnected. You take away rights for women, all women, gay women and straight women, you threaten the rights of women and under any banner you are threatening the rights of gay women and straight women. Fighting for gay rights is fighting for a right of choice just as much as fighting for reproductive rights is fighting for the right of choice. And that is something that is a constant struggle and WHAM goes through also.

So that's basically it for this.

**?: Women's Action Coalition (WAC):** \*\*\* The Women's Action Coalition started practically a year ago and so it's the newest action \*\*\* groups. And it's achieved extraordinary heights, not to be the bearer of bad tidings, but it's in a lot of trouble now in terms of not having \*\*\* issue to focus on, in terms of having become so obsessed with direct action and not having a sense of its own community basis and \*\*\*. It's become, it has actually created an extraordinary insight; the media skills, the management, I used to talk about \*\*\* represent things a lot last year, that it was a kind of voluntary corporation. We had our own in-house graphics committee, and our own in-house video committee, and in-house legal committee, and all these sort of different sites of information and professional expertise that could be used to mobilize \*\*\*.

At this point in time it's continuing to do very extraordinary actions. It's continuing to be a direct action focus group and it's continuing a diversity of a wide number of issues



and that's also very difficult \*\*\* conditions of the political climate are changing. And so the sense of the enemy is different and the sense of urgency is very different. And I had actually sort of prepared something that was more about some of the political issues that I in particular feel are facing WAC, but I don't know to what extent you would want me to go back \*\*\*. Does anybody want me to \*\*\*?

**Q:** I just want a definition, the mission, the overall mission because I was really confused, having kind of stepped back from the battle front, I was kind of confused. I was glad to see you out there, but I just was [unsure] as to what their mission was.

**?:** \*\*\*

**WAC:** \*\*\* mission statement, it's true, but also if you read it it includes sort of everything. \*\*\* it appears to be very inclusive and I think we're not by nature locked to things that have managed to slip through the cracks. \*\*\* so broad and so vague, so enormous.

**Q:** \*\*\*

**WAC:** Yes, we'll give you some of the \*\*\* of the history. In essence of what happened was following a number of art-related events, conferences, women in art conferences, that took place a year ago last September in Lower Manhattan in the sort of arts community a lot of women showed up to \*\*\*. And most of the questions and most of the question and answer period was with topics which ended up focusing on Anita Hill, the outrage the failure to not \*\*\* Clarence Thomas into power, the inability to get mass media to see what was going on in terms of the issues regarding the Michael Tyson trial and the William Kennedy Smith trial. There was just all of this energy and all of this outrage on the part of women.

So a group of women who apparently knew each other decided to call a meeting and that meeting was loosely titled "Women Strategizing for the '90s" and that took place on January 28th last year. And that gave birth to WAC, Women's Action Coalition, \*\*\* Women's Artist Coalition because in fact \*\*\* in the arts community. And at that first meeting a number of \*\*\* showed up and some of the women who had originally known each other and called the meeting had come there with some ideas about different action that could be taken and ideas \*\*\*. \*\*\* was to call attention to the trial of the last woman in the St. John's rape trial. And literally that evening we had sort of an open discussion about what we wanted to do and what we could possibly do and by the end of the evening we had subdivided \*\*\* into a legal action committee, a logistics committee, a creative committee, and a media committee. And those were the first 4 committees of WAC that set the methodology \*\*\*. The legal committee went through figuring out what it was we needed to be careful about, the logistics committee figured out where the \*\*\* court house [was] and exactly what was taking place and how to get there and what times \*\*\*, the creative committee actually came up with the symbol of the blue dot which was \*\*\* Patricia Bowman who was covered by the blue dot during the televised hearing of the trial. And the statement that was attached to that was we



no longer fear recognition, we demand it. And that was actually later used \*\*\*.

We actually were at the Queens County Courthouse within less than a week following that first meeting. So Tuesday night was the first meeting, the following Monday morning we were at the Queens County Courthouse trying to provide some sense of outrage about the fact that the fellows who had gang raped this young Jamaican woman...three of them had been let off despite the corroborating testimony and two guys who plead guilty even before it went to trial \*\*\*. And this was the remaining person, the remaining guy, \*\*\* had been in fact the one who had lured her into this fraternity house \*\*\* where she was apparently \*\*\*. She was either drugged or given something to drink and then gang raped \*\*\*. \*\*\*. She was then transferred to another fraternity house \*\*\* further abuse and victimized. \*\*\* had enough they took her back to the first house and then a group of them actually drove her to somewhere near her place of residence and dropped her off on the corner. She went to a nun \*\*\*. So that by the time the police actually got involved almost everything \*\*\* in terms of evidence was gone. \*\*\* she was so ashamed \*\*\*.

So it's not unlike the \*\*\* case which we have had our attention on \*\*\* , but in essence that was our first action. We arrived there \*\*\* first action myself \*\*\* volunteer to be media committee \*\*\* the state of the art press releases. \*\*\* on Monday morning with banners, posters, the blue dot, some women brought drums, and thus the drum corp was functioning \*\*\*. Following that it literally escalated within three weeks from about 7 women to over 300 women. Three hundred women who attended every meeting right up until approximately October and sometimes \*\*\*. So there was a huge pull and also the other thing that we started was a phone tree \*\*\* phone tree and get in contact \*\*\*. That phone tree now \*\*\* 2000.

But the numbers attending the meetings have dropped to about 100, so there's been some very, I mean, this is a case study of things that work and don't work. And I don't want to deliver a eulogy, but there's some really disappointing aspects to rising so hard and so hot and so fast and then in the face of \*\*\* direct action, you know, having some very naive notions of really good use it can be put to. I mean, the notion of dissent, while appearing theoretical has some very practical complications and talking about representation of dissenting opinions and negotiating different perspective within a group that has such a huge and vague mission.

So we were so tireless and so eager and actually in fact during an election year and the crisis at hand we had so much to do. A lot of things that should have been addressed \*\*\* were not and there was a lot of hurt along the way. There's been a lot of insult to injury, a lot of difficult moments for the group as a whole, and certainly for all of those of us in the group. Again, I think it's a case study in the extraordinary capability, but also \*\*\* setback and certainly not new \*\*\* feminism to be able to see groups come and go, to see different issues that must address \*\*\* whole-heartedly, and from personal opinion we should \*\*\*.

The neglect of those issues, the logical response is that the group deserves to be undermined because at that point it's failed at its own stated mission to address the issues that we are claiming to hold others accountable to. And I really think \*\*\* direct action \*\*\* state of social shame and it's an opportunity to shame a larger social group into recognizing or to come and directly face the very real injustices and lack of access, lack of privilege, lack of resources. And not just lack; it has to do with oppression, it has to do with constraints against having access, against personal, \*\*\*.

And so direct action I think in it being that kind of social shaming does become this kind of... It's social shaming that's kind of social education. It's also at its best moments it's an opportunity to use creativity \*\*\* legitimate in the eyes of the community and the eyes of those who perhaps \*\*\* emotions of what direct action was and was not. what was not appropriate about direct action was that we showed up with a drum corp and the drum corp always had interesting chants and wonderful banners, and we always had an educational week \*\*\*. And the education week was always done with some amount of like serious information. Eventually we created a research committee so that every week that was created had been researched. There were statistics, there were perhaps other groups in the Coalition that could be contacted \*\*\* tell them, we would ask them if they wanted to be \*\*\* as a possible resource \*\*\*. And for a while there were a number of groups that were helpful in providing aid and advice and information to women and to mothers in particular.

And so that little education week was very well received because instead of being seen as singularly oppositional, "loud-mouthed," "bitchy," "dyke," you know the terms, you know what the gender compromises really are there. That by producing this very creative action, and I don't mean to demean it when \*\*\*, it not only shows the willingness of our \*\*\* as direct action \*\*\*, that we're willing to go the extra mile. So when you say, you know, you as our representatives, you as our elected public officials, we are demanding a social accountability, we are demanding that you go the extra mile. We're putting our best foot forward by saying, "We've done our homework. We have the statistics. Here is what we're doing."

So that was one of the things that actually worked very well and was very well received and allowed \*\*\* that otherwise were very, very hostile. And in fact one of the positive things that has come out of that is that the media regularly called on our media committee to provide spokespersons on everything from Madonna's book on sex, to feminist bondage fashion, to some more real things \*\*\* If he can use this as a defense for his behavior then we will use that defense \*\*\* and immediately you reveal that there's no logic in it, but in his case it's actually being entertained as possibly logical and in our case it's considered absolutely out of line.

So, let's see... \*\*\* what we've done more recently and I'd really like to actually go back and talk more about the problems because that immediate success leaves you very vulnerable and become a kind \*\*\*

?: \*\*\* great opportunity to help each other figure out \*\*\*

?: \*\*\* because I'd like to hear that too. I think when we were talking about before when you said, "What is WACs mission?" And we have this \*\*\* we're against homophobia, racism, we're for healthcare, reproductive freedom, we're for the whole p.c. agenda. Which in one sense gets a tremendous lack of focus, which in another sense is a tremendous sense of empowerment because any woman can come \*\*\* and create a committee on any issue she choses to address and \*\*\* use the resources that WAC provided because you talked about the legal scene and the \*\*\* committee and use those resources to create an action about that. And that's been very empowering.

And to show two very different ends of the spectrum. One of the things we're doing is working on the Glenridge case. We had a demonstration on the opening day of the trial. We had a court presence there almost every day. We had a demonstration when they pulled back the rape shield laws. We held another demonstration \*\*\* closing day demonstration \*\*\*. And that's why that trial is like so many rape trials that just disappear and go away. \*\*\* these groups got out there and demanded that we be heard.

Then on the other end of the spectrum we've been working on women's rights, human rights. For example the leaflets that WAC has developed \*\*\* talking about our leaflets. And some of you may have seen the women in black out at the lunch. WAC held a vigil outside the U.N. every Wednesday from 5:00 to 6:00 protesting the human rights abuses in the war in Yugoslavia. And also letting people know what they as individuals can do, where they can send humanitarian aid, specifically \*\*\* community, what they can do about legislation of rape, and war crimes, and human rights. That's two of the issues that WAC's... They show you the real diversity and lack of focus.

?: \*\*\* This is a committee \*\*\* and they're called \*\*\* because it grew out of the research committee in order to defend what we were doing and to know what we were doing \*\*\*. This was created \*\*\* actually collected and we decided we would put this together and make this available as much as possible. So we limited it to \$5.00 which is really unusual \*\*\*. So and we've done very well. I think we've sold like 3000 copies and it's now back in print and we're actually producing I think 10,000 \*\*\*

This is actually an old press kit that I'll send around because this particular brochure during the Republican convention, which was definitely not easy on any of us, there was a specific mandate within the Astrodome to throw out anything that looked like it was xeroxed for obvious reasons we all know a \*\*\* when we see one \*\*\* same thing xeroxed. So this is what our other thing...actually this was also from the Republican convention and this is very funny. This is Operation Dessert Storm and we had 12 flavors of ice cream and you just have to read it and chuckle. This was great because I could actually hand this to harassing policemen and say with like a complete straight face, "Even the Republicans had to chuckle," and they would go ballistic, but they couldn't do anything. It was really funny.

But we took this, two of us dressed up like very nice girls and \*\*\* press passes to sneak into the Astrodome and managed to distribute these all over the Astrodome and we actually stood outside of the Republican Women's Political Caucus and I even got \*\*\*, she was like, "Oh, thank you dear." \*\*\* and it was in fact translated into Spanish and almost the entire janitorial staff of the Astrodome during the Republican convention was Spanish-speaking women. And they were noticeably afraid to take this and what we would do is we would fold it so that you could see that it was in Spanish \*\*\*. \*\*\* a woman earlier in the day was walking around emptying the garbage cans and I realized that she had hers completely wadded up in her hand and she was lifting all of the bags and for those entire two hours she must have had it in this one hand \*\*\*.

So that was real, these were \*\*\* and actually WAC provided the only event that was free and open to the public. And we rented an ice cream truck and we got ice cream and we gave ice cream to all the children, rang then little bell. Works. They all came out and we gave ice cream to children and we gave brochures to their parents, inviting them to come to a \*\*\* which we raised money for \*\*\* huge 45, 60 image. Our legal committee spent almost \$12,000 just getting this permit \*\*\* so many prohibitions against personal liberties. So we had to have permits to put these two sticks together. And we got them and so when we arrived they couldn't touch us because we had xeroxed multiples of every permit you could ever imagine.

And we did in fact get a permit to take over a park \*\*\* find a park that was next to a parking garage and we rented a projector, a special projector that takes a glass slide and produces \*\*\* image. Laurie Anderson, who's been in and out of the group, donated music and \*\*\* an audio track that was in Spanish and in English \*\*\* ranging in age from I think 4 years to 84 years \*\*\* the issues of their life and that was the soundtrack as the images changed. And that took place \*\*\*. I'll just pass this stuff around.

**Kampen:** Maybe now is a good time to open up for general discussion. Certainly one of the things that each person has come back to is the question of what are the pitfalls when you do direct action and one of the things that seems to be pretty clear is the question of how you recognize who you're speaking to, with, for. Maybe we can start with that because that seems to be something that's either been dealt with adequately or not adequately by the each of the groups, knowing who your constituency is.

**?:** Maybe I can talk about some of the experience of the Reproductive Rights Coalition because I see that both WHAM and WAC have run smack up against issues that we've tried to deal with.

And one of the reasons why I left the Reproductive Rights Coalition is because I couldn't get the people in WHAM who formed WHAM to deal with the fact that there's a problem with the fact that we had no women of color in this organization, we had no community base, and we're talking about issues that are affecting other people's lives and none of those people are in the room to talk about it. And no one had a problem with that and I had a problem with that because it was counter to all the other

political work that I had done in my life and was continuing to do as a community activist. It is inherently undemocratic and apolitical to talk about issues that have broad ranging impact such as reproductive rights or women's health and not deal with issues of race and class at the front end.

And then, you know, you get down the line like a year or two later and you look around and you say, "Well, you know, we've done great work, we've raised lots of money, there are no women of color here, but that's okay." That's not okay. It's just not okay and too many organizations have been willing to let that slide and say that it is okay or say in a nominal way, "We don't like it, but what can we do about it?" And just keep on going on without listening to, working with, or in any fundamental way trying to alter that paradigm. It makes us no different than other segments of society because all of the things that we claim to be so fundamentally against we replicate everyday in the work that we do.

And so I had a real problem with that, but fortunately I had a community base from which I was working and from which I simply, you know, went back to and also was working at the Center for Constitutional Rights at the time so my life didn't change fundamentally because I was no longer working with the Reproductive Rights Coalition. But I did feel it was a tremendous moment in history that had been allowed to pass because what we were able to do in the Reproductive Rights Coalition, the way it came together, was to bring together this diverting interest of women's rights groups, whether you worked on abortion rights, you worked on healthcare, or you were in labor, you were women in labor, all these people were sitting around a table together, which was a fairly phenomenal thing to do because we're so segmented. You know, even as women we're so segmented in terms of what we do and how we intersected. And to have everybody around the table dealing with one common agenda was pretty phenomenal, but then we got into attacking what other individual organizations are doing. And I was like, you know, as a woman of color, if I sat in here and attacked the lack of attention to issues for poor women and women of color for every group, you know, I would just spend the whole day castigating everybody. You know, NARAL has basically no women of color members, NOW doesn't seem to think there's a problem 23 years later. You know, they have a mailing list -- I remember when we did one of the demonstrations in '89 we asked for their mailing list and they asked me for a mailing list and I said, "Well, you're the oldest chapter of NOW in the country. Don't you have an adequate mailing list?" "Well, we don't have any women of color groups on our mailing list?" And I said, "Well, why is that?" "Well, it just kind of never came up." And I said, "Well, I'll be damned." And it was just really interesting to me because there were things that I had just assumed, but when those opportunities come up and we have to realize that we've had a lot of crisis in terms of attacks on women that have brought us together, but we can't piss away the opportunities to make fundamental change and really build a broad based movement of women in this country. And make space for everybody at the table. We can't attack each other. You know, we can try and persuade each other to come around and be more open about what one's agenda is or at least to support the agenda of other



organizations.

But there were just was some blisteringly abhorrent meetings where people were, you know, just trying to tear NOW and NARAL apart limb by limb. But the fact is that they paid for this t-shirt, they paid for the graphics, you know, they got the permits, they got the banners. It was the organizational support of those two organizations that were the engine of that coalition of hundreds of women. So everybody has something to bring to the table, but if we don't deal with this race and class concept we're going to continue to look a lot like the Republic convention.

?: I actually wanted to speak to that for a second because you are totally right about that. For the longest time and when I first came into WHAM, from right before I was coming into WHAM and up until a couple of months that I had been here, I was sort of shocked by the unbelievably small, actually one, basic color in that room. Actually at the time there were two, I'm sorry there were two. And it upset me a lot, especially in terms of dealing with things because people would start, get up and talk about access to healthcare, they were talking about Medicaid funded abortions, and I said, "Who are we representing?" Like I would get in trouble at meetings all the time because I would raise my hand, I would go, "Who are we representing? Why are we talking about this? There is nobody in this room. I would say there are 6 or 7 percent of the women in this room even vaguely know what it means to be in a position to not be able to afford healthcare." And that's it. You know, you're dealing with mostly upper middle class White women and that was a big problem.

So what has been happening -- and it in no way solves the problem. I'm not even going to hint or begin to say that this problem is anywhere near being solved. But what WHAM has been doing has become a really big issue over the course of the last 8 months. When we were trying to move away a.) from being so aborto-centric, we were moving away from being so race-centric as well. And we organized a bunch of women, Sandy Snider -- who I don't know if you know -- and a number of other women got together and formed a thing and sponsor workshops that go on for \*\*\*. Workshops that happen, a 10-week long workshop called "The Resisting Racism Workshop." And it's a 10-week long workshop that's done intensively with members of WHAM, you sign up for it, you commit to it for 10 weeks, and it literally sits down and you try and figure out how your racism works into what you do because everybody's got some. And it goes into what you do and what you don't do and how that's affecting your activism and how you can go back to the group and try and literally make the necessary links to get the group to have a more far-reaching sort of a base. People who come to the meetings, people who organize it, that we get involved in communities and communities become involved with us because, yes, we represent a community, but it is not a very big community and it is not a community that is affected by 90 percent of the legislation that we're against.

And also I think, what's also going on now is that there has been a slow growth -- and it is slow growth -- in women of color, women of different racial backgrounds and



monetary backgrounds, financial backgrounds, who have come into WHAM and become involved with WHAM. And it is a very slow process because people sit around and they say for days and days, "Oh, you know, we need to get more racially diverse. We need to become more culturally diverse. We need to reach out more," and then nothing happens. And it's very, it's a frustrating issue. There's no way that it's not a frustrating issue. I think that...I don't know how it happened that it got this bad, frankly. I'm a little confused. I know NARAL is bad like that, I know that NOW is terrible like that. I'm not sure how WHAM quite managed to do that, but it did.

And I think that there has to be more involvement of the more -- and this is sort of a, I don't how well this term will go over -- media savvy direct action groups in communities that reach out beyond the communities that they sit in. And that's been a big problem. It has definitely been a big problem.

?: I think that it's interesting to see that WAC and WHAM are at such a similar place. \*\*\* Being so new at dealing with this it's very frustrating to hear Bernice say that she threw up her hands because I've seen way too many women walk out of WAC in the exact same way.

?: Why?

?: Almost every, I would say almost every woman has walked out of WAC \*\*\*, and I can't blame them.

?: \*\*\*

?: And it's an incredibly frustrating difficult situation and we have found ourselves in the similar point as WAC. WHAM is doing bias workshops with ourselves and we're talking about our own individual prejudices, which is all very necessary work and I don't want to say that it's not. Obviously the reason for...why is WHAM here now? Because we got it down, I think. And until we find out what that thing is inside us that got us to that point, we can't solve it.

So it was really interesting to hear what Bernice was saying about talking about working on the community level. And I think that's something we all need to look further into because I think it's where WAC really needs to focus. We don't go to the communities and I think we need to start trying to approach going to these meetings, through coalitions with other people who are already there who could tell us how to do it.

?: When Carnival Knowledge, we went to Coney Island to do productions on the beach. And we went with all these, all sorts of performance things. We had a big \*\*\* and a 10 foot condom that we pulled out of the water and talked about birth control. But we were also there with very specific literature about various legislation things that were happening about choice and reproductive rights issues. And we were talking to

15 year old girls who had two children who had never been to a gynecologist. I mean, what do they need to know about \*\*\* and where the legislature, what state the legislature came from \*\*\* letter to. What they needed to know is here are different kinds of birth control, here are some clinics that are in your neighborhood \*\*\*.

You know, I think sometimes we can get into these little groups and we come up with a very high fallooting \*\*\* and we don't see what that community needs right then that would be really helpful. And in a way a lot of times it's stepping away from maybe our major goal. It would be great to change the whole world, but right now let's get the address of the clinic.

So, you know, almost all of us should stop and do some direct action in the street just as a way to listen to people. You know, "Here I am," and see what people say to you and realize what they need and really step down.

?: Well, I think one way to get involved with women of color is to go in through the schools, through community school board meetings, through parent meetings. A lot of school boards now have parent workshops. I don't go to many because I think they have a tendency to talk down to parents, but it's a way to get your foot in the door because this is what a lot of, you know, teenage parents and young mothers and fathers and families are dealing with. They're dealing with basic survival, you know. And unfortunately a lot of people come in and talk down to them, but they're getting their children to school and they're feeding them and clothing them and that's a lot to do these days.

One of the reasons I came to this particular workshop -- beside the fact that \*\*\* -- was because we have a situation at my daughter's junior high where we have a principle who's an African American woman who is under a lot of fire now. She's been there for 14 years and they want to down-size the school. Now the whole thing started I guess like in February when she wanted to do a publicity campaign and produce a flier to send out to parents promoting school. What came back in the mail with no return address was \*\*\*. So now what has happened is, you know, what's presented to the community school board, they were like, "Well, who sent the flier?" You know, the response is just so ridiculous, besides the fact that, well, there some people who don't like the fact that this school is mostly Black and Latino and want these children out of this neighborhood, okay?

So when I looked \*\*\* business meeting at this community school board meeting and I found that the school board was very antagonistic towards the principle and to the parents -- some of the parents were there. I was there and other parents -- who were saying that the school is doing well. They had discipline problems the year before because the district had forced the school to accept 9th graders from another school which put even more children into the school. The principle told me at \*\*\* gang members, she couldn't get any help from the district as far as getting kids out of there. Well, anyway this year they created middle schools throughout the whole district, so

there's no 9th grade there.

And the principle and her staff decided to do away with mini school. I don't know how much you all know about education, but they have these little mini schools where you have arts and then you have a math and science mini school, different \*\*\*. And it had created a situation before where there was a lot of in-fighting for supplies, you know, just through the whole building. So \*\*\* decided to do away with that.

Well, at the school board meeting in March the members were very antagonistic, "How dare you do that without telling us. And dah, dah, dah, dah, dah." All that in addition to the fires. And in addition to the rumor that they were going to close the schools and they decided that no they weren't going to close the schools with everyone at the moment. They were going to down-size the schools. Well, why are you going to down-size the schools? Where are you going to put these African American and Latino students? No answer.

Now there are so many parts to this puzzle, okay? One of the concerns is that they're also going to be opening \*\*\* and so does the district want to get rid of all the African American and Latino students south of 96th Street? They say they're not racially motivated, but there's a lot of racial issues going on here. And at this point everybody is, "Hmm?" We can't get any politicians or anybody to do anything. This woman is standing out in the wind having community school board members calling her incompetent on national television and it's very frustrating.

And I feel that... The other issue. There's another issue. There's a speaker there who calls Latino students "illegal aliens," okay? He is...he's just religion as far as, you know...just terrible. He has \*\*\*. A few teachers have quit, she can't hire new teachers because there's this whole union thing, you know. So meanwhile she's got to deal with substitutes which doesn't help the education process of the children. So it's getting to the point where I feel something big has to happen. And we've done our petitions, we've gotten the NAACP to act as an advocate for us, they're helping us, but at this point I feel there is some kind of conservative political caucus happening in that area that really does not want those children in that neighborhood.

?: Not only do they not want those children, but they also don't want progressive agenda, period. You know, that talks about opening up the minds of young people to be able to deal with diversity whether it's gender or sexual orientation or race diversity and you can't imagine how big an issue this is in communities of color. And so for those of us who work on reproductive rights issues and health and sexual education issues, it's kind of all subsumed in that same debate or discussion.

And probably we all sit on and think about the issues that we work on, I was really glad to hear you talk about taking up the school board elections as a campaign because I myself as a progressive person, it's like, well, you know I'm not a parent. All of the kids in my family are either in high school or college or graduate school, so I don't have to deal with the local school issues and I'll just work on these other issues in the

community and I'll let the people who have Black kids in the school system deal with the school system. And so we allowed that to go on and now you have this absolute and complete and total mess when the New York City public education system could seriously be tipped into a completely right wing place.

And it has a lot of health issues. You know, the largest growing group of people who are contracting sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS are young teenagers of color who are school age. And we can't get condoms into the school system, we can't talk about it? While kids are dying. That's an issue for us to work on.

And it's those kinds of issues that I would try to bring to the floor to the Reproductive Rights coalition and people, you know, they wanted to work on the issues that they wanted to work on. And I'd say, "You know, we have whole worlds out here of people who live next door to you, who ride the subway with you everyday, whose lives are in utter turmoil. And you all are working on these issues, but they have no connection with our lives. Absolutely no connection. So when you have a demonstration, do you wonder why we don't come to the demonstration? They don't mean shit, that's why. And you know it's wonderful that you get all this press. That's really great, but it doesn't change the material conditions of our lives. And until we see you come to the table to work around those issues..."

And this school board stuff is... You know, it really is a Pandora's box, but it's a Pandora's box for everybody who works on progressive issues in New York City because if we can't control the breadth of information that our young people have access and availability to, then we're not going to be able to control anything else. You know, controlling the minds of children it's just definitely Orwellian, but it's real. And it's really happening.

**Q:** What I don't understand is that in the school boards especially in my district they're made up of people that generally live there. So I don't...\*\*\* Black and Latino children, it's got to be a Black and Latino neighborhood.

**?:** Not necessarily.

**?:** It's a diverse neighborhood.

**?:** The school boards are not necessarily not...the people who are on school boards are not necessarily the people who have children in the district or who work in the district, they may live in the district. For instance School Board 24 out in Queens where that woman, Cummings, comes from \*\*\* right wing nonsense. That district is 70 percent Latino and 20 percent African American and 10 percent other. And since \*\*\* part of that other is probably Asian and not necessarily White and every member of that school board is White, every member. So it is not reflective of the people who live in a district or who have children in the district. And that is simply a by-product of electoral politics in New York State and New York City election law.

?: Until this election there has been almost no broader based interest in the school board. Nobody voted.

?: \*\*\* was very interested. They were very smart and they got there ahead of anybody else and they build these 70 percent turn outs at the school board elections

?: Not any more.

?: Not if we have anything to say about.

?: Everybody and their mother is voted.

?: They've elected who they've wanted to elect for years. \*\*\* not voting. Of course, there's a lot of active progressive people who either their children are grown or they're not having children so they're not working on the issue and we've let the school board \*\*\*.

?: And they don't vote. I mean, plain and simple they have the politically correct attitude. And I remember at the Center for Constitutional Rights it was amazing...they have a voting rights program that's been in existence since the founding of that organization and it's based in Mississippi and it's still doing serious hard-core grassroots work around getting local people elected to local political office. Ninety-five percent of the people who work in the national office in New York were not registered to vote or had not voted in a decade. You know, we were so Socialist that we just couldn't participate in the electoral process, which is just, you know, utter bullshit. It's a complete and total contradiction that we will fight for people all over the world...and you now we had cases going on in just about every hemisphere but we would not vote in New York City in local electoral politics. And a lot of the progressive community is like that and we don't connect on these local issues. You know, we talk about these mass campaigns, but we don't follow what's going on in our local communities. And that's why so much of what we do is irrelevant to so many people.

**Kampen:** Let me ask...I've got a lot of hands up here and I don't want to skip people over. I saw Joanna first, \*\*\*, and I saw your hand \*\*\*. Can you remember that?

**Q:** Actually what I wanted to say was more about what you were talking about when I first came in and I'll try to tie it to what you were just talking about. I think that \*\*\* activism right now is that activists...it's almost become like a new hierarchy in activism and that really concerns me. And I'm not sure \*\*\* the hierarchy that everyone thinks it is either. I mean, I think that there is hierarchy that to me almost is based in people not listening to each other, no matter who those people are who are not doing the listening or doing the talking. People not having respect for each other and still not being nice to each other. And I noticed as I was standing here, it's sometimes hard to politicize and to put into terms that people who are political people can really appreciate. But something that I see \*\*\* that really disturbs me is the lack of respect



that we women feminists treat each other with. And I know that a lot of women of color have left WAC, but I also know that a lot of women of all races have left WAC. And it's so concerning to me for us to be forming a revolution and in a lot of ways not treating each other any differently than the way we're treated outside of that activist situation.

And I realize that this creates sort of a break in our conversation, but it's so important for me to say that because I feel so pained by what's going on in every activist group that I've been a part of. And I just wondered if maybe we could look at what breaking down the patriarchal structure really looks like instead of just taking theory that might actually sometimes exclude people and might actually make people feel like, "Why do I need to come here after working 10 hours a day and get totally badgered because my opinion is different from someone else's."

And I just wondered if people maybe can look at what real accessibility is all about on an active level. And I don't think that we'll even have to think about whether or not we want to have a coalition for the school board election. Of course we want to have a coalition for the school board election! I mean, don't you think maybe people need to frame their feelings about activism maybe in a way that they're not always so used to doing?

**Q:** Sort of following that, I was wondering about sort of the issues of ownership as they come up and I hate to use that term, but they do come up within all these direct action groups. And also harkening back to the question of really talking about theory and purpose before going out there and doing action. How does that work when you're trying to form a coalition of different groups, focusing on some kind of direct action and when, if the two groups have two different theories of purposes and philosophies, you know, how can that conversation take place? And how can you not have these questions of possessiveness when action does go on? I mean, I know a lot of the stuff that everyone was talking about around this table are actions that, you know, all these groups have been involved in. And I was wondering St. John's, working with \*\*\*, for instance and what about that? And with the St. Luke's Women's Hospital closing, what kind of work did you do with \*\*\* was organizing, legally around that, for instance?

**?:** You mean what kind of work? They were part of our legal council and then they decided that they couldn't file a law suit at the eleventh hour when the meeting was done. \*\*\*, but having been in a legal organization for 5 years we really ought to be clear on a low level of impact of what \*\*\*. Although even right now \*\*\*, as long as it doesn't subsume, you know, \*\*\*. It's just one strategy, you know. And unfortunately there are a whole lot of people who work in that field, but it is one strategy and it's not the \*\*\* strategy, particularly if your politics are not clear.

**Q:** I wanted to go back a little bit to the point about working with the schools and the idea of reaching out and involving more \*\*\*. One of the issues that we haven't talked



about is that there are no Latina women here and we haven't talked about religion. And one of the problems I've had in going to the schools is that when talking about sexuality and reproductive rights there's a huge organized body of parents that don't want to let you in. And most of minority women, Latina women, Black women, are church-going people, as far as I know, the people that I work with. And that's always, you know, I'm not sure how to deal with them, I don't know where to go about this. It's always been a real...

?: Just one aspect about \*\*\*. Part of the work I do is teach in this creative arts \*\*\*. We go into schools throughout the city and usually we do conflict resolution. What we do is we ask the schools, "What issues do you feel that students really need to look at and need to understand?" And we've gotten gender, prejudice, racism. We only got one school that wanted to deal with homophobia as an issue. And it was the first time that they did that. There's one other team that went in. And they dealt with it very well. I mean, maybe if you can't get the response from the parents, if you can get to, talk to, call the school and talk to some of the teachers and see if that's an issue they feel that students can deal with because, you know, you may have to bypass them in that instance, you know.

But we only got one school that wanted to deal with the homophobia issue and as far as the sexism issue, all the schools deal with that. And as far as sexuality, the students, the teenagers, are like really quiet on the issue. We had the \*\*\* AIDS education component, which deals with sexuality and safe sex, which does great. I mean, that's the program and schools buy it and the children end up opening up, you know, the teenagers. And if you deal a lot with drama and, you know, once they're distanced from it, when you do that type of thing, once they're distanced from it, like, "I'm not talking about myself," you know? Then they can talk about it, you know. That helps.

?: I know, well, that's on an educational level. I've had a lot of success working with the schools, but in terms of organizing a direct action through the school system is \*\*\*. I mean, when \*\*\*.

**Kampen:** Tracy and then Hope and we'll see who's next.

?: There is one thing that really concerns precisely about the education issue is that a lot of it is taking place and calling it a Pandora's box is really \*\*\*. Some of the most right wing thing is toward social fundamentalism \*\*\* are now \*\*\*. But I travel a lot and I think that that's a really vital thing to bring up \*\*\*. For people who are real working, tired, exhausted parents, etc., etc., etc., trying to sort out the distinction between the \*\*\* of a community, which in many cases has been under siege since time immemorial, and differentiating that from the kinds of right wing religious right, fundamentalist, strategies where you isolate groups of people and you get them either kicked out \*\*\*. \*\*\* very slippery ground, very, very difficult ground and I think that we... requires that all of us be in that struggle and in that fight before we lose any more ground or lose any more people who are very rightly confused. \*\*\* literally is

coming, did get there before we did, and generally uses \*\*\* our language in order to focus \*\*\*.

The other thing is I think one of the issues for a WAC and for a kind of collaborative work is trying to do a very \*\*\*. We have become incredibly slippery and we're not thinking about what \*\*\* looks like and what it is and where it sits and what it means to \*\*\*. And so I have sat for a year and half in a group of predominantly White women who every time this issue comes of class can slide from one end of the thing to the other. And, you know, I'm very unpopular for saying, "Look, even to the extent to which there are many who are artists have chosen substantially more difficult relationships, it's chosen." It's chosen and it's a relationship to usually, in those cases, there are substantial education opportunities and a whole different set of cultural choices.

And to try to do an honest assessment of what \*\*\* sits in the room when you're trying to talk about any kind of coalition and to try to think of what are the ways where those \*\*\* can be mobilized as resources. And not resources that you can necessarily control. I mean, one of the things \*\*\* White women \*\*\* is in fact saying, "We have these resources," and then you actually don't make them available without strings attached. \*\*\* and you have this group \*\*\*. And one of the things that I think is really critical in direct action thinking is understanding that corroboration, cooperation, that is necessarily a \*\*\* of the sense of one's own loss. That the process of compromise, which \*\*\*, but the process of arriving at the understanding of a perspective that is widely different from your own or is slightly different from your own, feels like you've lost the battle. And there's got to be a way where, I think, continuously...

You know, astoundingly enough \*\*\* you have a very difficult time differentiating personal hurt from political transgression, differences, etc. And that is a very real scenario in any kind of women's organizing, in any kind of organizing of people without power relative to who ever you see as having power. \*\*\* divide and conquer falls down.

And also as \*\*\* was saying, I don't need feminism as a first language. I think it's a second language. And a second language in the sense that we've come to it with different motivations \*\*\*, and different aptitudes for \*\*\*, and different reasons for using it, and different arenas for using it. And so that is why we really allow ourselves to get away from the central issues \*\*\* theoretically, practically, participatory, democratically, economically, and all these different manifestations by not separating \*\*\*.

?: Before I go into talking about more stuff and feeling about stuff, there are things I want to sort of announce that may be of use in some of the stuff we've been talking about.

First, there's a phone number and the phone number is for School PAC, which is the School Political Action Committee, which is right now tracking progressive candidates

for school board all over the city. And that number is: 979-8320. You can speak to anybody that answers the phone there, just ask for stuff to do with School PAC. They've got 5 offices running out of there right now, just ask for School PAC stuff. And what they can give you is a list of progressive candidates in each and every district. That's one thing. And they can also give you help if you're interested in organizing around your district or districts that have less progressive candidates than others and where stealth candidates are a real problem. And there are a lot of them. They also know who the stealth candidates are. So they're very useful in that regard.

Another thing for in terms of right wing, the problem with the fundamentalist right's attack on women in terms of reproductive rights, in terms of economic rights, in terms of Medicaid, in terms of sexual orientation, ACT-UP and WHAM together are now working in collaboration on a group called Apocalypse Now, which is a right wing tracking working group, specifically involved in tracking a.) stealth candidates in every kind of election that's happening, and b.) in terms of finding out exactly what the fundamentalist right is presently doing and with what money, and where, and when, and they know where they are all the time.

To get in touch with Apocalypse Now you can call them on the WHAM line or through ACT-UP, which is 564-AIDS. And also if WAC was interested in getting involved with Apocalypse Now, you can talk to any of the people involved with it. It's a very collaborative effort, it's not a very large effort. It has, I think, at tops 10 people in it, who are at the fore of it who do tons of work, who have stacks of information specifically on the fundamentalist right.

Another thing that has to do with specifically right now, we were just talking about crossing over privilege and about problems. Right now there's a real big debate going on in SoHo, which I've been involved with very heavily in terms of trying to get WHAM involved with, trying to get ACT-UP involved with. There's a group that has actually started in ACT-UP, called Housing Works, I don't know if anybody knows about it or know what it is. It is a facility that does adult day care and treatment for homeless people with AIDS, most of whom are substance abusers, drug users, whatever you want to call them, substance abusers. I'm never sure what the correct term is, but I think that's what it is. And we've been working with Housing Works because Housing Works is located in SoHo because SoHo is very accessible to trains and no where else that they could locate themselves was accessible to trains.

They're trying to build an adult treatment center on Green Street and they are getting the most unbelievable backlash from the SoHo community that I have ever seen in my life. I work in a political office and we get 100 letters a week from angry people who don't want that in their neighborhood, and don't think it's indigenous to their neighborhood, and don't think it's something they ought to have in the neighborhood, and they are fighting him to the point where he is about to lose his ability to \*\*\*. And right now Housing Works has begun reaching out to activist groups for help. So they have contacted WHAM, they have contacted NARAL, they have contacted ACT-UP,

and if you would like to call Housing Works, the gentleman who runs it, his name is Charles King. I don't have his phone number here, but it is definitely something that deals with issues of privilege and racism and bigotry. It's awful.

So that's my informational stuff. Sorry to have \*\*\* in terms of the discussion. But in terms of what was being said I think that there's a big problem in getting involved with school board elections. I believe very strongly in it, I think it is unbelievably necessary, but I think that the big problem with it is that it's crisis intervention. We didn't give a shit about the school board elections before this. Everybody who's involved in school board elections is looking at us, going like this... Because who the fuck are we? Where were we when they were trying to put together an education for their children. It's ridiculous. Like, people are going, "Oh yeah, we can mobilize." And I was like, "First of all, yes, it's necessary to mobilize, but stop what you're doing for a minute and think." Because the fact of the matter is by simply going in there and going, "Hi," everybody's like, "Who the hell are you? And what are you doing here? And where were you before?" And that's a problem...

?: "And where will you be after?"

?: "And where will you be when it's done?" Exactly. And it's like, you know, it becomes a thing that...I went to a performing arts college and \*\*\* term in an acting school that I heard about; it's the difference between a change for crisis and a thing called the change in kind. And a change in kind is not just a change in your behavior, it is a change in your being; it is a change in how you think, it is a change in how you operate, and it is a necessary change in every single political activist group in this city. Because that is what is integral to making sure that things that...we remain involved in school board education, we remain involved in our community boards, which are also a tremendous amount of power in each and every community and people have a tendency to ignore until there's a time of crisis; that we remain involved in the constituencies of the communities in which we live, work, and operate.

And that is something that is a problem with this school board mobilization because we are walking in and sort of just saying, "Well, we can handle this. This is a crisis, we'll step in and we'll deal with this." And that's not fair. It needs to be done considering the situation, but it's still not right and not fair.

**Q:** I know we have to go soon. All these things are fairly important, but I don't \*\*\* urgency of a lot of activism feeling right now are here in this room to discuss theory as well because otherwise we just seem to go from crisis to crisis and we kind of haven't solved anything. The right wing's still on the offensive. You know, the mass rapes in Bosnia, I mean, some things \*\*\* over with and everything's getting worse and worse. So the problem with direct action \*\*\* focus and the attention for having people come to consciousness about what they're against, but it's not enough because then we have to come together to try to work out what we're for, right? I mean, it's no accident that there are these huge divisions of race and class in the women's movement because they

exist in society and they got much worse over the last 12 years with Reagan and Bush. So what was great about the women's movement, you know, since it started 25 years ago, is that it's anti-hierarchical, that we really say and really believe that we do want to hear from every movement and we do want to have every movement develop itself and all it's capabilities, but that doesn't mean we know how to do it in our own organizations, right? That requires I think a much, much more profound change in society than we've had yet.

And, you know, I'm a revolutionary, I disagreed with the panel this morning. I think that getting more women in elected offices isn't going to do it. I don't think it's going to do it. I happen to think that we need to tear up this society root and branch and establish one based on human needs and human \*\*\*, but it's very important that we have some theoretical discussions. And I'm speaking to WAC now because I've been attending some of the meetings to get reborn \*\*\*. I know in Chicago WAC they decided to have one meeting a month and discussion on one issue \*\*\* and I think that's a good idea.

And the other thing is to get more communities and talk to people and work on the things with them and not just so that then they'll work with you on your issues, you know. It can't just be a "let's trade" action, it's got to be listening to people and hearing what they're interested in. It may be that they're interested in all the issues that you're interested in also, you know, but there has to be a discussion and there has to be seriousness about \*\*\* listen to their ideas. Don't assume, you know, that they're only interested in that issue. You don't even know until you've listened.

Bernice mentioned the Webster demonstration. What was great about that demonstration -- it started at Foley Square which nobody knew \*\*\*, but then we marched through Chinatown and the Lower East Side.

?: And that was intentional.

?: And the women were hanging out of the windows, waving, \*\*\* Chinese sweat shops. And, gee, I wanted to go back there and talk to those women again or set up our workshops there or our meetings. And, you know, we have to actively reach out, but we have to begin to break down that division between classes and races. And that division between action and theory or we're going to keep running into the same brick walls.

**Kampen:** I have to say that the time that is ours is now officially up and the next talk is at 4:30. I have the feeling that there are a lot of people with a lot of stuff left to say and so I'm certainly not going to drive anybody out of this room, but it hereby becomes an informal discussion instead of a panel. I want to thank the participants and everybody.

?: \*\*\* WAC does now have over 40 sister organizations now all calling themselves across the country, in Canada, Berlin, and I have a lot of contacts with Mexico and



France.

?: Yeah, WHAM has 8 in the continental \*\*\*

?: \*\*\* You can always contact us. We have a network now \*\*\* and what we ideally would like to see happen is do a national action where we mobilize \*\*\* using that infrastructure to do direct action on a single day across the country.

*(Remainder of tape is informal conversation and distinct dialogue is mostly indistinguishable.)*