

“A Modest Herstory” of Betsy Warrior

Betsy Warrior was a radical organizer of women’s liberation and the battered women’s movements in Boston and the nation. In 1968 she began organizing and agitating as one of three original members of *Cell 16*, a women’s liberation group that exposed the subordination of women and advocated for equal pay, childcare, reproductive rights, economic justice and self-defense. These early messengers for women’s rights campaigned against unpaid labor by homemakers, wife abuse, the inequality of women in the workforce and in intimate relationships and they trained women in karate for self-protection. She was an author and editor of the *Journals of Female Liberation*.

Often, she could be found disseminating feminist literature written by Cell 16 on the streets of Cambridge in Harvard Square. At that time, promoting the ideas of female liberation met with hostility or ridicule. As people began reading and arguing these ideas some attitudes began to change, and women especially, began to drop their denial of male supremacy and support feminist perspectives. This street agitation served an important role in broadcasting ideas, as not only the corporate press, but also alternative presses were male controlled, virulently sexist, and women, as usual, lacked the financial resources to compete with the male propaganda machines. Distributing literature on the street was one way to foil male suppression of this female insurrection.

In 1969 Warrior’s economic analysis of women’s unpaid labor: *Housework: Slavery or a Labor of Love* and *The Source of Leisure Time* was published. In *Housework*, she posited that wife beating was an occupational hazard of the housewife who, deprived of monetary remuneration for her labor, lacked resources and recourse to escape male-pattern violence. In *Leisure Time* she described how women create leisure time for others by performing most of the life sustaining, arduous tasks necessary for everyday existence, thus freeing others for more creative endeavors. In 1971 Warrior and Lisa Leghorn wrote and edited *Houseworker’s Handbook*, an economic analysis of the unpaid labor of houseworkers, which makes inevitable women’s lack of economic leverage in the paid labor force - and in every other arena the world over. How much are employers willing to pay workers who characteristically work for free? Three editions of the *Handbook* were published.

On International Women’s Day, 1971 Betsy marched from Boston to Cambridge in a demonstration to demand a center for women. Some of the demonstrators took over a Harvard building until they were given space for a Women’s Center at another location. At the new Women’s Center Betsy built and stocked a library of books on women’s struggles for self-determination, provided GED classes, and explored options for starting a women’s press. Simultaneously, she was doing welfare rights and tenant’s rights organizing. In 1974, while working with Chris Womendez and Cheri Jimenez, who established the first shelter dedicated to battered women, and with Respond, another shelter group, Warrior realized the need for a compendium of resources, analyses of male-pattern violence and templates for shelter procedures and undertook a decade long effort to provide a network to knit the movement together by sharing resources and knowledge. At the same time she provided a support group for battered women, which aided women for 36 years and trained other women and agencies to facilitate such groups.

Working on Wife Abuse (later called *Battered Women's Directory*) was the first international directory of individuals and programs advocating for battered women. It provided statistics on wife abuse, articles on the history, motivations and utility of male-pattern violence, explained legal options like restraining orders and provided a bibliography on woman abuse. It included guidelines for setting up shelters, hotlines and support groups for battered women. Nine editions were published. The first edition was 33 pages and the last, in 1989, was 300. The Schlesinger Library for Women at Harvard houses her "collection" which contains some of her correspondence with people setting up shelters and services in the early years. <http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~sch00439>

In November of 1973, Betsy wrote *Progress?*, a poem calling women to mobilize. The last portion reads:

*Sisters, don't hesitate.
When, where, shall we meet?
Together we'll go,
Black, white, brown and red,
We'll turn from directions
That men had once tread.
With our banner of feminism
Proudly unfurled,
We'll march out united
And create a new world.*

In 1985 Betsy and other activists attempted to place an anti-pornography Human Rights Ordinance on the ballot in a Cambridge election. When the city refused, the women sued and won to get the referendum placed on the ballot. Unfortunately, it was narrowly defeated.

Married at 17, she endured years of abuse (as is the case for millions of women even today) by her husband before being able to leave with her child. Thereafter, she adopted the name "Betsy Warrior" to commemorate a Native American activist. She identifies as a working-class woman of multiple ethnicities, including Canadian Micmac, and is self-taught.

Recently, Betsy developed a series of International Women's Rights Posters honoring women activists from many continents. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN7qpEEw1Ow>). She has also posted her watercolor art on YouTube where she wrote:

"A friend who liked my artwork gave me some watercolors and watercolor paper, which encouraged me to start painting. I love the dreamy, limpid quality that watercolors can achieve. In some of my paintings I try to capture this magical, moody quality. Often, I try to create the type of landscape or seascape that I would like to walk into - to sit under its trees, to walk along its coastline, or simply gaze at the sky, be surrounded and be at one with nature. I hope my paintings give others the same sensation of entering a dreamy, soothing imaginary world."

Many of Betsy's books and articles are now out of print. She is hoping to post them on the web for ready access by feminists and others working to end male violence against women.

Betsy Warrior was more than an inspiration to the early battered women's movement. She provided critical analysis of "male-pattern violence," offered support to struggling feminists establishing women's centers and shelters, and established a broad, international network of women and men activists committed to ending men's violence toward women. To say we are profoundly indebted to her vision, passion and dedication is an understatement. Her contributions are beyond comprehension and certainly far exceed this modest herstory of Betsy Warrior.

– Barbara J. Hart, J.D., Director of Strategic Justice Initiatives
Muskie School of Public Service, Portland, ME
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