

Oakville on Board

BEV LEFRANCOIS

Le nouveau groupe lobbyiste féministe "Women of Halton Action Movement (WHAM) a immédiatement réagi quand Doris Anderson a démissionné. du CCCCF. Elles avaient décidé de faire ce qu'elles pouvaient pour changer ce scénario qui, encore une fois, ignorerait les femmes. WHAM a nolisé des autocars pour amener des femmes à la conférence sur la Constitution tenue à Ottawa le 13 février 1981. L'auteure se rappelle cette période et l'action qui a abouti à l'inclusion des droits des femmes à l'égalité dans la Constitution.

The newly formed feminist lobby group, Women of Halton Action Movement (WHAM), immediately responded when Doris Anderson resigned from the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. WHAM women had great respect for Doris's commitment to women's equality so we joined women across the country to stand with her to challenge the government on the lack of input from women into the proposed new Constitution.

WHAM's first issue in 1980 was the discrimination faced by First Nations women in Canada if they married a non-Indian or a Native Indian outside their Band. Kay Macpherson, feminist, peace activist, and chair of Friends of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), was the speaker who drew interested women to the home

of Illa Drever in Oakville. Women in attendance were asked to leave a phone number if they wanted to attend future meetings to address this issue and other inequalities women face in Canada. The ten women who left their names that night were to become the first members of WHAM.

The name, WHAM, was carefully chosen. The organization would be action-orientated and start an equality movement in the Halton Region. We were through with consciousness raising and debating issues. It was time to take action. We would be feminist, grassroots, cross-party, and non-hierarchical in operation. We would have standing committees but would strike ad-hoc committees when needed. We would be nimble and quick. Letters would be written by each member at every meeting and mailed the next day.

Members were well informed by Betty Friedan, Michele Landsberg, Gloria Steinem, Marilyn French, Doris Anderson, and Penney Kome. But as Penney Kome writes, "The driving force for more women to get involved in the women's equality movement was when Doris Anderson resigned from the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women after the government cancelled the women's conference which would have provided Canadian wo-men input into the Charter

of Rights and Freedoms." Doris let Canadian women know their rights in Canada were being threatened. Nurses, teachers, lawyers, business women, librarians, artists, activists in the women's movement, and homemakers, many with small children, joined WHAM.

We were at Senator Nancy Ruth's (Jackman's) home attending a fundraiser for NAC the night Doris Anderson resigned. The conversations were about what, if any thing, could we do to effectively change this scenario of women being ignored yet again. After all we were 52 percent of the population. Various people were expressing great anger and concerns about the cancelled conference that precipitated Doris's resignation.

There was a general consensus that NAC was too cumbersome an organization to respond quickly to this late breaking development. The Cow Café on John Street in Toronto was chosen for a meeting on Monday at noon and the group was to get the message out that we were forming an Ad Hoc Committee on the Constitution and any women available to work was welcome. Could we do this? Kathy Devlin suggested a desk would be made available at the Toronto Women's Credit Union for someone to work the phones and act as information central. Illa Drever volunteered to be that office person.

That meant phoning women's organizations all over the country, giving them the information and telling them that we needed a response from every women's group in the country and we would find the monetary resources to help defray travel costs. One such call to the women's group in Whitehorse, Yukon, was very emotional. Illa remembers, "The woman on the line couldn't believe I called her from Toronto and that it *really* mattered to have representation from their group."

It became a logistical problem of transportation in our vast country. The numbers of women registered from the Toronto area soared. We had to charter buses. Illa ordered one, then two and in the end we filled nine large greyhound buses. The women from WHAM responded like so many. We were a jubilant and excited group as we left for Ottawa on the 13th of February 1981.

The conference itself was truly empowering. Women welcomed each other warmly and you could sense their determination and resolve. Women from every walk of life attended representing thousands who, for a myriad of reasons, could not be there. They would have been so proud to see the way women worked non-stop over the weekend to eventually come together with resolutions to present to the government. In spite of political and philosophical differences, and because of the skills of fabulous lawyers, organizers, and peacemakers, we were successful. Woman politicians on "The Hill" generously gave of their time and resources to support this successful effort.

Little did we know that the fight for our rights in the constitution would continue until November. The federal government eventually came to believe that the conference was representative of women across Canada because women continued to lobby non-stop in support of the women leading the struggle. They finally agreed to revise section 28 to state: "*Notwithstanding anything in*

this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons."

But, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the provinces must also agree to constitutional reform. This would prove to be a huge hurdle. The premiers of all provinces except Quebec agreed to an override clause that would give any government in power the right to override the rights in the Charter, including the equality rights in sections 15 and 28. Canadian women responded by redoubling their efforts and were successful in getting the *eleven men*: ten premiers and one prime minister, to agree to section 28.

The women of Canada's support for Doris Anderson led to the equality clause, which is a tool, a cornerstone for the continuing struggle for equality. Doris ignited a spark and then she continued to fan it. In her book, *The Unfinished Revolution*, she gave us more fodder to work for a national childcare system. Her travels and research in other countries once again ensured us it was normal and right. Doris often reminded us that if there were more women in government, childcare would not be an issue. She then went on to fight for a new electoral system in Canada to make this happen.

Twenty-five years later, on February 14, 2006, nine WHAM members once again joined with Canadian women back in Room 200 in the West Block on Parliament Hill for a Forum on Women's Activism in Constitutional and Democratic Reform, chaired by feminist lawyer and activist Marilou McPhedran. WHAM assisted as a member of the planning committee. We celebrated women's equality efforts. Doris Anderson addressed her adoring followers again. And together we highlighted the work that still had to be done.

WHAM has lobbied for 27 years and we are grateful to the feminist women writers, journalists, and activists who have kept us informed about women's inequalities in Cana-

da and throughout the world. Their words have not fallen on deaf ears. Like Doris they inspire and motivate us to take action for equality.

Bev LeFrancois is a peace activist, women's rights lobbyist and founding member of Women of Halton Action Movement, Oakville Peace Centre, Canadians in Support of Afghan Women, oomama, Port Coquitlam Area Women's Center and Coquitlam Transition House.

References

- Anderson, Doris. *The Unfinished Revolution*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1991.
- Kome, Penney. *The Taking of Twenty-Eight: Women Challenge the Constitution*. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1983.

ABOUT THE GUEST EDITORS

Sally Armstrong is a journalist, human rights activist, and author of the recently published book, *The Nine Lives of Charlotte Taylor* (Random House).

Sherrill Cheda is a second-wave feminist and a retired librarian who loves literature.

Michele Landsberg, O. C., began her journalism career at the *Globe and Mail*, worked for seven years with Doris Anderson at *Chate-laine*, and subsequently spent 25 years as a feminist columnist with the *Toronto Star*. She has written several non-fiction books, is active in many social justice causes, and lives in Toronto with her husband Stephen Lewis.

Shelagh Wilkinson is University Professor Emerita, founding Director of the Centre for Feminist Research, and Coordinator Women's Studies Atkinson, 1983-2001, York University, Toronto.