

Women's Center Celebrates Fifteen Years!

by: Rebecca Allen

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My curiosity was aroused. Who were the individuals that helped transform beliefs and commitments into tangible realities? As a graduate student at the Women's Center since the summer of 1988, I had heard names of former directors and other individuals who were involved with the Women's Center, the Children's Center and the Women's Studies Program. I wondered if information was available that told of these people and their efforts.

During my next scheduled work day, I went directly to our file cabinets. I opened a file drawer and behold, there was a folder labeled Women's Center Description/History. It contained annual reports, surveys, questionnaires, and handwritten notes that preserve some of the moods and efforts of particular times. I have pieced this information together in an attempt to tell our story, a narration that spans fifteen years.

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Other issues of concern among the women faculty, in particular Drs. Madelyn Gutwirth, Pamela Hemphill and Jane Swan, included the needs of the growing number of non-traditional women students on campus. These needs included child-care, and a "safe space" where they could go for support and information and meet other women with similar life situations. Unfortunately, room was not made available even with the support of some members of the administration.

A few individuals continued to advocate for the women students and thanks to the timely intervention of Dr. Swan, facilities were made available in the fall of 1974. The third floor of Smith House seemed suitable and the Women's Center was in business. Dr. Pamela Hemphill became the first Director.

In the beginning, the aim of the Center was to provide a place where the returning student could meet with others, discuss mutual problems and find answers to questions. Students were provided with a lounge and ambitiously started a newsletter.

In spring of 1975, Ms. Marjorie Master, a graduate assistant, was instrumental in running the Center. She developed a questionnaire about the needs of returning students and with Professor Andrew Dinniman helped establish an orientation program for incoming older students.

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the obvious need for starting children in a non-sexist educational environment, resulted in the development of a grant application. This was made possible under the HEW Women's Educational Equity Act funding. The principal investigators were Drs. Madelyn Gutwirth, Pamela Hemphill and Carlos Zeigler. The grant application was funded for the development, implementation and testing of a course to combat sexism in the elementary school. This grant was renewed for a second year and the final results were disseminated nationally.

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In fall of 1977, Dr. Jane Swan became Director of the Women's Center, insisting on a reliable budget, a central location on campus and the promise of a graduate assistant. The Spring and Summer of 1978 were spent overcoming endless bureaucratic delays. By August, Dr. Swan and Women's Center advocates acquired quarters in the Learning Research Center, room 129. The Center took on a new lease on life. The personnel of the Women's Center and Drop-In Center consisted of Dr. Swan (1/2 time), three graduate assistants, and one or two Social Welfare senior placement students.

The Drop-In Center opened in January 1979 to provide rudimentary day-care services for the children of returning students. The response to the facility was overwhelming. The space and budget were woefully inadequate and many requests for services were denied, but it was a beginning. By 1980 the Drop-In Center offered day care services for 22 children. In 1981 this number increased to 30 although only 17 children could be present at one time.

Dr. Jane Swan feels that her most successful accomplishment in the early years was starting the drop-in center for small children. At first run by sorority members, then staffed by work-study students, and against horrendous bureaucratic odds, she was able to get the Center officially licensed. Her words give insight into the situation when she wrote... "More than one day was spent typing out begging letters to friends and foes pleading for toys, supplies, even cookies and milk, while a tearful child on my lap pleaded for his mommy.

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Under the directorship of Mary McCullough, the Women's Center faced uncertainty over receiving funding by I.G.A. Fortunately things did work out, and I.G.A. did approve a budget request for the Women's Center and the Drop-In Center. At this time the finance committee also granted extra monies for the acquisition of cots for the children in the Drop-In Center.

Many innovations were made under Mary's Directorship. The Women's Center Review was begun, she applied for and administered grant monies for the Women Respond to Racism Project, and she did extensive outreach to other PSSU campuses who continued to look to the WCU Women's Center and Children's Center as a valuable resource for beginning or improving their own services.

Robin Garrett, current Women's Center Director, assumed the position in the winter of 1987. Sandra Jones became the Children's Center Director in November of that year. Prior to and during Sandy's work as director, the Children's Center grew from a drop-in center for children of students only, to a professionally staffed, state-licensed day care facility with a full preschool educational program available to faculty and staff as well as students. The work of full-time teacher Belinda Trani has been of inestimable value in the growth of the Center and the high quality services they provide.

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The Women's Center continues to provide a wide variety of services and programs. Support groups are currently offered for returning women students and incest survivors. The Brown Bag Lunch Forums continue to offer interesting programs that are well attended by students and staff. Exciting and fun cultural events such as the Washington Sisters, Alice McGill, Kay Gardner and the Philadelphia Feminist Writer's Group, continue to feed our spirits. Women and men students alike along with faculty, staff, and community people continue to find help at the Women's Center. They call or come in to talk about research on women's issues, experience with sex harassment, recent or past sexual assaults, relationship problems, stress, eating disorders, and balancing family and school. On the other hand, it is a place to come to share good news, experience camaraderie and support, or just to be in a place where they feel welcomed and safe. This is why we still have a Women's Center and why colleges and universities nationwide are starting them, too.

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