

ANTIGONISH WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION/ANTIGONISH WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE HERSTORY

Women in Antigonish first met in 1975, International Women's Year, for the specific purpose of examining women's place in society. A group of community women of all ages, income levels, and religious affiliations formed the group called Women in Transition (WIT). They met regularly over the next couple of years.

In the fall of 1982 the St. F.X.U. Continuing Education Department offered a non-credit course in women's studies, Women Today, taught by Angela Miles. 51 women and 1 man who participated in the class began to analyze women's historical and present lives and socio-economic status. We were eager to delve into the issues of economics, sex-role stereotyping, media images, pornography, aging, rape and women in the workforce. Discussions were intense and animated, often carrying over after class into the midnight hour at the local tavern.

When the class ended in the spring of '83, women needed a means of continuing their learning and analysis and a forum for taking action on some of the issues. As a response to this need the Antigonish Women's Association (AWA) was formed in May 1983.

The desire of the AWA was to support and appeal to as broad a base of women as possible. However as a woman-supporting organization the AWA was both Controversial and suspect in certain sectors of the community. We were fortunate therefore, to choose Grace MacKinnon, a longstanding member of the community, well-known as the town librarian, as our first president. Grace carried out her term as President with characteristic efficiency, dignity and respect for women. The original AWA members included women from the town and county, women working outside the home and full-time homemakers, single women and grandmothers, Sisters, "granolas", welfare mothers and university professors.

The AWA's first major project was to open the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre in November of 1983. To this end funding was secured in a grant from the Secretary of state Women's Program.

The original vision for the Women's centre was to establish a place where women from all walks of life could drop-in for information on a wide range of women's issues, to establish a lending library; provide a place for women to meet, lobby and express their concerns; to network with women in the community; to sponsor educational programs on issues of concern to women; to lobby and advocate for women. Where it is difficult for women to speak out alone, there is

strength in numbers.

"It struck us that in the earliest days women would come to the Women's Centre when they would go nowhere else because it was a women's organization and they were scared to go to Social Services, etc." Grace MacKinnon

The road to acceptance within the larger community has been a rocky one. We had to tread lightly on the issue of choice if we were to survive. Abortion is a divisive issue and in Antigonish, women on both sides of the debate are passionate. Through intense and heart-wrenching discussions around the abortion issue women in the AWA stayed together. Not one original member left the organization. As for policy, we decided that to take a stand on either side would polarize us and lead to our demise. We felt it was more important to work together on the many other issues with our common understanding rather than to divide ourselves over one.

"The pro-life movement is so strong in Antigonish that it shows the strength of the women involved in the AWA to persevere in the face of adversity." Mary Burns

The AWA has presented briefs to various Task Forces and government committees over the past six years. The first one was presented by Lucille Sanderson in 1984 to the Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution. Public awareness was raised around this issue when the Women's Centre showed "Not A Love Story". The AWA Social Action Committee wrote a letter to a number of local merchants protesting their displaying of pornographic magazines in areas accessible to children. The letter was signed by community organizations and published in the local newspaper, the Casket. Most of the merchants responded by putting the offensive material on top shelves of their displays.

The AWA and the Women's Centre have an ongoing relationship with women from around the world who study at the Coady Institute. It is a summer tradition to invite the Coady women to a picnic with AWA members. This is always a wonderful event, a time to share our stories, our individual and collective efforts in women's struggle for equality, songs food and laughter, and to catch up on news of former Coady students now returned home. We learn from each other and through each other. Individual friendships are often formed and invitations to participate in Women's Centre's activities are extended.

Appendix to an earlier chapter

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version of a paper now titled:
Aftermath of a trip to Antigonish & Lunenburg: The Case of
Appendix A - Detailed Chronology *Antigonish Town & County*

The idea of establishing a women's group in Antigonish came from the desire of women who had been attending a Continuing Education course at the university called "Women Today" to continue meeting and to initiate some form of activity. Twenty women, class members and friends, met in April of 1983 and decided to appoint a steering committee to establish an Association and to examine the possibility of establishing a Women's Resource Centre along the lines of one in a neighbouring community (The Second Storey Women's Resource Centre, ~~Lunenburg~~ ^{Bedford, N.S.}). In May the Steering Committee identified the steps involved in founding a resource centre, drew up a brief statement of the goals and objectives of the Antigonish Women's Association, printed membership cards and sold membership for \$3.00 each, and organized a general meeting of the membership. Approximately thirty women attended this meeting at which the steering committee was disbanded and a Board appointed, plans to seek funds from the Secretary of State to open a Women's Resource Centre were discussed, the steering committee's search for a possible location for the centre was reported and members were asked to raise and contribute money by selling sustaining memberships in the Association.

In June the Association Board met with a representative from the Secretary of State's office to discuss the proposed Resource Centre and funding guidelines, drew up a funding proposal for the Women's Programme of that office, sought letters of support for the Centre from agencies, groups and individuals in the community, held another general meeting and continued to increase membership by means of press releases and posters.

The application for funds was submitted in July. Board committees worked over the summer on housing, resources, policy and membership but the Board's next meeting as a whole was in September. In October word was received that the Secretary of State grant was approved; a hiring committee was established to draft a job description for a full-time co-ordinator and part-time office manager for the Resource Centre, to work with Canada Employment and Immigration and interview candidates; a general meeting of the Association was held to report on developments, increase members' participation in the Association's Committees. Letters were sent to established women's groups in the area inviting them to announce the meeting to their members and to send a representative of their group.

By November the Association rented a downtown location (after many disappointments and near misses over the summer), hired a very capable co-ordinator and office manager

and held its first public event--a social and educational on Women, Development and Craft Co-operatives held with the women students from Africa and Asia studying at the Coady International Institute.

Appendix B

Learning Opportunities for Rural Women is a project sponsored by Secretary of State, Women's Programme. The project's main objective is to provide a forum for rural women to identify their learning needs. It involved the assessment of learning needs by meeting with women in various parts of the county.

Background:

The Canadian Congress on Learning Opportunities for Women sponsored a project in another area of Nova Scotia where networking among rural women was being researched. Women in Antigonish began to discuss a variation of this project for their area which would deal specifically with rural women's learning needs and where a possible spin-off would be a rural women's network. A core group of women began to meet to formulate the objectives of the project. They formed a voluntary association which sponsored a grant application to the Secretary of State. The funds were received and a researcher, herself a rural woman, was hired.

The Project:

The needs assessments were conducted by means of "kitchen" meetings. This concept was an effective, informal vehicle for discussion among the women.

The county was divided geographically into four Sections, each of which included four or five small communities. Within these communities one contact woman was identified and asked to assist in bringing together a group of women for a meeting.

Stressing informality, the researcher developed a format for the meeting that would be used in each community. An integral part of this was to have the women prioritize, as a group, the (needs/issues/topics) identified that evening.

All the women who attended a kitchen meeting received a letter, a list of the learning needs as prioritized during her meeting, and a short questionnaire. She was requested to study the list and prioritize it again according to her preferences. This measure was intended to counter any group behavior wherein everyone agrees with a suggestion even if they personally feel differently. The questionnaire dealt with High School courses, Vocational courses, Literacy Training, University degree or non-degree courses, as well as their personal preference of format for such courses (workshop, class, etc.). They were also asked to identify any circumstances that might make it difficult for them to attend events. For this, transportation, babysitting, and cost of courses were most frequently named.

When all the kitchen meetings had been completed, a Section Meeting was planned to set up a Section Committee to

Herstory Rural Outreach

The Rural Outreach Project's primary focus was to help women establish "womens groups" in their areas. Groups were established in three communities which would provide a setting for women to examine the importance of women in their lives as friends and mutual supports. and recognise their commonalities and shared experience despite different backgrounds and upbringing. ^{if would} Give women the opportunity to "voice their concerns and interests regarding their lives families and communities and provide a space to take "time out" for themselves as women.

The project had three phases .1 a series of kitchen meetings focussed on self awareness self esteem and group building. 2. A series of six sessions teaching Facilitation skills in a central location in Antigonish and 3. further kitchen meetings to integrate the skills learned by group members to further empower the groups. Two women from each of the three rural groups learned facilitation skills. The project was designed to develop a model of group process and structure that would equalize power among group members, de mystify the role of facilitator^R and focus on self directed learning and feminist process.

This was accomplished to a high degree and resulted in active experiential learning, critical questioning and analysis and a women centered focus that valued diversity and difference.

All three groups are active and ongoing.