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Resist Newsletter, June 1997

Resist

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On March 6, 1997, a month and a half after the bombing of an Atlanta abortion clinic and a week after the bombing of a lesbian nightclub, several hundred people gathered at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center to rally against terrorism and homophobia. The rally marked a significant surge in cooperation between gay and lesbian, pro-choice and civil rights advocates, cooperation that persisted throughout a divisive session of the Georgia General Assembly. Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell and U.S. Representatives John Lewis, Maxine Waters and Cynthia McKinney shared the stage with members of AID Atlanta, the Georgia Equality Project, and the National Organization for Women (NOW). Religious leaders and union representatives showed their numbers in the crowd.

While the bombings have served as an immediate catalyst to bring together leaders with diverse agendas, Atlanta has long been a place where broad coalitions flourished. The Southern Regional Council, housed near the city’s Five Points, has played a central role in uniting black and white progressives, as well as rural and urban agendas, since the end of World War II. The AIDS crisis, first evident in black and white gay communities, spread rapidly to lower-income black heterosexuals in the 1990s, forcing gay, mostly white AIDS service providers and black religious leaders in order to protect their interests. With a preponderance of Democrats in the state and a sympathetic Speaker of the Georgia House, the pro-choice movement relied upon committee chair appointments, rather than grassroots pressure, to block anti-choice legislation throughout the last two decades.

Anti-Choice Violence and Legislation
1997 will be remembered as the year the dam broke. Hours after the Northside Family Planning Clinic was reduced to rubble, State Representative Ron Crews continued with his scheduled press conference to introduce legislation to outlaw the intact D & E procedure (what pro-choice opponents call “partial birth” abortions) in Georgia. Crews’ successful campaign included filibustering, lobbying by hundreds of “Teen Pacs” (home-schooled Christian students bussed to the Capitol on school days), graphic displays using pink plastic uteruses and, most importantly, the enormous political and financial clout wielded in the South by the Radical Right.

The timing of Ron Crews’ press conference held significant meaning for pro-choice activists and clinic workers shaken by the bombing on the same day. While no hard evidence currently exists to link Crews’ press conference with the actual act of violence, the inflammatory rhetoric and false statistics promoted by Crews fueled an atmosphere of danger that was felt by clinic workers.

continued on page two
workers and advocates throughout the legislative session. As the local media did little more than parrot concocted stories about babies being aborted "minutes from birth," in Georgia, clinic escorts began to document increasingly violent protests outside clinics located close to the state capitol.

Bob Jewett, an Operation Rescue leader with a history of arrests, had to be removed from the office of the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee after participating in a rally held by Ron Crews. Jewett had recently attended the "White Rose Banquet" in Washington, DC, where bumper stickers with slogans bragging "I'm Pro-Life and I Shoot" and "Army of God Atlanta Bomb Squad" were sold. Other aggressive protesters marched outside clinics displaying the home phone numbers of pro-choice legislators along with graphic pictures.

It may be only a coincidence that an abortion clinic was bombed on the very day the Christian Right planned to unveil the centerpiece of their anti-choice legislative agenda. It may also be only a coincidence that Beverly McMahon, co-owner of the The Otherside, a lesbian bar bombed in February, is the sister of the deceased physician who invented the abortion procedure being challenged by the Christian Right's legislation. Dr. McMahon, a vocal critic of the federal ban of his procedure, had appeared on 60 Minutes before his death.

In this atmosphere of intimidation and violence, pro-choice advocates struggled to find doctors and other experts who were willing to risk personal safety in order to come forward and testify. Few would take the risk. Although the American Medical Association, the Medical Association of Georgia, and the College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists opposed the ban on intact D & E abortions, it sailed through the Georgia General Assembly and was quickly signed by the Governor.

Activists Rally and Respond

This loss represents a watershed for pro-choice advocacy in Georgia. The pro-choice movement in this state has operated for the past 10 years through Georgians for Choice, a coalition of 35 organizations including the Feminist Women's Health Center, Planned Parenthood, NOW, Georgia NARAL (GARAL), the American Civil Liberties Union, the League of Women Voters, gay activists, religious groups, and a handful of the state's clinics. GARAL has approximately 5,000 grassroots members, most living in the Atlanta area. In contrast with the Christian Coalition, the pro-choice movement lacks a statewide network of activists. And while the anti-choice movement pours all of its energy and resources into political fights, many of Georgians for Choice's member organizations are service providers, committing all or most of their limited resources to direct delivery of safe reproductive and preventative health care.

Faced with the prospect of a Republican-controlled Georgia General Assembly, the pro-choice movement is adjusting its sights on grassroots organizing and public education campaigns. Also, faced with the continuing threat of violence, clinics are looking for new ways to protect themselves. For example, the Feminist Women's Health Center recently hosted an ATF training on bomb threats for local clinic staff.

The bombings brought Atlanta's rich supply of civil rights veterans—many who now serve as elected officials—to the fore. These women and men cut their political teeth on billy-clubs, not golf courses. Black legislators quickly and vehemently condemned the bombings. They carried this fight to the floor of the House, where blacks as a group were the strongest opponents of the "partial birth" bill, shattering the image that pro-choice means white, female, and upper-middle class.

In fact, our season of bombing exposed much more than the depraved vision of a few hateful loners. For progressives in Atlanta, the bombs blew away layers of accumulated stereotypes about who we are and who stands beside us in our causes. Black politicians, long painted as homophobic, lent vital support to gays and lesbians following the bombing of The Otherside. Gay and heterosexual businesses raised money for the lesbian nightclub. The Feminist Women's Health Center is expanding its programs relating to lesbian health and will set up a table for the first time at the Atlanta Gay Pride event in June. When the Georgia Equality Project organized the King Center peace rally, it was no accident that "everybody" came—the lesbians and gays who make up the Equality Project have been standing by the pro-choice community and the civil rights movement for years.

Standing on a street corner between King's childhood home and the crypt where he was laid to rest, U.S. Representative John Lewis recalled the bombings and acts of violence that shook the South four decades ago. "This madness must stop," he said. Even if it doesn't, it's the bombers who have lost, not us.

RESIST Newsletter

Sixty Minutes

Activists Rally and Respond

For progressives down here, the bombs blew away layers of accumulated stereotypes about who we are and who stands beside us in our causes.
The history of RESIST parallels the history of radical movements in the United States for the past 30 years. Founded primarily to fund anti-war activism and draft resistance, RESIST quickly included anti-racism groups among its grantees. Each successive movement—feminist organizing, opposition to the U.S.-sponsored war in Central America, environmental activism, gay and lesbian liberation, labor activism, to name a few—challenged RESIST to expand its funding. As part of a series of reflections on RESIST’s 30-year history, Pam Chamberlain offers her thoughts about RESIST’s middle years in the 1980s.

Pledging to Fund Change and More

PAM CHAMBERLAIN

I joined the board of RESIST in the early 1980s at a crest of my own feminist and gay activism. At the time I was also active in anti-militarist work, but in all probability the board invited me to participate to help review the women’s and gay/lesbian grant applications and to support RESIST in its effort to be informed and responsive to women’s and gay/lesbian issues around the country. I was flattered to think that I could add diversity to an organization, and I jumped right in to the work. What I didn’t know about RESIST was that a time-tested tenet of the movement thrived there: once snagged, worker bees could be persuaded to stay on in perpetuity!

Our Boston-based groups knew that RESIST offered grants, but the source of its funds was a complete mystery to me. If I gave it a thought at all, I suppose I might have imagined that a few rich donors kept the organization afloat. Certainly it never occurred to me to give any money to RESIST myself before I became active with the board. Like many of my friends, I felt that time was money, and if I didn’t have the money, I would donate my time. When I learned about the pledge system, the concept of people faithfully sending in their $5 or $10 a month somewhat reminded me of church, or of the United Way Campaign at my government job, and it reeked of conventionality. But I soon came to appreciate how non-traditional this concept was. I realized that hundreds of devoted supporters were hooked in to this organization, and all they needed to do to feel a part of something bigger was to respond to the gentle reminders from RESIST and return their business reply envelopes. It was a brilliant strategy, and it was working! It seemed like such a good idea to me that I started to pledge myself. Boom! I was then hooked in two ways.

The first few Sunday board meetings were a little intimidating for me. How’s a nice lesbian-feminist supposed to behave around a bunch of what I imagined were old lefties? The meetings lasted for most of the day, but at some point in the meeting people seemed to get energy from the passionate scrutiny of ideas. We were enjoying political discussions prompted by our task of making funding decisions. The perspectives were more diverse than I expected. It was actually fun! I discovered I had a voice—it was my own and amazingly, it could speak for others.

With the help of RESIST staff, the board hammered out how we should respond to the issues of the moment, given our limited funds: Reaganomics (support creative organizing projects that expose this folly); AIDS (fund groups that organize the outrange of people living with AIDS and their supporters); Central America (help groups that educate organize about the disastrous impact of U.S. foreign policy in the region); abortion rights (encourage groups to maintain and promote a strong reproductive rights guarantee for all women); and lesbian and gay liberation (recognize and support liberation struggles over rights-based assimilationist groups). The board prioritized political organizing over direct service, and shared a continued awareness that we all are stronger when we recognize and act on the connections across issues. We thought that coalition work, in its gutsiest and messiest forms, held the most promise. We supported specifically anti-racist work in local communities, but over time we also came to recognize the value of helping groups tackle racism in conjunction with their primary organizing projects. We still hold to those policies today and are pleased to see creativity and spunk in the applications we receive.

Today we are faced with the commodification of a lesbian on network TV; burnings of African-American churches; a definition of “full employment” that requires millions of people to be out of work; and a new version of the arms race wherein U.S. and Russian arms are sold to any ready buyer. Thus, organizing for social change remains as compelling as it always has been. A lot of work needs to happen, and a lot of work is being done!

What we see at our Sunday meetings these days is evidence of small and not-so-small pockets of resistance all across the country. Unlike places are emerging all the time: for instance, Montana is our newest “hot state” for numbers of grant applications. We are seeing an increase in groups organizing around local issues, which is necessary and fabulous; however, there are also plenty of groups who are committed to finding creative ways for everyday people to get involved in challenging many of the national and global abuses of power.

Foundations like RESIST help small groups with limited means to mount modest organizing projects. Often groups that come to us have trouble finding funding elsewhere. Sometimes, as I’m sure you have heard before, our grants can make the difference between the life and death of a project. These efforts taken as a whole mobilize hundreds of thousands of people into many creative, empowering activities that most of us rarely hear about. And when we do hear about them, often in the RESIST Newsletter, it really feels like something important is happening.

RESIST has survived and even thrived for 30 years, thanks to our pledges, donors, applicants, and staff. My involvement has undeniably enriched my life and helped me feel in touch with social justice work, even during the country’s most dull and stultifying moments of the past 15 years. In an era of invasive telemarketing and direct mail overkill, we remain a low-key alternative funding organization. And that’s a breath of fresh air these days.

Pam Chamberlain, a progressive educator and amateur mycologist, has been a RESIST Board member since 1983.
Sexual Minority Youth Demand Rights

Queer Youth Activists are all SMYALs

NATHAN POSTELL IV

I can sit here and quote back the statistics on homosexuality from now until the state of Kentucky allows gay marriages but what good would that do? We’ve all heard them in some way or another, so let’s not go there. However, I will say that the face of the queer youth community is changing everyday from the docile, scared and meek victims of the 1970s and 1980s to the proud, empowered youth I see everyday at school, in public and even in the workplace.

However, this openness has not come without a few physical and mental scars.

— A gay youth from Virginia was held off the railing on a balcony during a fieldtrip and harassed because he is openly gay and fights for gay rights and issues in his high school. He reported the incident, and his attackers were suspended.

— Several members of the football team beat up and yelled at a lesbian and several of her friends because she is openly gay.

— Two high school sophomores were beaten up by a group of kids from their high school because they kissed on the football field. The two sophomores and only one of their attackers were suspended.

— Someone stapled a cross to the picture they would not have been reported. The student who was attacked by members of her school football team feared retribution and the possibility of being outted to her parents. Her teacher refused to take the photo down and responded that it was the student’s fault because she was “flaunting” her sexual preference.

Three out of four of these cases were reported. The student who was attacked by members of her school football team feared retribution and the possibility of being outted to her parents. Had these case occurred in the 1970s or 1980s, odds are they would not have been reported. The gay bashing would have remained one of our dirty little secrets.

Not anymore. Since its re-birth last August, the SMYAL (Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League) Youth Council has been dedicated to empowering queer youth throughout the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. The 12 active youths on the council have spoken at more than 50 events, ranging from the first Youth Pride Day to a discussion on alternative lifestyles at a local Middle School health class. Without the bravery of gay, lesbian and bisexual students all across the country who took a stand and said enough is enough, queer youth might still be lurking in the shadows and living in constant fear.

Since the age of 16, I’ve been out of the proverbial closet to my friends, family and even my co-workers. My mom found out Saturday September 17, 1993, when she stumbled across a love letter written to me from my boyfriend at the time. When I got home that night, she curiously asked me who he was; tired of the lies, deception and just the blatant crap, I told her. By this time, I had joined SMYAL and had made a lot of cool friends who were also going through the process of coming out. Although they weren’t there, I knew that I had there support and encouragement.

My mother took it rather well. I was expecting her to freak out; I was actually expecting my entire family to freak out to the point that I’d be living on the streets. It was rough initially—that entire weekend I didn’t speak to my mom, and I could barely look her in the face. But one night she came to me and apologized for invading my privacy; she said that she loved me no matter what and that we would get through this together.

It was those words that sparked me to get more involved in the Queer Youth Movement to the point that I’ve spoken at workshops, on television, and even on radio. The Youth Council has given youth who aren’t able to be outright active a chance to be heard without necessarily being seen.

It’s because of the support of parents and families like mine that queer youth have the courage to stand up and fight. A perfect example is Jamie Nabozny, a gay male who became a famous part of the Queer Youth Movement after he successfully sued his high school, winning more than $500,000 dollars. During his time at the school, Nabozny was harassed, beaten, and even sexually assaulted. His lawsuit challenged the fact that the school administration ignored what was obviously happening to him.

In 1997, queer youth are out, loud and proud, and we’re ready to fight for what we believe. We have supportive families, friends, and in many cases, lawyers who believe in the same thing we do: equality no matter what.

With the help of a grant from RESIST, the SMYAL Youth Council is able to do just that. Thanks to RESIST, we’ve organized a rally to bring attention to the issue of teen suicide, and this summer, the council is planning what we call SUMMIT ’97, a day-long workshop for gay and straight youth, their parents and community leaders to educate each other on these issues. For gay, bisexual and transgendered youth, today’s society is getting tougher and tougher everyday. However, we must all remember, to exist, we must resist.

Nathan Postell IV is a 19-year-old part-time college student. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League (SMYAL) and chairs its Youth Leadership Council, which received a RESIST grant in 1997.
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In each issue of the Newsletter we highlight a few recent RESIST grants to groups around the United States. This month, we feature grants awarded at our May Board meeting. For more details about these grants, please write to the organizations themselves at the addresses listed below.

Pride!
PO Box 775
Helena, MT 59624

PRIDE! formed following two failed attempts to repeal Montana's Deviate Sexual Conduct Statute, in 1991 and 1993. After those defeats, gay and lesbian activists, along with straight allies, met to formulate a serious organizing strategy. PRIDE! formed the following year to organize, educate and build coalitions to promote and secure the constitutional rights of privacy, human dignity and equal protection for lesbians, gays and bisexuals in the state.

In what is considered a "frontier" state (with less than six persons per square mile), gay men and lesbians constitute one of Montana's largest minority populations. PRIDE! organizers have worked to overcome the vast area and isolation, offer a progressive voice for the "lesbigay" community, and bring straight and gay progressive activists together.

With a $1,000 grant from RESIST, PRIDE! purchased a computer to facilitate their organizing work.

Solutions to End Poverty Soon (STEPS)
986 Broad Street
Trenton, NJ 08611

Founded in 1993, STEPS is a statewide coalition of low-income people and anti-poverty advocates in New Jersey. STEPS works to promote public awareness of poverty in the state, provide avenues for the voices of the economically distressed to be heard, and construct realistic solutions to poverty.

STEPS sponsored the "People's Convention on Poverty" and the "Truth in Budgeting Day" in which low-income residents prioritized specific organizing goals. With information gathered from those events, in 1995 STEPS introduced a comprehensive plan to combat poverty in New Jersey, which has come to be called "The Work Support and Family Stability Program."

A $1,000 grant from RESIST will help STEPS to purchase office equipment, such as a printer and copy machine, to be used for the production of educational materials on Welfare Client Rights under the new Welfare Reform Laws, and to update their "Poverty Teach-In Packet."

Immigrant Workers Resource Center (IWRC)
25 West Street, 2nd Floor
Boston, MA 02111

The IWRC formed in 1987 as a support center for immigrant workers experiencing abuse on the job. IWRC joins the resources of the labor movement with those of immigrant and refugee communities to obtain safe, decent jobs; improve wages and working conditions; and build immigrants' power and participation in the decisions that affect their lives.

A $1,000 grant from RESIST assisted IWRC with the costs of organizing May Day 1997. The event celebrated the contributions of immigrant workers to the U.S. economy and culture, protested the Welfare Reform Bill, raised awareness about current immigrant worker struggles, and united labor and immigrant groups in international solidarity.

Project on Youth and Non-Military Opportunities (Project YANO)
PO Box 230157
Encinitas, CA 92023

Project YANO was formed in 1984 as a coalition of community groups working on issues like economic justice, human rights, peace, militarism and nuclear war. Concentrating primarily on reaching out to and educating low-income high school-age youths, Project YANO sends military veterans into high schools to counter the presence of military recruiters and JROTC; makes youths aware of non-military alternatives for job training and college aid; and promotes youth involvement in social change work.

A $1,000 RESIST grant will be used to restock buttons with the slogan "Youth for Peace and Justice," distributed in high schools; and pay for a fund appeal.