

I GET DRY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

*Kathleen "Corky" Culver,
from an interview with Barbara Esrig¹*

Part of my motivation for getting sober was that I had just seen an antinuclear protest ending with the arrests of activists. I wanted to be willing to go to jail for justice but thought I would have a hard time not being able to drink in jail. I knew that to be free enough to act on my beliefs, I had to give up drinking.

We were part of an antinuclear group organizing against the proliferation of nuclear submarine stations, power plants, and weapons. We listened to Helen Caldicott. We demanded the cleanup of radioactive waste dump sites and the closure of nuclear reactors until they dealt with important repairs and critical safety issues. Our group had just been asked to join a large demonstration at the Savannah River Nuclear Power Plant in South Carolina, where we would block the entrance so workers couldn't go in.

I and five lesbian friends—Kate Gallagher, Lynda Lou Simmons, Judy Keathley, Pam Smith, and Jean Francis from the Gainesville group—decided we would be ready to risk going to jail for civil disobedience. I quit drinking for three days before we set off for the Peace Camp where the demonstration was being coordinated.

We all camped out together, and I remember we made a circle to introduce ourselves and so we could each speak our truth. It was very orderly, and everyone listened when another person spoke without interruptions or cross talk. That was normal protocol in

group process at the time. There was no shell or talking stick back then, so instead we passed around a fifth of Southern Comfort. When it was my turn and I was handed the bottle, I passed it to the next woman without taking a drink.

I remember feeling nervous and self-conscious because everybody in the circle knew that I wanted to stop drinking. I didn't know how they would react. Much to my surprise, after me, a couple more women passed the bottle without taking a sip either! I was so surprised when they did that. It really felt like I was getting unexpected support.

After a few days of planning meetings, we mobilized for the blockade. It wasn't just us but a huge group of men and women. All of us had talked about the dangers of nuclear power with the local people who lived around the Savannah plant and were getting cancer. Then my friends and I joined others, took a stand by the plant entrance, locked arms, and refused to leave. We allowed ourselves to be forcibly removed and arrested and would not give our names. Each called herself "Jane Doe," knowing that would get us in jail. (Actually, the policeman who arrested me put my stated name down as "John Doe," a dig at my dyke look.) Sure enough, the six of us were carted off to the Bamberg County Detention Center.

Getting handcuffed, put in a van, and taken to an unknown place was scary, but lo and behold, they put the Gainesville group in the same cell block! The block consisted of pairs of cells with only bars between them, and in the very next cell was Blue Lunden. Blue was one of the women who lived at Sugarloaf Women's Community, a center for nonviolence on Sugarloaf Key, FL, with Barbara Deming, a well known peace activist. Because she was a recovered alcoholic herself, Blue's wise, knowledgeable, and kind way helped me in those crucial days of early sobriety, as well as the fact that no alcohol was available.

The idea of being in jail was terrifying, but once there we actually felt powerful, and lucky. We were in jail for sixteen days.

¹ Barbara Esrig interviewed Corky Culver in Melrose, FL, November 21, 2019. This interview was not recorded, but the complete 1593-word interview notes are archived. Culver has also written about the action in South Carolina and the Peacewalk to Key West described here in "Into the Grueling Duellings of Consensus Dances Sweet Meditation," *Sinister Wisdom* 93 (2014): 23–26.

I think the sheriff really sympathized with our protest, and he helped make our time there not easy, but bearable. We even had a jail block Halloween party with makeshift costumes. The sheriff left our cell doors open so we could move around the block and visit each other. Barbara Deming sent us cookies.

We were interviewed by several newspapers and referenced in national news on NPR. The press gave us access to the outside, and a lot of people knew where we were. For all those reasons we never felt isolated or alone.

In jail we had difficult discussions about when we would give our names to start the sentencing and release process. Some did not want to give our names until there were no more missiles, some when there were no more wars, and some wanted desperately to get back to their lives. We were stuck, and the arguments continued.

At that point we decided to meditate together. We put down a green blanket, pretended it was grass (ha!), and sat in a circle. We asked for guidance deep within, and that is how the Peace Walk was envisioned. Out of the meditation came the image and idea of all of us as a sort of cleansing, flowing stream. We saw a peaceful demonstration, walking from Gainesville all the way to Key West. In meditation we saw we could get attention by walking through every little town along the route. It was a way to both continue our mission and get out of jail.

When released, we all wanted to eat really good food and celebrate together. At the restaurant, my friends surrounded me on one side of the table where no one drank. It was a crucial time for me. I had not known if I could have a good time, if I could socialize, without drinking. It was wonderful to feel the healing.

The subsequent support I got from my community was amazing. In part because of my choice to give up alcohol, it was decided the Peace Walk would be chem-free, clean and sober. That was a wonderful way for us to be together. A group connected by optimism and idealism is a beautiful thing.

On the Peace Walk, which lasted forty days, we sang and chanted all the way down the Florida peninsula. It was high-minded. The local television, radio, and newspapers helped to spread the word about our action and broaden support. Every night people offered places where we could stay. One night we slept inside a Mexican restaurant! We had circles every day to discuss our mission, our worries, our blisters, and plans. We had the precious experience of living together, sharing a life-changing experience, and getting stronger.



Photo by Emily Greene

Peacewalk begins downtown Gainesville, December 17, 1983. Corky Culver is holding the sign at left, Blue Lunden at right. Peacewalkers carried the sign all the way to Key West on a forty-one-day walk.

Along the route, we met many lesbians and began introducing them to our experience with activism as a way to engage rather than drinking. During that time in the 1980s, some lesbians thought that the only way to meet other lesbians was by going to bars. Perhaps we helped sow the seeds of sobriety for some.

After the Peace Walk came more actions, conferences, and community building. We had consciousness-raising (CR) meetings where a subject was given, and everyone talked about how they related to that subject. When a CR was offered on addictions, I became uptight, fearing that the whole focus would be on me. Amazingly, it was not. Instead, there was not a single person out of thirty-four in the circle who didn't have a personal connection to addiction, either their own or a family member's.

Those of us who thought we were alone found out that many other people had what we thought was our own personal failing or drama. Suddenly, we were relieved from all that self-condemnation. The once-heavily drinking community now supported other activities, like chem-free dances. We discovered that we did not have to deal with problems alone.

We learned we could do it together.

MOBLEY-IZING FOR CHANGE: A BLACK LESBIAN SEEKING COMMUNITY IN THE SOUTH

*Woody Blue from Lorraine Fontana's
interview with Carolyn Mobley¹*

In the '70s, throughout the United States, lesbians were figuring it out. They may have started slow and tentative, but once out of the closet, lesbians formed their own societies and social clubs. There were sports clubs for the jocks, speakeasies for the discreet professionals, bars for meetups and dancing, bridge clubs, bowling leagues, groups that tangoed, and the Girl Scouts. LOL. There was lots of adventure to be had. Crushing out on gym teachers was big. Sleepovers and kissing girls. That kind of thing.

There was one woman, born in Sanford, FL (December 17, 1948), who never doubted that she belonged in the lesbian world. Her name is Carolyn Mobley. Her granddaddy was a Baptist preacher, and many generations of church blood trickled through her veins. Being in the church was in her DNA.

Carolyn was a member first and foremost of the Black community where she was raised and baptized at age ten. By the time she was through high school she was sure she was a lesbian. Being the adventurous type, she elected to attend a predominantly white coed college in Abilene, TX, thinking that would keep her lesbian tendencies at bay. Surprise! Despite constantly crushing out on (or finding herself attracted to) white girls, she managed to get her religious education degree in 1971.

In those days, women weren't allowed to become preachers. Carolyn wasn't into "bucking the system"; she just wanted to serve God and knew that was her vocation. And just because, she fell

¹ Lorraine Fontana interviewed Carolyn Mobley by phone on December 15, 2015.