

TRANSFORMING LESBIAN CULTURAL POLITICS IN GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

Corky Culver

By the late sixties, the Gainesville, FL, area had become a magnet for feminist activities. Previous issues of *Sinister Wisdom* covered the first lesbian consciousness-raising (CR) groups there in 1969, the first women's land group in 1972, and in 1974 the first art festival to showcase women's art.¹ Here we proceed into the 1980s.

Lesbian-feminists of the 1980s diverged from the politics of Women's Liberation to include culture, seeing a partnership between culture and politics as important. We added art and music and peace activism, ecofeminism, and living on the land. Of course, we added a lot of romancing—"revolutionary ardor," I like to call it. In the 1980s, we had peace work, activist organizations and events (FAN and LEAP), and writing groups.

FAN, the Feminist Action Network, grew from the Peacewalk, Gainesville to Key West in 1983–84.² Having acted on global issues, completing a forty-one-day walk spreading the message of demilitarization and hands off Central America, we now turned to local issues. The sexual harassment of women students jolted into the spotlight from our first march in whiteface down fraternity row, where the guys predictably acted out in gross fashion, jeering "they're too ugly to rape." For the TV cameras and the *Gainesville Sun*, the frat boy uproar made the issue quite clear and resulted in a permanent committee at the University of Florida to deal with the issue.

FAN also marched downtown to form a circle at the city hall to speak out on violence within relationships that had once been discounted as "spats." As always, we used theatrical presentation to underscore the horrors and bring reality out of the fog of denial. Chem-free dances sprang up, an alternative to bar culture, as significant numbers of women began a path of sobriety. We were rather shocked at first to think of partying down without alcohol, but fabulous times were had at these high-energy events. Newly sober dykes had a safe place for lighthearted socializing without the triggers for drinking. And lesbians and feminists in recovery groups rewrote the opening prayer to eliminate the male pronoun for God.

After the FAN actions, there seemed to be a natural progression among women in the community to step back for a while to write. Lesbian-feminist writing groups sprang up, including a monthly reading and potluck which continues to this day. At one time in the late eighties, four different groups were meeting, using the written word to develop new ideas and often to journal through recovery. Many Gainesvillians were attending *Womonwrites* in the eighties and nineties, which gave a superb boost to writing.

Meanwhile, FAN was meeting to organize Lesbians Empowered for Action and Politics (LEAP), retreats that included everything from spiritual circles to pursuing justice in the legal system. LEAP was an amazing example of Gainesville's holistic approach to feminist politics. Our Peacewalk connections across Florida and the South helped the core Gainesville lesbians organize LEAP with weekend meetings in various towns over the course of a year. We would have one day of CR before one day of nuts-and-bolts planning. The CR addressed our wish to keep learning, to keep challenging old assumptions from the patriarchy. This inclusive approach was unsettling to the ideological purists in women's liberation, who went their separate ways. We all remained a family, loving but not agreeing.

1 See *Sinister Wisdom* 93 (2014), 98 (2015), and 104 (2017).

2 See Kathleen "Corky" Culver, "Into the Grueling Duelings of Consensus Dances Sweet Meditation," *Sinister Wisdom* 93 (2014): 23–26.



Photo by Pat Paul

Marcella and Sherry, LEAP 1984.

At each LEAP event (in October of 1984 and 1985), over 200 lesbians from around the South camped for four days at women's land near Gainesville called the North Forty,³ creating this new world, experiencing it, and making it ours. We introduced many lesbians who had only seen lesbianism as a sexual proclivity to a much, much larger view, which we took back to our home communities.

Nothing like this had appeared on the political landscape before: culture, how we communicate and celebrate with one another, how we live, how we make art. It can't really be separated from politics, nor spirituality, nor fitness and health. We had workshops (we called them "learn togethers") on racism and creating utopian community, on consensus and electoral politics, on knowing one's own body and the body of one's car.

³ Corky Culver tells the North Forty story in "The North Forty: Florida (1972–Present)," *Sinister Wisdom* 98 (2015): 19–24.



Photo by Pat Paul

Judy Keathley at Learn Together board, LEAP 1984.

Nonviolence was one of the principles underlying LEAP. Many of us came from the Peacewalk; some had been jailed for blockading an unsafe nuclear plant. While we were aware that having a large gathering of lesbians might attract those who despised us and wished to disrupt, we were determined to adhere to our own values. Each tent of campers got a whistle, and we agreed that if anyone saw an intrusion, she would blow the whistle and all would come out in support. Sure enough, about two in the morning, when everyone was asleep, the whistles began to blow. A group of men in a pickup truck were at the gate drinking, throwing bottles, and yelling, "Dykes! Dykes!" We emerged from our tents *en masse*, running up the sand road toward the gate. I will never forget the sight of women holding up mirrors as they ran, to reflect back at the men their own negative energy. Of course, the sight of a dark road filled with hundreds of mirrors and flashlights heading toward them sent the men off right away! Witness the power of nonviolence in action.



Photo by Pat Paul

Making music to inspire activists for peace and the environment and feminism, and to connect with each other in a joyous way at LEAP 1984.

The decades of the seventies and eighties truly roared for women in Gainesville and surrounding communities. The times were full of diverse grassroots groups, not a unified toe-the-line movement. Femmes fought for pink and dykes for their bikes. We railed against organized religion and loved the names of goddesses. We vacillated between vegetables and hot fudge sundaes. We were for womyn's music only, well, except for the Eagles, Crosby Stills Nash and Young, John Lee Hooker, and so on. We went to Women Producing Women concerts of Alix Dobkin, Kay Gardner, Ferron, Barb Ester, and Beth York. We had new freedoms and options to explore, and we created a world never seen before.

GAINESVILLE DYKES

(TO THE TUNE OF "STAYIN' ALIVE")

Words by Patti Carnuccio, Amber Waters, and Ruth Segal

Well, you can tell by the way I use my walk
That I like the girls so let them talk.
I have no need to conform, because this was the way that I was born.
And it's all right, it's OK—for me there is no other way.
I won't try to understand, why anyone would need a man.

Chorus:

*Whether you're a butch or whether you're a femme
You're a Gainesville dyke, Gainesville dyke.*

Car detailing or gourmet catering.

You're a Gainesville dyke, Gainesville dyke.

Ah, ha ha ha, Gainesville dyke/Gainesville dyke

Here we go...

Now some have dogs and some have cats

Some prefer to swing a bat

Whether Pride Committee or HRC

Diversity makes community

And if you want sports intrigue

Join the Lavender Menace league

When it's time for a shopping spree

Wild Iris Books is where we'll be.

Whether you're a mother or whether you're a brother

You're a Gainesville dyke/Gainesville dyke

You got hair on your legs and none on your head

You're a Gainesville dyke/Gainesville dyke

Ah ah ah ah Gainesville dyke/Gainesville dyke (2x)

Doctors, lawyers, nurses, business owners, counselors

You're a Gainesville dyke

Massage and acupuncturist, librarian and firefighters

You're a Gainesville dyke