

issue. We welcome all woman-loving women and ask that you treat all those present with respect.” Including African American lesbian “womonists” (or finding them, for that matter) was addressed but never realized. Still, for fifteen years, the Upstate Women’s Community served as a touchstone for white lesbian South Carolinians: a means of finding each other in one of the most religiously and politically conservative states in the South.

Beth York: Carol, as a native South Carolinian who fled her homeland for greater social and creative freedom in Atlanta, I am grateful to find UWC, grateful for the part you played in connecting upstate lesbians.

Carol Creech: The UWC was great while it lasted. Parties, rap groups, potlucks, dyke hikes, group trips to concerts, pride marches, yard sales, talent shows . . . almost every weekend you could dress up or down, go out, and have fun with lesbians.

This article is based on a review of monthly newsletters from November 1986 through June 2001. The newsletters are archived in the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City. Many of the quoted materials are not signed or use first names only. Quotation marks are provided to indicate the individual voices of women who contributed to the newsletter, and hence to this article. Although Beth York currently lives in upstate South Carolina and grew up there, she was not living in South Carolina during the time when the UWC was active. She corresponded with two early members of the organization, who shared the newsletters.

SOUTHERNERS ON NEW GROUND (SONG) 1993–PRESENT

Phyllis Free

Building Allies: Connecting Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation¹

Since 1993, **SONG** has been known, both regionally and nationally, for its organizing and training work across issues of race, class, gender, culture and sexuality with both LGBTQ people and allies. . . . Long-term goals of SONG are to build, drive, amplify, and support Southern inter-sectional movement work thru regional capacity building, leadership development, and organizing.
(From SONG website, southernersonnewground.org)

Mandy Carter: SONG came out of the 1993 Creating Change Conference, a conference that the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force does every year. That year, Ivy Young, a Black lesbian working for the NGLTF, called me and said they’d just lost the site for that year’s conference and could they bring it to Durham, North Carolina. This would be the first time they had the conference in the South. I enthusiastically agreed, knowing what a good base of gay and lesbian activists we had in the area. Then we started getting phone calls from people coming to the conference asking things like “Is there an airport down there?” and “Why are we holding it in North Carolina? Isn’t that where Jesse Helms is from?”

¹ This is the tagline SONG used in its earliest literature, followed by content from the About page on their current website (southernersonnewground.org/about/). Their current tagline is “building a political home across race, class, culture, gender & sexuality.”

I told them, “We’re holding it in North Carolina precisely because that’s where Jesse Helms is from!”

The anti-Southern bias was unbelievable. Suzanne Pharr, Mab Segrest, Pat Hussain, and I had already planned to offer a workshop on what it means to be living and organizing in the South as gay people, as lesbians, and these phone calls really underlined the need for that workshop. We had been discussing some of these issues at other places, especially Rhythmfest,² which is where I first met Pam McMichael, so I think the kernel of what became SONG began at Rhythmfest. Then that Creating Change workshop and others at the conference, Mab’s amazing plenary speech on why we as LGBT people have to care about NAFTA and other “nongay” issues, and two follow-up meetings after Creating Change, led to SONG. Our original statement of purpose, which came out of that workshop, was “building transformative models of organizing in the South” that would “connect race, class, culture, gender, sexual orientation,” and I think we added the phrase “gender identity.” The key words are “transformative models of organizing.” It wasn’t just about being Southern, or gay, or lesbian. If you took all that and looked at what you were organizing around, you could see the connections.

Pam McMichael: There are two pieces that are an important part of the context at the time of Creating Change. First, the right wing had released a video called *Gay Rights, Special Rights* that situated lesbigaytrans people as the enemies of people of color. It was a racist video that tried to appeal to people of color, and they mailed that video to Black churches all over the country. The second part was that NAFTA was being debated in Congress at the time of the conference. Having Creating Change in the

South for the first time, having the first race, class, and gender preconference institute, the things in the air around the right’s antigay activities—all of that created opportunity to push the envelope.

Five of the SONG cofounders were there. Joan Garner was the only one missing, but she was soon identified as someone to involve, and we had the first SONG planning meeting, after Creating Change, in January 1994 at her house in Atlanta. Another person who was at Creating Change and was really instrumental in the start of SONG, was Carla Wallace, from Louisville. All of us had done multi-issue work in our communities, and had done that work as out lesbians, and had strong ties to wide movements.

Mab Segrest: I had been on the board of the Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR) in Atlanta and had been generally networking with progressive organizations through entities like the Funding Exchange out of New York City since the early 1980s. Pam McMichael had invited me to speak in Louisville in 1985, and we became good friends. Pam also came to Womonwrites. Carla Wallace and Pam were doing great work in Louisville with the Kentucky Alliance Against Racism and Political Oppression and the lesbian and gay Fairness Campaign. They were mentored in antiracist organizing by Ann Braden.

I also knew Suzanne Pharr from these networks, had spoken at the Arkansas Women’s Project that she helped to found, and did a workshop for the Women’s Project when I was working with NCARRV (North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence). Suzanne had organized a national workshop on countering domestic violence with a wonderful assortment of women of color and white women, which I had attended.

Joan Garner was head of the Fund for Southern Communities (FSC), and NCARRV and CDR had worked with her on the FSC conference on the right wing. Pat Hussain had been working in Atlanta on getting the Olympics out of Cobb County and had been a cochair of the National March on Washington. Mandy [Carter]

² Rhythmfest was a women’s festival held in Georgia and North Carolina in the 1990s, emphasizing “music, art, and politics.” Mandy Carter was one of the producers. We are planning interviews with Mandy and other Rhythmfest producers for a proposed later issue emphasizing the cultural arm of lesbian-feminism.

had been working with the War Resisters' League nationally and in Durham and was working nationally on Black lesbian/gay issues in the context of Black communities.

In other words, all of us were nationally, regionally, and locally located. We knew we were in alliance. Various of us were comrades and friends and had consulted on the common issues we faced in working in mostly straight progressive Southern organizations. It was not any one thing that led to SONG but a set of convergences that unfolded over time. SONG did not come from any one of us, but from the moment and the confluence of forces. If there was one point person for all of this, I would say it was Suzanne.

Suzanne Pharr: That kick-off—to move beyond single identity politics, combined with us all having a strong inclination to carry into it an economic analysis and analysis around violence—set up the political part of it. And also we really, really believed in the power of our relationships, the power of our Southern histories and lives. We recognized that the South is this extraordinary combination of a horrible racist history, horrible labor history, oppression of workers and of women, and at the same time carries the most outstanding movement of the twentieth century, the civil rights movement, as well as extraordinary work by women. Throughout all of that, we recognized that people who grew up in the South love the smells and sounds and tastes of the South. This belief in how our cultural lives intertwine with our political lives—that has been SONG.

The big thing I brought to SONG was a sense of political integrity, that your organization and what you do in your organization and how you treat each other should mirror what you're demanding of society. So don't demand racial justice if you're going to insist that white people be in the majority. Don't demand economic justice if you're going to have huge differences in salaries. You don't demand equality if people don't have a full share of decision making and control over resources.

You have to create models of living where you would tilt the balance toward equality and full self-determination and wholeness of people of color.

Pat Hussain: The six of us were clear that we were tired of actually choosing, you know, I go to this meeting for this issue, and that meeting for another issue. That there needed to be a place that was home, and a clarity that organizing on the East and West coast impacts what happens in this country, but that when the South is in motion for justice, this whole country shakes. There's something different about this region that lost the war. There's something here about the heart of people and the way change happens. No one would have ever imagined that the civil rights movement would have national effects, because it was in the South.

We were all Southern. That was the synthesis, as we kept talking throughout Creating Change—to see that there was something that we wanted, and maybe we were in a position to be able to articulate it. To figure out how we would make all of our lives—race, class, gender, economic equality—the most important issue for us.

One of the things that the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force does—and at the time I was on the Board of the Task Force—is that they are a convener. They make space for people. They use their resources to create a space for smaller voices. It's not a room that they are controlling. It's a space they are providing so *you* can do *your* thing, and tell *them* what's going on.

Joan Garner: There was so much that I saw that was unfinished with the civil rights movement. I wasn't that engaged with the feminist movement, but there were all of these separate movements. For me, I wanted to know how we make the connection here. For me, it's personal. I can't separate myself. For me, I felt that what we did could not be business as usual. I would never go into a meeting and say I'm here as an African American first, or a lesbian first. The total of me is in this room, dealing with all of the issues that I have to deal with as a person.

For me, starting SONG, I felt that if we're going to do this, we've got to stay in the future and move this forward, without

the separation. We can no longer continue to separate ourselves, because there is a connection. We all had a role, and it was a collective role. It was about all of us, our collective wisdom.

The origination of SONG as chronicled here was selected and organized by Phyllis Free, from individual interviews with each of its founders: Mandy Carter, Pam McMichael, Mab Segrest, Suzanne Pharr, Pat Hussain, and Joan Garner. Those interviews, including more extensive background information about these six Southern lesbian-feminist activists—detailed interview notes, including their biographies, organizational affiliations, publications, influences, and insights—are archived at the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

Mandy Carter, originally from upstate New York, then San Francisco, is based in Durham, North Carolina. In 2013 she was National Coordinator of the Bayard Rustin 2013 Commemoration Project of the National Black Justice Coalition. In 2005 she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize (www.100peacewomen.org) and, in 2012, was inducted into the International Federation of Black Pride's Black LGBT Hall of Fame.

Pam McMichael, from rural Kentucky, is the director of the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee. She became a social justice activist and community organizer in Louisville, Kentucky, and served as codirector of SONG from 1994–2001. SONG's mission of building alliances across various divides, especially racism and homophobia, has always been part of her social justice work.

Mab Segrest, from Tuskegee, Alabama, is the Fuller-Maathai Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at Connecticut College. A member of "Feminary" from 1978–82, she is the author of *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1985), *Memoir of a Race Traitor* (Boston: South

End Press, 1995), and *Born to Belonging: Writings on Spirit and Justice* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

Suzanne Pharr, from Lawrenceville, Georgia, former director of the Highlander Center (1999–2004), is SONG's Political Education Coordinator. She is the author of two books—*Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (Inverness, CA: Chardon Press, 1988; updated 1997) and *In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation* (Inverness, CA: Chardon Press, 1996)—and has published over fifty essays in *Transformations* and other newsletters and journals.

Pat Hussain grew up in Atlanta, GA, where she came of age during the civil rights movement. This former debutante and U.S. Marine helped organize the Atlanta Chapter of GLADD, worked with the Gay and Lesbian Task Force, was national outreach coordinator for the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, and cofounded the Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition.

Joan P. Garner, from Washington, DC, has lived in Atlanta, Georgia, since 1978, where she currently serves as Fulton County Commissioner for Georgia's District 6. She became one of the six cofounders of SONG in 1993, while serving as director of the Fund for Southern Communities (1993–97), an organization that fosters social change in Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

To read more of this interview, visit
<http://www.SinisterWisdom.org/SW93Supplement>
 or use these QR Codes



Interview with Mandy Carter



Interview with Suzanne Pharr



Interview with Pam McMichael



Interview with Mab Segrest



Interview with Joan Garner

WOMONWRITES

Merril Mushroom and Rose Norman

This special issue of *Sinister Wisdom* is a project of Womonwrites, the Southeast Lesbian Writers' Conference. Womonwrites has been meeting every year since 1979, and in 1997 began convening twice a year. The idea for a conference for Southern lesbian writers came from a workshop on writing and publishing organized by *Sinister Wisdom* cofounders Catherine Nicholson and Harriet Desmoines and held at the Southeastern Conference of Lesbians and Gay Men in Atlanta in April 1978. Nicholson and Desmoines moved to Nebraska shortly thereafter and were not involved in future planning, but they left a seed well



Photo Credit: Photo by JEB, © 2014 by JEB (Joan E. Biren), used with her permission. From the collection of Rand Hall.

Workshop on the front porch of the dining hall, known as Radclyffe Hall. Left to right: Elizabeth Knowlton and Susan Wells (two of the Womonwrites cofounders), [unidentified], Judy Keathley, Susan Gorrell, [unidentified], [unidentified], Leslita Williams, [unidentified], Lynn Tippetts, [unidentified], [unidentified].

planted. In June 1978 seventeen women from North and South Carolina, Washington, DC, and Atlanta, Georgia, gathered for a planning meeting in Columbia, South Carolina. After two more