

Jane Does, Jail, and the Gainesville Women's Peace Walk

By Marie Steinwachs, 1954

In 1983, feminist activists in Gainesville, Florida, were practiced in taking causes to the streets. Pressing issues that year included the failure of Congress to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. Across Central America, the US continued to support right-wing autocracies that violently crushed opposing political parties of working-class people. Under pressure from arms dealers, the Reagan administration abandoned negotiations for a global ban on the testing and use of nuclear weapons. When a national call was issued for an



Peace is Matriotic banner and women at peace camp



Corky ready for action

action at the Savannah River nuclear bomb plant near Aiken, South Carolina, the local women responded.

This facility was building components for weapons of mass destruction, including deadly tritium and plutonium. It had heavily contaminated the environment and had displaced about 1,500 families, including Black farmers, who would never financially recover their losses. The communities surrounding the plant overwhelmingly supported the protesters.

OLOC member Corky Culver, 1939, was one of the six Gainesville women arrested and jailed for blockading the Savannah River plant. Unlike many who were arrested the day of the action, the Gainesville Six refused to provide local law enforcement with names or identification that were needed to charge and process the offenders. This drew a great deal of attention to the women, who became internationally known as the "Jane Does." They spent 17 days in county jail, where they continued to do media interviews and plan their next action.

Not surprising for those who know her, Corky's recollection of the days in jail, the conception of the Gainesville Women's Peace Walk, and the ensuing 41-day trek down the length of Florida (December 1983–January 1984) is as enlightening as it is entertaining! As she explains, "It wasn't all gravitas!"



Corky journaling in jail

She recounted that when the group first set out from Gainesville, it had a banner, a support van, and less than \$200. Decisions were made in circles and by consensus regarding basic issues such as the walking route and what time the group would get going in the morning. Radio, television, and newspaper interviews were held in towns along the way. They spent nights on floors of churches, in backyards, in a restaurant, and at a beautifully accommodating Girl Scout Camp. With the passion of feminist activists and the resilience of youth, the Peace Walk succeeded in heightening awareness, and it changed the lives of many of the participants.

The blockade, jail, and the publicity surrounding the Peace Walk drew like-minded Lesbians. By the time the group reached Key West, it had compiled contact information for women across the south. This was the basis for LEAP (Lesbians Empowered for Action and Politics), the first Southern Lesbian conference held later that same year [1984].

No doubt every woman who joined the Walk has stories about her personal experiences. Corky's story was showcased on the [Southern Lesbian Feminist Activist Herstory Project \(SLFAHP\)](#) website on December 1. On Wednesday, November 16, [Lesbians WriteOn](#) hosted Corky and other Peace Walk activists as they recalled some of the more memorable events along the way. Send an email to LesbiansWriteOn@gmail.com to receive the link.

Author: OLOC member Marie Steinwachs, 1954, grew up in Florida but came late to southern feminism after a successful environmental career in Missouri that focused on minimizing waste. Returning to Florida in 2014, she found her tribe through the Gainesville area dykes—in particular Corky Culver, who she married in 2019.