

DIRECTOR'S REPORT – JANUARY 2002

The anti-rape movement lost a leader on November 21, 2001. Deborah Wiatt, co-founder of the Rape Crisis Center of McLean County and the Illinois Coalition of Women Against Rape (ICWAR), passed away in the Quad Cities.

Deborah did not live quietly. Yes, she had an easy, relaxed demeanor, moved slowly and spoke deliberately, but her heart and head raced forward with a strong spirit that made her a champion for justice, equality, fairness and social activism. Deborah proudly wore the label of a Leftist. She personified the slogan of the Black Panthers, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” She believed in and worked to change institutions wrapped in traditional male hierarchy and governed by obedience to authority. Deborah prescribed street demonstrations, civil disobedience, Take Back the Night marches and forever speaking out against a society which tolerates rape, discriminates against minorities and creates more privileges for the well-to-do.

Deborah did not fear the role of anger in mobilizing people to change oppressive conditions. While not a foot stomping, fire and brimstone stump speaker, Deborah honored the anger of victims and survivors and could quickly and eloquently shape anger into a move to change.

Deborah knew who benefits from the abuse of power and who pays the price for that abuse. Her analysis reflected her incisive mind, a keen wit and an essential hopeful of those power imbalances, whether personal or global.

Deborah’s organizing work for a rape crisis center in McLean County began in the fall of 1973. By January 1974, she had spoken to local groups about rape and how to stop it. She helped write and distribute the center’s first brochure in March of that year, and in

September, she trained volunteers to answer a hotline and assist victims at the hospital and police station.

In 1975, Deborah joined forces with another McLean County woman, a representative from Champaign County Women Against Rape and one member from Springfield's Rape Information and Counseling Services, all of whom were also members of the National Organization for Women and together they formed the first Illinois state coalition to help lobby for the passage of two bills which had been introduced into the Illinois legislature. They called their organization the Coalition for Rape Reform in Illinois (CRRI).

They testified for the bills – the Rape Shield Law and the Rape Victims Emergency Treatment Act – in front of the judiciary committees of both the Illinois House and Senate and worked with individual legislators to help garner support for the bills and educate law makers about sexual violence.

In the spring of 1977, representatives from most of the 12 rape crisis centers in Illinois and several other organization met in Peoria and formed the Illinois Coalition of Women Against Rape (ICWAR). Deborah had immense influence with the statewide coalition. Her independent spirit made her a leader and spokesperson in forming the mission and goals of the early anti-rape movement. Though she and her allies often met resistance, Deborah never hesitated to speak the truth about why rape occurs and who needs to be held accountable. She followed her own conscience about how to advocate for social change and she thoughtfully and respectfully honored the ideas and offerings of others. She knew how to build consensus and how to agree to disagree about political ideologies and strategies.

Deborah devoted 28 years to the anti-rape movement in Illinois and the United States. She answered the hotline, trained volunteers, met victims in the middle of the night, wrote

training manuals, spoke to countless community groups, served on the Board of her local center and created the foundation for how ICASA conducts business. ICASA continues to make decisions by consensus thanks to Deborah's influence. Yearly, we have a retreat of ICASA member centers which Deborah first termed a "Gathering," a name we fondly retain. Deborah kept us focused on anti-rape work as social change. She made us remember that radical activity is essential to achieve equality and that only equality will achieve the end of rape.

Thank you, Deborah, for sharing your delightful wit, your steady wisdom and your abiding respect for silent voices. Thank you for informing yourself and passing that information to others. Thank you for reminding us that we are all part of a complex world and the biggest job is to ask the right questions. Thank you for reminding us that non-violence is a weapon of the strong and to always have passion for what we do.

We miss you, Deborah, and we always will. You made our days brighter and our work more possible.