

# **RADICAL WOMEN** in Gainesville

## A Letter from the Curator

### Why Radical Women?

The [Radical Women in Gainesville](#) collection and exhibit sites represent radical feminists involved in the grassroots and separatist strands of the local movement, while excluding the more bureaucratic feminist organizations that have chapters around the nation and well-documented histories accompanying them. Radical feminist organizations are less likely to have coherent histories as most of their institutions quickly close down in resistance to mainstream values, leaving the task for the ethnographer to compile the historiography from movement documents and participants.



### Why Gainesville, Florida?

I chose Gainesville as the setting for the collection because the small north Florida college town holds great significance in the national 1970s women's movement. Gainesville residents not only wrote the first theoretical framework for the movement in 1968, they also formed one of the first five Womens Liberation groups in the country.<sup>14</sup> Gainesville has since operated as a feminist Mecca, attracting activists from around the nation as a home away from home, including pioneering feminists Carol Hanisch, Kathie Sarachild, and Rita Mae Brown, not to mention others.

The [Radical Women in Gainesville](#) collection, not only validates the women who participated in the movement, but also contributes to the cultural memory of the local community, which has either forgotten or never known about the women who helped establish rape crisis centers, domestic abuse shelters, natural birth clinics, and other social institutions.

### The Curator's Process

This collection is the product of more than a year's worth of listening to women's stories, collecting their newspapers and papers, reading books and articles, and collaborating with the Digital Library Center to digitize it all. The outcome is an efficient [collection site](#) that allows for the user to view, zoom, search, and download images of archival documents, and an educational exhibit site that contextualizes the collection by providing a comprehensive history of the local movement community.

I began collecting oral histories from women involved in the Gainesville women's movement in November of 2006 under the auspices of the Ronald E. McNair Scholar Program and the guidance of Dr. Trysh Travis at the UF Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research.

My first interviewee was CWSGR affiliate and UF Associate Dean Emerita Phyllis Meek, who gave me a three-hour crash course on the history of women's activism in Gainesville. Over the course of the next year, I would interview several more local women, including former *WomaNews* columnist Sallie Harrison; former feminist bookstore owner, Gerry Green; former [Women's Center](#) director, Rosalie Miller; and co-founder of the [Rape Information and Counseling Service](#), Jacquelyn Resnick. For my last interview in November of 2007, I would travel to South Florida to interview Beverly Jones, co-founding mother of the Gainesville women's movement. Furthermore, in the summer of 2007, I began collecting archives from these women and others, including former movement participants Abby Walters and Nancy Breeze. For a list of the collection materials, [click here](#).

With each oral history and archival document I collected, I became increasingly more aware of the significance of the history I was recovering. I also came to terms with the fact that the history I was collecting differed greatly from the one that has been conveniently nested into our cultural memory by mass media, schools, churches, and political administrations that, despite the gains of the women's movement, continue to foster misogyny and anti-feminist consciousness in our society today.

In response to the bombardment of misinformation, even researchers, for example, tend to default to the errors of the movement, holding it up to an impossible standard, and construing its history in the process. As a result, the value of the 1970s women's movement was far from being fully realized.

The more I understood radical feminists and the social and political climates they lived in, however, the more I valued their oral histories and archives, and the greater responsibility I felt as an archivist to broadcast their hidden history to the public through pervasive forms of media that were more likely to penetrate and revise our prosaic ahistorical imaginations with a true historical narrative. Online exhibits and digital collections seemed to be the best way to accomplish this goal.

While browsing the exhibit and historical documents, one should keep in mind that the 1970s Gainesville women's movement was an experiment on social change. It was merely a group of women, mostly white, but also consisting of some highly-influential African American women and ranging in class, who began to do something about their dissatisfaction with the way in which men and male-dominated institutions treated them. "Their motivation was unfocused - composed of anger, inchoate need, confusion, and frustration - and their purpose was equally unclear."<sup>15</sup> In the same process, women gained some clarity and explored the possibility of owning their own organizations and creating programs to address the issues they felt were most important, like rape, spousal abuse, improved mental health services, and reproductive rights. The [Radical Women in Gainesville](#) collection and exhibit site affirms the women who participated in this history and welcomes others to engage it.

Leila Adams  
Curator  
*Radical Women in Gainesville Digital Collection*



## Overview: A Feminist Mecca Teeming with Plans, Ideas, and Energy

The Gainesville women's movement started in 1968 when two local residents and civil rights activists wrote and circulated "The Florida Paper." The dissemination of the position paper, which the authors originally titled "Towards a Female Liberation Movement," led women from other national women's liberation groups to recognize that Gainesville was not just another small, southern college town, it was a feminist mecca teeming with plans, ideas, and energy.<sup>1</sup>

In the years following, Gainesville would also be the site of early [Redstockings](#) members and the location at which Carol Hanisch authored "[The Personal is Political.](#)" Numerous women's groups and collectives would form as well.

The movement became most visible to the public in the mid-1970s when women began founding feminist institutions. [The Rape Information and Counseling Service](#) was one of the first organizations to form. Soon after came the [Gainesville Women's Health Center](#).

Perhaps the culminating moment of the movement, however, was the founding of [The Women's Center](#), a community space for women.



Throughout the mid-1970s, the local women's movement flourished as various women's groups collaborated in order to present events such as the Southeastern Women's Health Conference. Other protests and boycotts included the Title IV march and the Women for Decency campaign. Apart from involvement in local politics, women in Gainesville also developed a young and vibrant lesbian-feminist community.

But by the 1980s, the rise of the Religious Right, the [defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment](#), and the [County Commission's ruling to revoke federal funding from The Women's Center](#) all diffused the excitement of the movement and the once vivacious Gainesville women's movement faded into a movement in abeyance.<sup>2</sup>

Since the curtailment of the movement, women have formed new organizations and groups that nurture their feminist identities and give them the opportunity to express their pro-woman beliefs through political action. Yet nothing compares to the time when they once lived as history-makers in one of the most massive movements of the twentieth century. This exhibit features their history.

## A Timeline of Events that Affected the Development of Gainesville Women's Movement Community

| <u>1960s</u> |  |
|--------------|--|
| <b>1963</b>  | <p>In October, Beverly Jones co-founds <a href="#">Gainesville Women for Equal Rights</a>, a group of professor wives and local school teachers dedicated to ending segregation in Gainesville.</p> <p>Judith Brown meets Congress of Racial Equality leaders Betty Wright and Patricia Due Stephens and participates in CORE projects throughout North Florida.</p>   |
| <b>1964</b>  | <p>After harassing gay and lesbian teachers, professors, and students in Gainesville and other liberal pockets of Florida for nearly 10 years, Florida State Senate votes to allow the Charley Johns Florida Legislative Investigation Committee to expire.<sup>3</sup></p>  |
| <b>1968</b>  | <p>Beverly Jones and Judith Brown co-author "Towards a Female Liberation Movement" and attend the <a href="#">first Women's Liberation Meeting in Sandy Springs, Maryland</a> where they share the paper with Chicago and New York feminists, who rename it "The Florida Paper."<sup>1</sup></p> <p>Carol Hanisch relocates to Gainesville to start a "freedom for women" project through the Southern Conference Education Fund and to help in organizing the Gainesville Women's Liberation group (<a href="#">Gainesville Iguana Feb. 1998</a>).</p> <p>Gainesville Women's Liberation group sends Carol Giardina as a representative for the protest against the Miss America Pageant.</p> |
| <b>1969</b>  | <p>Kathie Sarachild joins Hanisch, Brown, and others in the Gainesville group, where she authors a consciousness-raising pamphlet.</p>   |
| <b>1970s</b> |  |
| <b>1970</b>  | <p>Carol Hanisch authors <a href="#">"The Personal is Political"</a> in the Gainesville student ghetto.</p>  |
| <b>1971</b>  | <p><i>The Florida Alligator</i> editor Ron Sachs runs an insert listing numbers to contact for abortion services in New York in protest of Florida Statute 797.02. His actions contribute to legalizing the dissemination of abortion information.</p>   |
| <b>1972</b>  | <p>Female students start The Abortion Information Dissemination Service, a UF student organization that connected women to legal abortion services in New York.</p> <p>Equal Rights Amendment passed by Congress.</p> <p>After Byllye Avery is denied a rental house due to her status as an unmarried</p>   |

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|             | <p>woman, local feminists meet with City Hall representatives in order to secure marital status as part of the municipal discrimination code.</p> <p>University of Florida and Santa Fe Community College develop Campus NOW.</p>  |
| <b>1973</b> | <p>Roe v. Wade decision legalizes abortion.</p> <p>The Jacksonville Clergy Consultation Service begins serving women needing abortion services.</p> <p>Maxine Margolis, Margaret Parrish, and Judy Levy secure employment records of all UF faculty and staff and contract an Atlanta Labor Relations Board employee to investigate the disparate salaries between men and women. They threaten suit against UF, who agrees to reform their discriminatory practices. Many of the gains made at this time, have since rolled back.</p> |
| <b>1974</b> | <p>In April, housewives and female graduate students organize the <a href="#">Rape Information and Counseling Service (RICS)</a>, a 24-hour rape crisis hotline.</p> <p>May 2nd, Bylye Avery, Joan Edelson, Judy Levy, and Margaret Parrish found the <a href="#">Gainesville Women's Health Center</a>.</p>   |
| <b>1975</b> | <p>March 21st, Gainesville women attend the first Equal Rights Amendment parade in Tallahassee.</p> <p>March 22nd, Women Unlimited found <a href="#">the Women's Center</a>, a local base for community building and political action.</p> <p>In May, Women Unlimited publish their first issue of <a href="#">WomaNews</a>, a radical monthly feminist newsletter.</p> <p>In June, <a href="#">Womanstore</a> opens, the first feminist bookstore in Gainesville.</p>   |
| <b>1976</b> | <p>In April, Gainesville Women's Health Center presents the Southeastern Women's Health Conference at the J. Wayne Reitz Union at UF.</p>  |
| <b>1977</b> | <p>RICS officially expands its services to battered women and is now known as <a href="#">The Sexual and Physical Abuse Resource Center</a>.</p> <p>New co-owners change the name of Womanstore to "Amelia's."</p> <p>SPARC assists in bringing a Rape Victim Advocate Program to the State Attorney's Office.</p> <p>In June, UF <a href="#">Women's Studies Program</a> is approved.</p> <p>In July, Women Unlimited secures CETA grant.</p> <p>By December, Alachua County Commission votes to cut CETA funding to the</p>          |

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
|              | Women's Center.  |
| <b>1978</b>  | In October, Judy Levy, Byllye, and Margaret Parrish establish the BirthPlace, one of the first seven freestanding birth centers in the United States.<br><br>The Women's Center and <i>WomaNews</i> cease operations, although Amelia's continues serving the community. |
| <b>1979</b>  | Carol Aubin and Gerry Green buy Amelia's from Bonnie Coates and Linda Basham.<br><br>March 22, 1979, original deadline for the Equal Rights Amendment, extended to June 30, 1982.  |
| <b>1980s</b> |  |
| <b>1980</b>  | <a href="#">Gainesville Commission on the Status of Women</a> founded.   |
| <b>1982</b>  | Carol Aubin and Gerry Green close Amelia's.<br><br><a href="#">Gainesville Area NOW</a> founded.<br><br>Equal Rights Amendment not ratified by the June 30, 1982 deadline.   |
| <b>1983</b>  | Byllye Avery launches the <a href="#">National Black Women's Health Project</a> in Gainesville.  |
| <b>1984</b>  | Lesbian-feminists found the <a href="#">Mama Raga</a> monthly newsletter.<br><br><a href="#">Florida School of Traditional Midfery</a> founded, working in conjunction with the Birth Center of Gainesville.   |
| <b>1985</b>  | Judith Brown and Carol Giardina revive the Gainesville Women's Liberation group.   |
| <b>1986</b>  | <a href="#">The Gainesville Iguana</a> , an alternative news source, founded and operated by Jenny Brown and Joe Quarter.  |
| <b>1989</b>  | <a href="#">Redstockings Archives for Action</a> created.  |
| <b>1990s</b> |  |
| <b>1991</b>  | <a href="#">Lavender Menace</a> organized by women wanting to play sports together.<br><br><a href="#">Gainesville Community Alliance</a> founded.   |

“Radical Women in Gainesville Historical Exhibit” by Leila Adams, March 2008

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|--------------|--|
| <b>1992</b>  | Susan Keel and Kerry Godwin found Iris Books steps away from what used to be the building that housed Womanstore and Amelia's, the first two feminist bookstores in Gainesville. |
| <b>1993</b>  | <a href="#">Civic Media Center</a> founded, an alternative library housing documents from local civil rights and women's movements.  |
| <b>1994</b>  | Kathie Sarachild teaches a "Feminist Activism" course in the UF Women's Studies Program  |
| <b>1996</b>  | Dotty Fiasbisy and Beverly White purchase Iris Books from former owners and alter its name to <a href="#">Wild Iris</a> .  |
| <b>1997</b>  | After nearly 25 years of serving the community, the Gainesville Women's Health Center closes ( <a href="#">Gainesville Iguana Oct. 1997</a> ).                                   |
| <b>2000s</b> |  |
| <b>2004</b>  | Cheryl Krauth and Lyly Rodriguez become the new owners of <a href="#">Wild Iris</a> .  |
| <b>2006</b>  | Cheryl Krauth and Lyly Rodriguez start <a href="#">Friends of Wild Iris</a> , a non-profit tax-exempt volunteer organization.  |

## Towards a Female Liberation Movement

A former UF political science professor best characterized Gainesville, Florida in the 1960s as "The Berkley of the South."<sup>4</sup> The small southern college town's progressive politics contrasted greatly when compared to its neighboring confederate counties and states thanks to the activism of local citizens.

Anti-war and desegregation were the two main issues of the decade, although a more subtle movement was forming against homophobia in response to the Charley Johns Florida Legislative Investigation Committee that harassed gay and lesbian teachers, professors, and students in Gainesville and like cities in Florida from 1956 to 1965.<sup>3</sup>



Women, mainly those associated with the University of Florida, participated in voter registration and desegregation efforts in Gainesville and its surrounding areas. Around the same time, racial tensions intensified when a handful of African American students were admitted to the University of Florida in 1958, sparking protests and a riot.

One of the African American students, along with white civil rights ally Judith Brown, founded a first student civil rights organization at UF during that time, known as the Student Group. UF professor Marshall Jones and his colleague Ed Richard would supervise the group.



The Student Group organized sit-ins, marches, and boycotts throughout Gainesville, especially at the College Inn Cafeteria and the Florida Theatre, two racially segregated institutions that would not integrate until the late 1960s. It was through the Student Group that UF student Judith Brown and Beverly Jones, wife of Marshall Jones, would meet.

Beverly Jones and a group of professors' wives would co-found the [Gainesville Women for Equal Rights](#) organization in 1963 in an effort to propel the static movement forward. Meanwhile, that summer Judith Brown would join activists Betty Wright and Patricia Due Stephens in Congress on Race Equality (CORE) projects throughout North Florida.<sup>13</sup> Both women's involvement in civil rights activism would equip them to soon become the leading writers of a feminist revolution.

Beverly Jones, frustrated with the unequal gender relations in her marriage and the way in which men ignored women's political ideas at meetings altogether, would sit down to write "Towards a Female Liberation Movement" in 1968.

Judith Brown would join her to write the second part of the position paper that same year and would urge Jones to finish her section in time for the first national Women's Liberation meeting in Sandy Springs, Maryland where the paper circulated from one feminist's hands to another and became nationally acclaimed as "The Florida Paper."<sup>1</sup>



## The Paper that Started It All

Frustrated with the unequal gender relations in her marriage and the way in which men ignored women's political ideas at local anti-war and civil rights meetings altogether, Beverly Jones, activist and wife of a UF professor, would sit down to write "Towards a Female Liberation Movement" in 1968.

Judith Brown, a member of the UF civil rights student organization of which Jones and her husband were supervisors, would join her to write the second part of the position paper that same year. Brown would also urge Jones to finish her section in time for the first Women's Liberation meeting in Sandy Springs, Maryland where the paper circulated from one feminist's hands to another and became widely acclaimed as "The Florida Paper."

"The Florida Paper" stated that men had too much at stake to make sincere efforts towards reforming the New Left to include women as equals; women were naive to think otherwise. Jones argued:

There is an almost exact parallel between the role of women and the role of black people in this society. Together they constitute the great maintenance force sustaining the white American male. They wipe his ass and breast feed him when he is little, they school him in his youthful years, do his clerical work and raise his and their replacements later, and all through his life in the factories, on the migrant farms, in the restaurants, hospitals, offices, and homes, they sew for him, stoop for him, cook for him, clean for him, sweep, run errands, haul away his garbage, and nurse him when his frail body falters.<sup>5</sup>

Jones and Brown intended to interrupt this system of maintenance by separating from men in the local student civil rights organization and addressing their own needs through a nation-wide campaign for women's rights. Yet Jones noted that women could not separate physically from men unless they first freed themselves from mental trappings, such as romanticism.

Women who would avoid or extricate themselves from the common plight I've described and would begin new lives, new movements, and new worlds, must first learn to acknowledge the reality of their present condition. They have got to reject the blind and faulty categories of thought foisted on them by the male order for its own benefit.... In other words, they must reject romanticism. Romance, like the rabbit of the dog track, is the illusive, fake, and never-attained reward which for the benefit and amusement of our masters keeps us running and thinking in safe circles.<sup>5</sup>

In calling for women to put aside romantic notions for a more realistic and strategic perspective, the paper also cited celibacy as a short-term tactic for non-married women to use in order to "stop the world and get off".<sup>5</sup> In other words, women could use celibacy as a transient space to move in and out of when they felt the need to separate from men and social pressures in order to become self-conscious of their own thoughts and considerate of the possibilities outside the perimeters of "safe circles."

As an important side note, women's all-female communes would also allow for experimenting with sexuality and relationship structures. Brown, however, criticized communes for their lack of political direction, structure, and constructiveness while envisioning a more revolutionary type of space that could establish women's political self-consciousness. Seven years later, [The Women's Center](#) would be the fulfillment of Brown's vision.

In 1968, the two women would travel to Sandy Springs, Maryland for the first Women's Liberation national meeting. There they befriended New York Radical Women and exchanged papers with them: "Notes from the First Year" for "Towards a Female Liberation Movement," which would later become well-known as "The Florida Paper." By forging the beginnings of a life-long partnership with radical feminists in New York, Gainesville would soon become "the southern base" for a "North-South connection."<sup>1</sup>



"The Florida Paper" helped mobilize and transform a small set of inchoate women's groups into a national force of social change. Chicago West Side Group member, Naomi Weisstein reacted to the publication saying:

'After we got started, for months we were paralyzed with doubt: was there any need for an independent women's movement, since the triumph of socialism would surely dismantle the patriarchy? Then the paper came out. It transformed our thinking... Now we knew we were doing the right thing. Here was a vision of the liberation of women so real, palpable, and compelling that our doubts dissolved and we forged ahead... After that paper, there would be no turning back for us or for the rest of the movement.'<sup>2</sup>

Despite national acclaim for the "The Florida Paper," Gainesville lacked one important component to take part in the women's liberation movement, a local women's liberation group. In actuality, Gainesville had only a paper, a theoretical framework, but no one to help spread the word or help in organizing a local group.

At this time, Gainesville's new-found friendship with New York Radical Women became most evident. New York women Carol Hanisch, Kathie Sarachild, and Irene Peslikis relocated to Gainesville and there helped found the Gainesville Women's Liberation Group along with Judith Brown and Carol Giardina.<sup>3</sup>

As "The Florida Paper" passed from hand to hand among women across the nation, Brown and other women inspired by the paper would distribute it throughout the Gainesville community, but not without opposition. One feminist recalls:

They would distribute it in bars and in women's restrooms and they would try to start consciousness-raising groups. The hostility was so tremendous that organizing in the women's restrooms was the only thing that they could do. At the time there was such antagonism.

In response, women often huddled around bathroom stalls to plan the next consciousness-raising location. From 1968 to 1973, various women's groups formed in Gainesville as the paper reached women throughout the community, galvanizing local women's consciousness and increasing restlessness among women. Not until the mid-1970s, however, would the movement become most apparent and have the longest-lasting impact on members of the local community as women moved outside the privacy of their homes and segregated restrooms and transitioned into the public with the founding of several feminist institutions.

## The Emergence of a Local Anti-Rape Movement

In April of 1974, a handful of housewives and female graduate students organized a 24-hour rape crisis hotline in the broom closet of a local Episcopalian church and called it the Rape Information and Counseling Service. Jacquelyn Resnick, a University of Florida counselor, trained paraprofessionals on how to counsel women in crisis.

At night, volunteers transferred the lines to their homes where they answered calls throughout the night on rotating shifts. By answering urgent calls, "accompan[ing] rape victims to the hospital, the police station, court, and provid[ing] getaways for women to escape town for the day or weekend" ([WomaNews April 1976](#)), RICS paraprofessionals weaved the beginnings of an expansive web of support for area women.



After receiving hundreds of calls from women in distress, volunteers for the Rape Information and Counseling Service realized women needed more than moral support through a telephone wire, they needed a safe living residence and a number of other services. As a result, RICS changed its name to The Sexual and Physical Abuse Resource Center (SPARC) and sought to serve spousal abuse victims in addition to rape victims as the community, along with the nation, uncovered domestic violence as a rampant reality. But inviting victims into volunteers' homes was dangerous. Sharon Bauer articulated this concern:

"We feel the community should provide this service and that it shouldn't be necessary for us to use our homes for emergency shelter. This is a risky situation since an angry spouse might show up at our doors" ([WomaNews Dec. 1976](#)). According to one account, Bauer demanded the county donate an unused city building in Kanapaha to SPARC in order to provide safer services for women. In October of 1977, after the county met Bauer's request, RICS confidently announced the extension of its services to battered women ([WomaNews Oct. 1977](#)). Bauer and her husband staffed the house and cared for victims first-hand.



In addition to providing shelter, SPARC often networked with local police officials, particularly with Martha Varnes, an investigator at the UF Police Department who consoled rape victims immediately after the assaults. SPARC also collaborated with others in establishing the Rape Treatment Center at Shands Hospital, which ensured victims received gynecological exams and information about the importance of venereal disease and pregnancy tests after the assault rather than only receiving a general physical at the Alachua General Hospital ([WomaNews May 1977](#)).

Later that same year, Sallie Harrison and other paraprofessionals secured a Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) grant for SPARC, which provided for a private coordinator, counseling specialist, and project coordinator who would also act as a media liaison.

In May of 1977, SPARC would also help bring a rape victim advocate program to the State Attorney's Office and receive \$12,000 per year for training and supervising volunteers out of the \$40,000 state grant. Other rape services objected to SPARC's allotment, but funding guidelines specified recognition be given to women's groups that first brought forth the issue of rape to the public consciousness ([WomaNews May 1977](#)).

In 1980, SPARC began receiving additional funding from new legislation mandating a portion of the marriage license fee go to supporting domestic abuse programs. This funding sustained SPARC while President Ronald Reagan allowed the CETA program to expire during the first year of his presidency.

As the domestic abuse shelter received more money from outside sources, it also began losing its feminist base. During the mid-1980s, an exchange occurred in which feminist activists resigned from SPARC and more business-oriented professionals - men and women whose main purpose was to secure funding for SPARC and ensure the organization met state grant requirements - took their place.

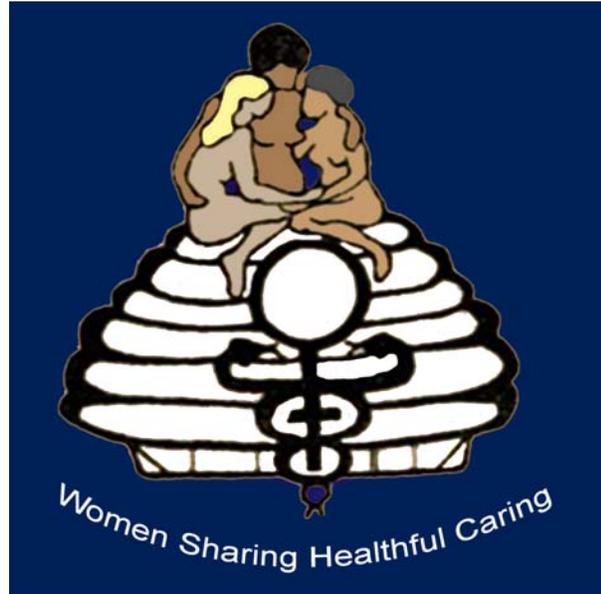
While other feminist institutions closed down due to the economic and political stresses of the 1980s, SPARC continued garnering community support and improving its services. In year 2000, SPARC changed its name to [Peaceful Paths](#) and continues operating today as a domestic abuse network.

## Reproductive Rights Take a Front Seat

In 1971 [Ron Sachs](#), a newspaper editor for *The Florida Alligator*, ran an insert listing numbers to contact for abortion services in protest of the unconstitutional Florida Statute 797.02 that prohibited the distribution of abortion information ([Independent Florida Alligator 1970s Reprint](#)).

Several meetings later between University President Stephen O'Connell and the Board of Student Publications, the University of Florida pulled funding from the newspaper and disassociated itself from it. More importantly, Sachs' actions led to the overturning of the outdated 1868 legislation that prohibited the distribution of abortion information.

As a result, in 1972 feminists were able to start a *legal* abortion referral service known as the Abortion Information Dissemination Service, a student organization. Female students connected women to abortion services in New York. Yet not all women could afford to travel to New York to terminate their pregnancies. Byllye Avery, co-founder of the Gainesville Women's Health Center and [National Black Women's Health Project](#), described this dilemma.



We found out this New York number we could give them, and they could catch a plane and go there for their abortions. But then a black woman came and we gave her the number, and she looked at us in awe: 'I can't go to New York...' We realized we needed a different plan of action, so in May 1974 we opened up the Gainesville Women's Health Center.<sup>11</sup>



Between the years 1972 and 1974, however, two important events would take place prior to building a feminist health clinic in Gainesville: Congress would pass the Roe v. Wade decision and the Jacksonville Clergy Consultation Service would begin serving women needing abortions. By January of 1974, it became undeniable that a women's health center had to be created in Gainesville as the Jacksonville clinic could not adequately provide for all women seeking abortion consultations in the region ([WomaNews Feb. 1976](#)).

At this time, Byllye Avery, Joan Edelson, Judy Levy, and Margaret Parrish, a group of women envisioning a type of health care that would "help women solve the crisis-producing situation of unplanned, unwanted pregnancy," at an affordable price for low-income and minority residents, founded the Gainesville Women's Health Center on

May 2, 1974 at 805 Southwest Fourth Avenue.

In addition to abortion services, the Gainesville Women's Health Center also offered specialized services for African American women, such as sickle cell anemia testing, as well as other more general preventative health measures for all women. The health center staff published *Sage-Femme* as well, a newspaper that educated women on issues of women's health while training

them how to intelligently consume services from the androcentric and sadistic medical establishment.

The co-founders decided against outside funding in order to ensure "complete woman control" of the clinic. This decision meant that Gainesville Women's Health Center's services would not be free - clients would have to pay "for services rendered" ([WomaNews April 1976](#)). In keeping the charge for service at a non-profit, affordable level, however, the health center ensured its mission: "Health Care for People, Not for Profit" ([Gainesville Iguana May/June 1998](#)).

In April of 1976, despite not receiving grant money to fund the expensive project, members of the Gainesville Women's Health Center brought well-known feminists Phyllis Chesler, Pauline Bard, Barbara Erinreich, and Rita Mae Brown to Gainesville for the most impressive event of the decade, the Southeastern Women's Health Conference. The conference featured several workshops such as Lesbianism and the Women's Movement, Motherhood Outside the Nuclear Family, Abortion and Birth Control Counseling, Black Women and Birth Control, The Healthy Lesbian, Feminism as a Way to Mental Health, Changing Attitudes Toward Menstruation, and Incestuous Relationships.

Prior to the event, incest still hid quietly in the social unconscious, far from being conceptualized in even the most enlightened American mind. At the conference, mental healthcare professionals shared what was considered the unthinkable at the time: stories about women who had been sexually molested by their family members. As a result, the workshop on incest brought the issue to the forefront of the social imagination, attracting both local and national attention to the shocking realization that incest was not only real, but rampant.

In the following years, while the local movement slowed down, the GWHC continued operating and the original leaders would develop additional women's health institutions in Gainesville. In 1978, Judy Levy, Byllye Avery, and Margaret Parrish would establish the BirthPlace, one of only seven freestanding birth centers in the United States, where midwifery nurses provided traditional birth services in a comfortable, homelike atmosphere. Women's increased education of their bodies and ownership of their reproductive rights, whether to have an abortion or to choose to have a natural birth, made both the GWHC and the BirthCenter successful institutions. Today, the Birth Center of Gainesville operates in conjunction with the Florida School of Traditional Midwifery. Furthermore, in 1983, Gainesville would be the site that inspired Byllye Avery to launch the National Black Women's Health Project, which today operates as the Black Women's Health Imperative in Atlanta, Georgia.

Throughout its history, the Gainesville Women's Health Center endured "attacks by anti-abortion forces, hostile pickets, excessive IRS scrutiny, legislative assaults on abortion rights, and the failures of other small businesses" ([Gainesville Iguana Oct. 1997](#)) and improved the practice of medicine with such trainings as the "art of gentle pelvic examinations" and numerous other alternative healthcare ameliorations.<sup>12</sup>



In 1997, after nearly 25 years of serving women's health interests, the Gainesville Women's Health Center, "an isolated and embattled beachhead in a sea of for-profit health care providers" lost its foothold due to the persistent and escalating nature of the health care system's "for-profit dog-eat-dog climate" and would permanently close its doors in 1997 while the BirthCenter continued the legacy of woman-centered healthcare in Gainesville ([Gainesville Iguana Oct. 1997](#)).

“Radical Women in Gainesville Historical Exhibit” by Leila Adams, March 2008

For more information on how the Gainesville women's health movement has influenced healthcare today, [see the video presentation](#) given by Byllye Avery and Betsy David Randall at the University of Florida Changing the Face of Medicine conference.

## The Realization of a Seven-Year Dream

On March 22, 1975, a day after the first Equal Rights Amendment parade in Florida's state capital, a small group of women known as Women Unlimited founded the Women's Center in downtown Gainesville, Florida. Feminist foremother, Judith Brown, played an essential role in securing the facility ([WomaNews April 1976](#)).

Altogether, Women Unlimited, operated as an umbrella organization housing three main organizations: the Women's Center; *WomaNews*, a monthly newsprint; and [Womanstore](#), a feminist bookstore. Breakthrough, an alternative counseling service, rented space with Women Unlimited's organizations.



During the open house event that celebrated the birth of the Women's Center, a slide presentation voiced the founding of the Center as "the realization of a seven-year dream for Gainesville women" ([Gainesville Sun July 1975](#)). This seven year vision no doubt dates back to the writing of "[The Florida Paper](#)," in which Judith Brown criticized all-female communes for not being

"self-consciously arranged to serve political as well as personal needs. They are not a temporary stopping off place for women who need to re-evaluate their lives. They are no sanctuary from destructive male-female encounters. They are no base for female liberation work."<sup>6</sup>

In regards to the separatist aspect of the institution, Brown speaks extensively about the importance of a sexually-segregated space for women to participate in democracy. After all, before the founding of the Women's Center, women had few places to organize in public.

Seven years later, the Women's Center would be the place at which women felt at "home in organizing" as an all female space based on the consensus model, which necessitated women's political participation. In addition, the Women's Center would serve as a "place where one slackens the pace at the crossroads, and takes a chance to rest."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Women's Center operated as a space for women to write and obey their own rules, or simply rest, rather than submit to the governance of the male class or endure "destructive" interaction with men.



Upon founding the Women's Center, members immediately established its

structure and leadership. By October of 1975, *WomaNews* published three pages of "[Structural Guidelines](#)." The following newsletter announced three new positions that the Steering Committee formed in an effort to "legitimize leadership" and the Center. The committee unanimously elected Rosalie Miller as the director and task leader, Linda Basham as the maintenance leader, and Charlotte Hunter as the financial affairs officer ([WomaNews Nov. 1975](#)). The establishment of rules and leaders also ensured that the "Tyranny of Structurelessness" that existed within less successful feminist institutions around the nation, would not dictate the Center's future.<sup>9</sup>

The Women's Center also became a place for women's community. Rosalie Miller, original co-founder of the institution, speaks about its function in this regard:

The reason that we started the Women's Center was because we realized that there were all of these different groups of women around Gainesville, but they didn't have much interaction between them. So we started the Women's Center in part to facilitate more collaboration and cooperation.

Not surprisingly, however, participants experienced the Women's Center in different ways as its newfound existence allowed for interpretation. To some, the Women's Center was the "intellectual hub" of the movement and a "meeting forum for organizing after hours," while for others it was a type of lesbian "clubhouse" for meeting, dating, and selling books. Overall, members perceived the Women's Center as both a base for mobilizing political action and a space for creating and enjoying a lesbian feminist community.

During the height of the movement, the Women's Center brought activist and former UF student,



Rita Mae Brown to Gainesville for the Southeastern Women's Health Conference, the most impressive event of the decade, which was mainly coordinated by women from the Gainesville Women's Health Center. In the wake of the exhilarating wave immediately following the successful health conference, one woman wrote, "Within Gainesville, a new cohesiveness has developed between the different feminist organizations as a result of the conference, and there has been increased communication between the groups" ([WomaNews May 1976](#)).

Prior to the conference, most members of the Center hoped that they could create a separate self-sufficient world within the Center. Now after the conference, with the air still buzzing with yesterday's synergy, Women Unlimited believed without a doubt that such a women's community was possible.

Five months later in October of 1976, women relocated the Center to a larger and more expensive building as part of this revolutionary vision after Libertas, a local women's group consisting of five members: Bonnie Coates, Gerry Green, Carol Bradshaw, Barbara Canning, and Grace Fordyce, bought a two-story building on 12 Northwest Eighth Street and leased it to the Women's Center ([WomaNews Oct. 1976](#)).

One Libertas member commented on her investment in the Women's Center saying: "I wanted a central place for the movement that we could call our own, where we could have an economic and power base." Soon volunteers were consumed with raising funds to keep the Center open as the cost for running the new building tripled ([WomaNews March 1977](#)).

In June of 1977, members secured a federal work grant known as the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) in order to cover the new costly edifice and compensate three new leaders for their public service to the Center: Kayanna Pace, Charlotte Hunter, and Janette Friel. With the \$33,000, the center planned to expand their services and provide employment opportunities for Gainesville women, especially housewives ([WomaNews June 1977](#)).



Women's new space in the political community disturbed right-wing conservatives who cringed while reading the widely-circulated feminist publication, *WomaNews*. A columnist for the newsprint, spoke about their reaction to the publication, saying, "The right-wing did not like their tax-payers money going to promote lesbianism and witchcraft."

As a result, conservatives pressured the Alachua County Commission and the Department of Labor to cease funding to the Women's Center, claiming Women Unlimited had violated grant requirements by publishing *WomaNews*. A local feminist spoke of this right-wing counter movement:

When we got the CETA grant... of course we publicized it with delight. As Linda [a local feminist] predicted, that's when they [right-wing members of the community] saw their opening. They harassed the Labor Department in Atlanta until a woman agent was sent down to investigate us for alleged misuse of government funds... This fight over the CETA monies was enraging, mystifying, time consuming, frustrating, exhausting.... and when it was finally over I certainly felt totally drained and defeated. I put on as good a face as I could and did what I could to rouse the troops [new members of the Women's Center] taking over, but then I resigned...

After six months, two investigations, one review, and unrelenting pressure from conservatives, the County Commission cut funding to Women Unlimited before the case reached Washington D.C. Women Unlimited filed for an injunction in order to appeal the Commission's decision, noting that they had passed two prior investigations and claiming that the County Commission had denied them the right to a trial ([WomaNews Dec. 1977](#)).

Their hopes for continued funding and for expanding the Women's Center ended, however, when Circuit Court Judge John Murphree denied the request. The Women's Center closed soon after the decision and the movement's momentum began to wane.

## Every New Cultural Wave Needs a Published Organ

Women Unlimited published its first issue of *WomaNews*, a monthly feminist newsletter, in May of 1975, two months after the opening of the Women's Center. The writers of *WomaNews* reported most of the movement activity in Gainesville. One feminist comments on the importance of the newsletter saying,

"I know that during the Civil Rights Movement I think one of the lessons that everyone learned was that we had to have some sort of written document, some sort of newsletter, some sort of newspaper that really carried the message. Every new cultural wave needs a published organ, alternative or whatever one wants to call it...or its dead in the water."



The newsletter centralized The Women's Center by making public the leaders and leadership responsibilities, policy and structural guidelines, meeting times, fundraisers, and other pertinent news and events that organized the institution to function as one unit.

*WomaNews* issues also reached the hands of local right-wing conservatives, who cringed while reading articles on women's sexuality and spirituality. A *WomaNews* columnist, who wrote the "Radical Ravings" section, spoke about their reaction to the publication, saying, "The right-wing did not like their tax-payers money going to promote lesbianism and witchcraft."

Once the Women's Center began receiving the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act grant, community conservatives pressured state and government officials to cease funding to the feminist institution, making unsubstantiated claims that Women Unlimited violated grant requirements by publishing *WomaNews*.

After six months, two investigations, one review, and unrelenting pressure from conservatives, the County Commission decided to cut funding to The Women's Center before the case reached Washington D.C. and prior to giving Women Unlimited a fair trial ([WomaNews Dec. 1977](#)). *WomaNews* staff ceased operations shortly thereafter in 1978.

The end to radical feminist print culture was not near, however. A new lesbian feminist publication began circulating six years later in Gainesville called *Mama Raga*. According to one account, three women founded *Mama Raga* in 1984 in response to the blockbuster hit, *Gandhi*, which emphasized the importance of the press by asserting that "Without a journal of some kind you cannot unite a community" (*Sony Studios* 1982).



As a result, women compiled newsletters and distributed them once a month, publishing articles on women's sexuality and politics, poetry, and other forms of creative writing. The publication also features a calendar of events, listing fundraisers, social events, and other local happenings as well as a classifieds section and a directory of local lesbian businesses.

Throughout the decades, the Mama Raga Collective has struggled to continue operating due to a lack of financial support and volunteers; however, the collective's small core, overall minimal expenses, and a steady stream of committed lesbian feminists has allowed for its continual operation.

Today *Mama Raga* continues as a group of loosely linked activists who meet once a month in the [Pride Community Center](#) in order to produce "The Lesbian Feminist Newsletter of North Central Florida." The group also communicates daily through a Yahoo message forum in order to assemble the newsletter - a technological advancement that allows for new ways for coordinating communication in the next cultural wave.



## Nurturing the Intellectual Needs of a Community

In June of 1975, women officially opened [Womanstore](#) to the general public. Womanstore would operate as a bookstore and would share the same suite with the Women's Center and [WomaNews](#). In hopes that its profits would eventually "pay for the basic operation of the center," Womanstore sold local female artists' crafts and paintings, as well as jewelry, and alternative literature for children and adults ([Gainesville Sun, July 1975](#)).

In Womanstore, women nurtured and educated one another by passing around books such as Anica Vesel's *Feminism as Therapy*, Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, and Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* to one another and exclaiming, "Every woman ought to read this!"

Despite the withdrawal of Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) funds from The Women's Center and the Florida State Senate's refusal to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution ([WomaNews April 1977](#)), feminist bookselling persisted while the rest of the movement flatlined. In 1977, new co-owners changed the name of the bookstore to Amelia's due to their admiration for Amelia Earhart. Amelia's would serve the community for five more years as a community space. During this time, various activist groups, especially newly forming gay and lesbian organizations, continued using the store for organizing protests, rallies, and other political operations.

Amelia's shifted ownership as one lesbian couple bought the store from another in 1979: Gerry Green and Carol Aubin bought Amelia's from Bonnie Coates and Linda Basham. Gerry Green's professorship at Sante Fe Community College paid for much of the store's expenses while Aubin and other women of the community staffed the store and raised funds in order to keep it open.

In 1982, as the national economic crisis worsened, Bonnie Coates, owner of the bookstore building, doubled the rent. Despite Amelia's usefulness in the community and affiliation with over 200 members, Aubin and Green would have to close the store due to their inability to fund the bookstore's rising rental rate as they were already experiencing a serious deficit. In 1982, after nearly a decade of feminist book selling in Gainesville, Aubin and Green put the store's materials on the auction block, sold most of the 1,000 titles, and paid the debt they had accumulated in the past three years, approximately \$10,000.

Green attributes much of the bookstore's loss of support to the closing down of *WomaNews*, saying, "Every new cultural wave needs a published organ, alternative or whatever one wants to call it...or its dead in the water." Without a publication and community support, Amelia's bookstore would founder in 1982.





Feminist bookselling reemerged in Gainesville in 1992 after nearly a decade of its absence. At that time, Susan Keel and Kerry Godwin founded Iris Books. The store once again exchanged ownership in 1996 to Dotty Faibisy and Beverly White, who altered its name to Wild Iris.

In 2004, Cheryl Krauth and Lylly Rodriguez became the new owners of [Wild Iris](#). Shortly after, they founded [Friends of Wild Iris](#) - a tax-exempt non-profit organization. This step was taken to establish the bookstore as a permanent institution, a feat few bookstores have accomplished as Wild Iris is the only feminist bookstore remaining in the state of Florida and one of less than 70 surviving throughout the United States.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Wild Iris is the new "intellectual hub" of the community and a political space for both older and newer generations of feminists. Student groups such as Feminists Actively Creating Equality (FACE) meet at Wild Iris to discuss political issues, while other students work on special projects at the store through the internship program affiliated with the [UF Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research](#).

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Leila Adams  
Curator  
*Radical Women in Gainesville Digital Collection*

## Contribute

***Radical Women*** and **Radical Women in Gainesville** are growing collections, and works in progress, designed to reclaim and preserve the history of the Women's Liberation Movement.

More materials will be added as they are located and [Internet Distribution Permissions](#) are obtained. If you would like to contribute archives to this developing collection or if you have any questions, please [contact us](#).