

Coalition building in Nova Scotia

Our little piece of sidewalk...

by SUSAN L. EATON

SOMETHING QUITE REMARKABLE HAPPENED in the small, rural community of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, this year.

For 33 straight weeks, from March 8 to October 11, as many as 80 women and men gathered every Wednesday at noon on what became known as “our little piece of sidewalk” in front of the Town Hall. They sang, they shouted slogans, they carried signs and banners, and they shared countless stories of struggle and hope. They came to declare their support for the two key demands of the World March of Women 2000: an end to poverty and the elimination of violence against women.

In a place like Antigonish — unique in its cultural and religious heritage, yet so similar in form to thousands of other small communities across Canada — such a sustained, public demonstration was unprecedented.

This is the story of how a little piece of sidewalk attracted a small, dedicated group of justice-seekers and grew to embrace the whole world.

The community

ANTIGONISH IS ONE OF THOSE COMMUNITIES that can be described as ‘ordinary’ and ‘special’ at the same time. As an east coast community, it has a long and involved history that defines its contemporary culture. The Mi’kmaq First Nations people have always considered the region as part of their home. French Acadiens expanded into the area in the 1700s. Irish Loyalists arrived shortly after, followed by black loyalists around mid-century. By the late 1700s, thousands of Scottish highlanders who had fled their home country landed on the coast and settled in the rich farmland of the region.

Today, Antigonish is a thriving town of 5,000 that provides services for the surrounding county of 15,000 people. It is home to St. Francis Xavier University, a 150-



PHOTO BY ED MILLER

WEEKLY VIGIL: Support grew for Antigonish action.

year-old liberal arts institution, whose Extension Department is renowned for its pioneering work in developing credit unions and cooperatives among the farmers and fishers of the region. This is also the birthplace of the Antigonish Movement, an internationally recognized adult education movement whose principles continue to shape development work around the world. Each year, the Coady International Institute provides training for some 50 community development workers from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

It is within this milieu — largely Celtic, mostly Roman Catholic, and more than a wee bit conservative, with a history of cooperative effort and a small slice of cosmopolitan experience thrown in — that a few social activists decided to organize an event for the World March of Women 2000.

The organizers

THREE GROUPS COORDINATED THE ANTIGONISH VIGILS. The Antigonish Coalition for Economic Justice (ACEJ) is a network of individuals and groups concerned about local and regional economic and social justice issues; they are activist in nature but

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Let's sing, let's dance,
our song will move hearts
(Brazil)





PHOTO BY ED MILLER

GODMOTHERING: Different groups hosted each vigil.

respectful of local sensitivities. The Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre / Antigonish Women’s Association (AWRC/AWA) provides services, support and advocacy on issues affecting women in the town and surrounding region. It has an extensive network and most people quietly accept its work, though a few local opinion-makers are vociferously opposed to any of its programs or positions. The Sisters of Saint Martha are a community of Roman Catholic religious women who have a long history of service in Antigonish; they are respected and admired members of the community.

The credibility and networking capacity of the coordinating committee played an important part in guaranteeing the success of the project. Some early opposition to the vigils quickly evaporated when it became clear that the organizers were firm in their commitment to the World March of Women 2000. As more and more groups joined the public witness, the wider community began to take notice.

The strategy

IT CAME AS A SURPRISE to a lot of people (including a number of experienced organizers) when the idea of 33 weeks of noon-hour “vigils” was proposed. How could such an activity be sustained? Where would the people come from?

The coordinating committee was undaunted. Similar strategies had been used by the Civil Rights Movement in Brooklyn, New York in the 1950s and ’60s and could be adapted for this time and place. The goals would be

moderate: building relationships with other groups in Antigonish; developing a coalition of socially conscious people; and standing publicly against violence and poverty. No one expected the patriarchy to crumble as a result of the vigils, nor did the organizers expect a large amount of media attention.

The key element of the strategy was to invite various community groups and organizations to “godmother” (sponsor) each noon-hour vigil. This gave a high profile to the weekly events, provided a public forum for groups to explain their work, and ensured that there would always be a minimum number of people in attendance.

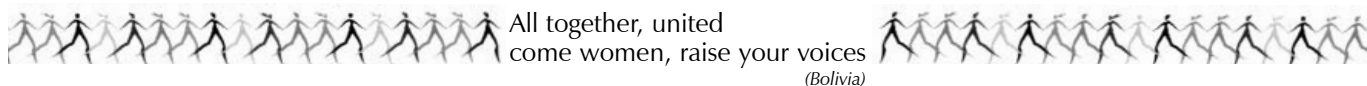
Over the 33 weeks, 25 separate groups came forward to godmother the vigils. They included unions, churches, community groups, organizations of black women and aboriginal women, youth, people engaged in the fishing industry, low-income women, international development organizations, health care advocates, members of the university community, and the international participants from the Coady Institute.

The message

AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE VIGILS was ensuring that the godmothering groups always related their work to the unifying message of the World March of Women 2000. Since the issues of poverty and violence against women touch everyone, this proved to be a relatively simple task.

The Schizophrenia Society presented information relating mental health issues to violence, homelessness and abuse. The Mi’kmaq and African Canadian women pointed out the racialization of poverty in Canada. International development groups brought stories of the situation of women in other parts of the world. Unions, health care advocates and low-income women spoke of the effects of government cutbacks.

Far from being overwhelming, the variations on the central theme added to the feeling of empowerment. The vigils were always upbeat and quite social, with good energy, lots of music and song, and clever political satire and humour. Even the moments of respectful silence and shared tears culminated in shouts of determination to bring about meaningful social change! ◆◆



All together, united
come women, raise your voices
(Bolivia)

The tactics

THE VIGILS WERE LAUNCHED ON MARCH 8, International Women’s Day. With each successive Wednesday, they gathered momentum. A huge banner painted by several participants was hung on the steps of the Town Hall; homemade noisemakers were passed around; new songs were added to the songbook. At each vigil, people signed “the big book” to ensure an accurate record of participation. During the mid-point celebration, a four-inch wide ribbon was rolled out, stamped with colourful symbols representing all those who had participated in the first 16 weeks. From that day on, everyone was invited to ‘make their mark’ on the ribbon to show they were part of the World March of Women 2000.

A final ‘Grand March’ through the town was held on Saturday, October 14. More than 80 exuberant women, men and children — representing the godmothering groups and others who had attended the vigils — carried banners, shouted slogans and provided a raucous rendition of songs from the ever-expanding songbook. Over soup and biscuits at the closing gathering, one theme was repeated: We did it!

What was learned

THERE WAS TIME BUILT INTO THE PROCESS, both at the mid-point of the vigils and at the closing celebration, for the participants and the organizers to reflect on what was learned and what the World March of Women 2000 meant for them. The participants spoke of several things:

- The sense of empowerment. Many people, particularly women living in poverty, said they didn’t feel so alone and isolated. “I saw that there are a number of people in this town that care about this.”
- Increased awareness. People learned a great deal from the information presented by the godmothering groups. “I have a lot of facts that I simply didn’t have before. I knew things weren’t right but I didn’t know how to defend that position.”
- Learning to speak out. Demonstrating in a public fashion is not a common part of small town culture. A



PHOTO BY ED MILLER

CREATIVE SPIRIT: New songs and noisemakers contributed to the festive atmosphere.

number of people felt that participating in the vigils was an important public witness for social justice by ordinary people. “I feel that I can act out here — like I don’t have to behave myself.”

- The importance of solidarity. The Sisters of Saint Martha, whose members came out in large and steady numbers throughout the thirty-three weeks, noted that participating in the vigils helped them to stand with the people who live in violence and poverty in this community.

A number of insights emerged for the organizers of the Antigonish vigils as well, among which were the following:

- It takes hard and steady work to get people who are working on their single issue to see beyond that to the issues that unite them.
- Coalition-building requires people to not be diverted by their differences and to find the important common ground in the work for justice. Staying focused on the issues that unite us is essential in dealing with opposition.
- Working in a coalition is effective when a big job can be divided into little ‘jobettes’. Sharing the work strengthened the leadership in all of the godmothering groups.
- It is important to establish realistic goals before the event takes place. Because this was done, it was possible to measure the success of the efforts.

Conclusion

MANY THINGS CAN BE LEARNED from the World March of Women 2000: both personal and with political implications. Joanne Tompkins, a member of the Antigonish Coalition for Economic Justice, put it this way:

“It really helped us to see ways in which broad-based community leadership can be developed. It was activity that allowed for lots of involvement. Our whole family, even the children, could take part. There was lots of work to do, however it was work that did not leave you feeling defeated — you felt that you were part of “building” something. This became far bigger than any of us.”

In Antigonish, Nova Scotia, people learned just how big a “little piece of sidewalk” could become.



Let’s all stand up,
let’s struggle for peace

(Burundi)

