

The feminist evolution

Demise of herland film festival marks the end of an era, and the dawn of the third wave

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Sharon Stevens realized an era had ended when in late 2008, she received notice to empty out the office of the herland Feminist Film and Video Festival. The festival, which Stevens helped organize, started in 1989 and flourished for a decade. But by 2000 it was barely surviving. By 2007 the last credits had rolled.

Herland operated from a cubicle in the Old Y Centre for Community Organization. Stevens looks around the cramped space, about the size of a double-wide closet. It's stuffed to the ceiling with paper files in cardboard boxes and anachronistic tools, like cut-out art — the kind people used before clip art.

“Herland was the last creative celebration for feminists in Calgary,” Stevens reminisces, rifling through old posters. “It wasn’t about artists and curators; it was films by women for women. We were non-competitive and offered childcare and transportation subsidies.” Those days are gone, she admits. “Now everything is damage control.”

Stevens says feminists had to shift from seeking equality to feeding impoverished women. Budget cuts toppled the movement, which depended on government largesse to allow women to agitate for equality. “We’re no longer perceived as a threat.”

A longtime activist, Stevens says that in hindsight, the movement she embraced has probably just come full circle. “The movement went from child to adolescent, then from mother to old crone. A new cycle is coming up, and new women’s organizations will come along.” She says she hopes this generation appreciates the work done by the last one.

THE THIRD WAVE

I find the new feminists at the Dalhousie Community Mennonite Church, celebrating a “girls (un)Valentines Day Party.” The poster urges teenage girls to “Forget romance, let’s go skateboarding!”

It’s early afternoon and the party is in full swing. About 20 teenaged girls sit cross-legged in a circle on the floor. They’re making the case against the myth that the only good girl is a skinny girl. A young woman with a laptop uses stats and studies to analyze negative stereotyping of fat girls. The girls tell their personal stories.

The session ends half an hour late. Some of the girls go to the gymnasium to skateboard or make T-shirt art. Others take the free self-defence class.

“This event is about getting girls to think about what they’ve been taught being a girl is. And to question what being a girl is for them,” says 18-year-old Kay Gallivan, one of the organizers. She says she and her peers are third-wave feminists, distinguishing them from the women of the second-wave movement that lasted from the 1960s through the 1990s — women like Stevens. First-wave feminists were the suffragettes active at the turn of the 20th century.

“I was involved in activism around women’s issues for a couple of years before I started calling myself a f-f-f-feminist.” Gallivan spits out the f-word. “We don’t like to be associated with second-wave feminists. They’ve been defined by the stereotypical man-hating fringe,” she says. “They couldn’t even organize with men.”

Now all that “goes out the window,” Gallivan continues. “We renounce gender roles entirely. We’ve moved past the point when women were the only people who were oppressed. Now feminism is about gender equality and smashing the patriarchy.”

Young feminists inherited their fuck-you attitude from the ’90s underground punk Riot Grrl movement, the angry genesis of third-wave feminism. Today, their causes reflect those of the global social justice movement, like peace and the environment. They advocate for the disability community and the GLBTQ (gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender-queer) cause. They protest against racism. They work with men.

A suffragette landing in Calgary today might not recognize Gallivan as a sister feminist. A century ago, the fight for the right to vote was all about the oppression of women — mostly white middle-class women. The second wave was perceived by the new generation to also be the exclusive enclave of educated white women. Opposition to that exclusivity is fundamental to the evolution of feminism and to the

third-wave's identity.

Laurie Blakeman, Liberal MLA for Edmonton Centre, was on the forefront of second-wave feminism in Alberta, serving for a while as executive director for the Premier's Alberta Advisory Council on Women's Issues. Blakeman describes herself as an "unrepentant feminist" and denies that second-wave feminists were exclusive.

"We spent a lot of time trying to get different women at the table. We couldn't find them." She remembers many women were struggling to survive and didn't have the time educated white woman did. "Middle-income white women were available to do the work, and they achieved things."

Blakeman admits she and her second-wave peers were often shrill in their struggle for women's rights. "Why were we yelling? It was out of sheer frustration. We could not get people to understand what we were talking about."

Blakeman recalls an argument she had one night with a parking lot security guard. She'd complained about how dangerous it was for her to get to her car. He offered to walk her. She responded by yelling that she didn't want to have to call a man every time she had to walk to her car. She wanted the parking lot design to be changed so everyone would be safe. "He was offended. But I was right."

Blakeman's in-your-face tactics were in keeping with the era. Young people felt entitled to change the world. Second-wave feminists did their bit by advocating for safe abortions, custody rights for mothers, affordable daycare, paid pregnancy leave and reducing the use of sexist language. In doing so, they shifted the world's perspective.

"But we still have a lot of work to do so women can have equal opportunities in Alberta." Blakeman points out that working women still earn just over 70 per cent of what men earn.

The conservative winds blowing through the '90s carried with them a backlash against feminism. In Alberta, the Klein Tories eviscerated public services and decimated funding to social programs – including women's activist programs. Feminist groups subsisted on thin gruel, pitching their skirmishes from fortress feminist. They were attacked by the conservative media, loudly renounced as baby-killers and anti-family. Most hurtfully, they were dismissed as irrelevant.

"It was the decline of an era of feminists in Alberta," Blakeman laments. "The issues were no longer gender specific, which was opposite to the point we were trying to

make.” She concedes, though, that feminism isn’t dead.

“Now, young feminists don’t band around the women’s movement,” she says. “They band around other agendas, perfectly appropriate to their time.”

Stevens agrees. “It’s good to know we’ve laid the groundwork for the women doing it now,” she says while assessing what remains of herland.

“These young women don’t have to separate themselves from men to do the work,” she says. “They are part of a chain. Our legacy is that there are issues that don’t need to be fought for anymore — like the visibility of lesbians, the right to abortion and issues around women’s sexuality. A lot of that is a given now.”

Stevens laughs at the archaic cut-out art used for the old herland posters. Then she asks “Does it matter that young women know what we fought for?” And she begins moving boxes.