

Affirmative Action—How It Works for Me

Elizabeth Rowan

Une secrétaire parle de son changement d'attitude à la suite d'un programme d'action affirmative.

'Well, what's so wonderful about a bunch of women holding a residential seminar?' I was asked when I spoke with enthusiasm about having attended a second such seminar. The speaker believed that a group of women getting together for a few days to analyse, discuss, and consider women's issues was more of an ego trip than an opportunity to help women develop their careers.

As a single parent for many years, I have been primarily concerned with providing for and raising two sons. At the time I started out employers were not too interested in hiring women with dependants, and career goals were the farthest thing from my mind. But now I know I don't want to remain a secretary for the rest of my working life. I feel I have more potential than such a job offers. But since I had started out as a secretary, I could never get clear of the tag. I was now over fifty and 'free' to seek new career goals. But was it too late in the day? Would I have to wait until my retirement in order to begin to write? Because that's what I wanted to do. As a member of a Task Force responsible for publishing a bi-monthly newsletter under the direction of the Women's Advisor's Office, I was invited to attend a residential seminar. And that ushered in what I term my 'new beginning'...

I had approached the seminar with a mixture of hope and doubt. Women have not been encouraged to believe that they can achieve a climate of trust in relation to one another, and in a workshop situation one's weaknesses and strengths are soon revealed. Women have been led to believe that they are too 'catty', 'emotional', 'illogical' to be able to get along together. The prevailing attitude is that it's risky to reveal feelings, attitudes, indeed one's true self, to other women. One of the first things I discovered at my first seminar was that women do encourage, support, and assist one another. Women are only just beginning to realize that they most certainly can enjoy one another, and develop a 'bonding' in sisterhood as deep and as meaningful as that which we have been led to believe exists only between men. In the workshop I was able to submerge myself in two days of intensive investigation of my own values, societal values, and some methods of communication; and in doing so I was finding out what I really wanted to do with my life.

The concept of career goals is a relatively new idea for many women. Most working women hold support staff jobs, very few of us have been encouraged to develop our potential. For most working women it's a matter of 'having a job' rather than a career.

I discovered this for myself when I sat down at the seminar and tried to assess my own value system and my career goals. I found that I didn't have any clearly defined career goals—just a collection of aspirations based on wishful thinking. Being a secretary was a survival situation for me and nothing more. I was not interested in becoming an executive secretary or an administrator.

As I sat there staring at my career-goals analysis I realized I would have to change my whole working life. And I honestly couldn't think of anything more unreal at that moment. How would I live? Perhaps finding out what one wants to do is a step in the right direction but doing it is another thing.

That first workshop set me thinking. I knew I could never again accept my role as a secretary and leave it at that. But I had also learned at the seminar that I must be realistic. I knew now I should look for work in an area that would give me an opportunity to develop skills in communications. The logical step was to seek employment in the government information services area. This meant using the ideas I had learned at the seminar. It meant developing skills in effective presentation in the written and the spoken word.

The first step in seeking a new job is to establish a goal and work toward it. I believe I had taken the first step at the residential seminar. My goal was to prepare myself to make a move. Then I redoubled my efforts in writing, taking on any volunteer writing task I could find. In the year following that first residential seminar, I was the editor and writer for a cable show; I also undertook the publicity for a group to which I belong; prepared materials for public speaking events, and so on. I also studied in my spare time, ransacking the libraries for additional information on all aspects of writing.

Another important step was reviewing my prepared résumé, taking it apart, and analysing how I could better it in presenting my writing skills, and I prepared a kit of samples of my work. In my résumé I developed sections which emphasized contact with the public and any information-service-oriented work I had done. All of this was directed toward getting a job in information services.

I entered every competition in the government where writing skills are required. My résumé would be accompanied by a brief letter stating why the job had attracted my attention and why I believed I would be a suitable candidate. My goal was becoming more clearly defined to me and, most important of all, I was actively marketing my skills and my potential.

Throughout that year, I used other skills which I had learned at the seminar. Effective speaking, for instance. Learning to get my thoughts in order, staying with the points to be made, developing a dialogue in order to gain input and exchange of ideas. I consciously practised doing these things. And in doing them I gained confidence. These changes I was making in my work life were directly developed as a result of participation in the residential seminar, which made us test ourselves and begin to overcome our inhibitions and doubts.

I also learned to become more assertive. I needed to assert myself if I wanted to move in my job. From the seminars I developed an understanding of how to do this. I am emerging increasingly as a single-minded and tenacious professional and because of this I feel I have gained respect in my dealings with my supervisors.

Through my involvement as writer and editor with the cable show, I have found myself taking the place of the regular broadcaster in an emergency. At first I was scared, but because I took the risk I will be doing some of the broadcasting regularly in the coming year. Where did I get the guts to try? Where did I get that confidence after years of dreaming...? From the seminar, of course. The shot of adrenalin in my sagging psyche.

This year I was again invited to attend a residential seminar. But this time I knew what I was getting into—three days in which to learn skills to advance my career. I was not disap-

pointed. But even more important to me was the fact that my focus had shifted from total concentration on my own career goals to the consideration of the equality of women in the larger sense. Somewhere along the year I had begun to mature as a woman and was identifying with women in a broader sense. I felt a growing responsibility as a woman to be of value to other women, encouraging and supporting us all in our struggle to achieve equal opportunity. A workshop on Women Working with Women made me examine that old myth that women cannot work successfully for women. For the first time I began to realize that *support* is what it's all about. Without that we have no chance against the male hierarchy.

There is another side to the residential seminar which must be expressed, otherwise the enrichment of such an experience is not fully appreciated. We came for the most part as strangers to one another. Our common ground was the desire to learn more about equal opportunity for women. Yet out of those days something infinitely precious emerged to my mind. We had shared ideas and attitudes. We had risked revealing ourselves and discovered in the process a sense of closeness. We had managed to break through those age-old barriers which have kept women separated from each other and denied us

the experience of a sisterhood equal to the much acclaimed 'brotherhood of man'.

I hope that in writing this I will encourage other women to take a look at where they are and where they would like to be, and encourage young women coming into the work force, when they are thinking of joining a company, to ask if they have an active Affirmative Action or Equal Opportunity Program; to ask what career development workshops they are running; and, if they do have a good program, to use it. If they don't, perhaps you'd rather not work for them anyway.

Well, what is so wonderful about a bunch of women getting together to hold a residential seminar? In the final analysis it's me, in the whole of my life learning to be creative. It's me at fifty-four feeling satisfied that I am finally having an opportunity to grow, to participate, and to contribute.

In my working life, I may never reach my ultimate goal of earning my living through creative writing. I am realistic enough to know that at fifty-four my time-span in the working world is growing short. But already I feel that I am taking steps toward a clearly defined, desired career. In other words I'm not just settling for a 'job'.



Judge Helen Gregory McGill