

# By Students, for Students: a Celebration

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Photo by Ellen Shumsky



Une Journée dans la vie des femmes: à la fête comme à la fête.

On lit ici la description d'une Journée Internationale de la Femme organisée par une collectivité à l'intérieur d'un collège parallèle, faisant partie d'un CEGEP. Le groupe de femmes qui l'a organisée en relate les détails ainsi que les conclusions qu'elles en ont tirées.

## Background

The New School of Dawson College is a small independent school within a larger community college (CEGEP) in downtown Montreal. We teach approximately 140 university-transfer students in the areas of Language and Literature, Creative Arts, and the Social Sciences. Our philosophy is based on Humanistic Education as it has been developed through the Human Potential Movement. We work on the assumption that it is our mission to engage the whole student in the learning process, to address ourselves to the whole person. That is, we are concerned with working with the student's emotional, social, and general educational needs. We ask our students to reflect on the following question as they begin to make their learning choices each term: 'Why is this subject or project important to me *now* at this particular point in my life?'

At the beginning of each term, the students interview the teachers in the school, and each other, in order to find out common interests. As interest groups begin to emerge, a curriculum develops for the school. Learning groups, tutorials, and projects are negotiated through contracts whose contents are usually very detailed, covering the students' personal objectives, commitment to the group, specific tasks to be undertaken and the credit weight anticipated. There is a process of ongoing evaluation in the learning groups within the school, and sometimes their direction might change through consensus. People are held to their contracts and ultimately evaluated by the group as well as the teacher.

At the beginning of the winter term of 1978, a group of women students announced that they would be interested in organizing a celebration of International Women's Day for the school. The director of the school, who also teaches Women's Studies, expressed an interest in participating and over the next few weeks the project developed. There were

two important constraints: time, as this had to be ready for March 8, and money, as there was next to none available to finance the project. Thus it became apparent that everyone would have to work hard, and that we would have to draw on all possible resources within the school as well as those of a voluntary nature in the community at large. The following, then, is an account of how this day was put together and what people's perceptions of it were.

The organizing group for the day evolved from a women's discussion group during the first term. A few members had found it an interesting and enlightening experience to share their feelings about being women. However, they felt that the time had come to get beyond confession to action of some sort. As one member stated in her contract: 'Being obsessed recurringly with my identity, my awareness as a woman, I feel it's time I grow out of my lamentation and do something. Once with a friend, I was wailing and screaming at the aggression and disrespect which so many men display towards women. 'Why don't you do something about it?' he asked. His response shocked me to thought.'

The original idea had been simply to offer an event of entertainment to the school. However, after the first meeting of the organizing group, it became clear that students felt that there were multiple needs to be met within the school. One of these needs was to extend the information available to students about feminist resources for women in our city. We also felt it was important to discuss sexism within the environment of the school. Although the school is based on libertarian philosophy, some of the women felt that they had experienced covert sexism from some male and female students in the school and that this should be discussed openly.

There was also a prevalent feeling that women have much to celebrate and that all too often we focus only on our oppression. One student stated the case this way in her contract: 'I wanted to have a festival because I like to hear women singing and talking together. It gives me pleasure and strength. I sometimes feel the drawbacks to being society's second sex and forget the positive within, what we can create in spite of it all. This is a chance to celebrate, to dig for those poems hidden in drawers, to release those notes that long to escape, to share with the light of other minds, the sense of other beings.'

It soon became clear that it would take a whole day to offer the full variety we thought the event should encompass. We decided to ask the school community for a complete day free of classes. We were worried that they would not support this request, but when we brought our proposal to the weekly community meeting we were delighted with the full support we got. Classes were cancelled and March 8; was turned over to the celebration. This proved to us that we as women must learn to assert our needs in the community. As a result of this community meeting news of the day quickly spread within the school, eliciting marginal participation from people who did not have the time or energy to devote to its organization. Thus we were able to offer an interesting exhibit of women's art in the school and to elicit comments from people on a graffiti wall we put up. Some people made posters and leaflets advertising the day in our building, which also houses other programs and offices of Dawson College.

#### *March the Eighth: International Women's Day*

The diverse needs fell into three general categories: information, entertainment, and creating a forum for honest exchange on our feelings about sexism. Since we had the support of the school in general, we were able to proceed with a good level of participation, although until the day was over we all suffered anxiety attacks that no one would come. It is important to emphasize that one lesson to be learned from this exercise is that enthusiasm is contagious and that it takes courage and support to give a party. The fact that it was a group effort certainly created the necessary support to carry this off. As well, a men's consciousness-raising group in the school offered to help. This at least communicated to the organizing group at an early stage that there were some men in the school who were interested and sympathetic to our objectives. In addition, it was seen as essential to create an environment throughout the whole school, which we did by spreading the art show throughout the school, providing a two-hour tape of women's music which had been put together by some members of the group, and displaying relevant newspaper clippings on the walls. A local bookstore which specializes in Gay and Feminist literature was invited to set up a book table for a good part of the day.

Our first event was a panel of women invited from various agencies to present feminist resources in our city. Indeed, the information was so interesting and so little was known by the general group that the allotted time had to be extended to deal with all the questions asked. The students had organized the panel themselves, contacting individuals and organizations, moderating the event, and finally writing letters of thanks to the participants. We contacted three women's centres for participation. One could not participate because its resources were over-extended for that day; another one was in the process of closing owing to withdrawal of support by its mother organization; and the third, The New Woman's Centre, sent a speaker. This speaker drew to our attention the plight of women's centres such as her own, which is also being closed owing to lack of government funding. We all realized the gap the removal of this centre would create in Montreal, considering the range of its services — from counselling, to a home for wives, to general animation of consciousness-raising within the society at large. A representative from a new Rape Crisis Centre spoke on the politics of rape and gave practical advice on what to do if one were raped. Rank and File, an organization for non-unionized working women, brought to light several obligations employers have to their workers, the necessity of maintaining these rights, and how to fight sexism on the job. This was particularly relevant to our students, many of whom have part-time and summer jobs in low-skilled non-unionized work. Powerhouse Gallery, a feminist collective, was also represented and its speaker emphasized the necessity for a collective rather than a competitive environment for

women artists. As many of our students are in the Fine Arts program, this was pertinent as well. The women from Androgyny, the gay/feminist collective bookstore, were able to share with the group the many resources available to gay women in the city. Finally, a student from Concordia University's Women's Studies program gave a talk on the new Institute for Women's Studies which is going to open in the fall.

We wanted to involve as many people in the school as possible in 'doing' as well as absorbing information. Consequently there were several workshops in the afternoon. There was a Self-Help workshop in which women learned about their cycles, the basis of natural birth-control ideas, massage and pressure points, cervical self-examination (which women could try there), and the sexist politics operant in parts of the medical profession. For many women, the self-examination was the first time they were able to observe what had hitherto been seen only by a gynecologist. There was also a workshop on Wen-Do (self-defence), and another one on abortion.

The most heavily attended workshop was one entitled "Is there Sexism in the New School?" which was animated by a woman from the organizing group and a man from the men's consciousness-raising group. This workshop began with angry questions from some of the men present as to why they had been excluded from the Wen-Do and Self-Help workshops. This question raised a point that had been discussed in the organizing group at some length. On a day celebrating women, to what extent should women feel obliged to both include men and make them feel comfortable? We had decided that it was a day for women and that, although men were welcome to some events, they should not be at those events where their presence would seriously inhibit the women's experience. There were some male anger, some female defensiveness, some shared feelings on subjects such as sexist remarks, the general atmosphere of the school, the school's curriculum, and people's own experiences. Women in the group told how often very thoughtless and seemingly trivial remarks by their male colleagues offended them. What finally emerged was the agreement by most people that men should be conscious of the possible effects of such gestures and also be prepared to absorb the hostility they might engender. There was also very interesting discussion on expectations various males had of women in their lives, ranging from mothers to sisters, girl friends, and colleagues. It was a very emotionally charged group, which did not come up with any absolute conclusions but provided an important occasion for the ventilation of deeply held feelings and values within the school.

The rest of the day was really given over to celebration. There is a great interest in folk-dancing and folk-music in the school, so a folk-dancing session was given in which international dances for women were shared. One student gave a folk-music recital of songs for, by, and about women. The dinner was organized by members of the women's and men's consciousness-raising groups and the evening ended with a poetry reading by about eight women. The poetry and prose were written by women in the school as well as by published writers. The themes around which this presentation was organized were: Women and Anger, Women and Work, Women and Love, and Women and Power. The presentation was given in the school's theatre in the evening, and was attended by students, staff, parents, and visitors. The day ended at ten o'clock that night. It had been a very emotionally charged experience, and we all felt exhausted but fulfilled by it.

One of the most interesting results of the day was the message the organizing group got from the school community. Towards the end of our planning sessions, there had been an increasing fear that people wouldn't be interested or supportive. We found the contrary: attendance was excellent at all

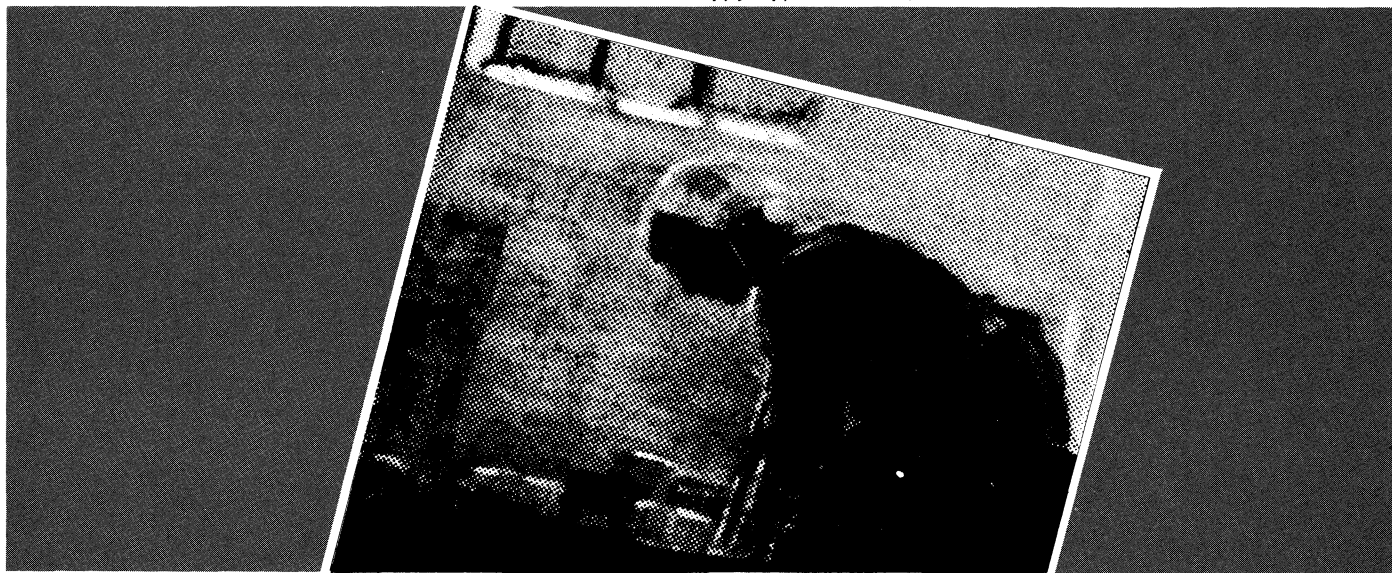
events and feedback told us that people finally understood by the end of the day why it was so important to all of us to put aside such a day.

Another very positive result was that it helped women in the group to develop organizational skills in the school and also in their interfacing with the community at large beyond the school. They learned about communications, planning, dealing with nervous anxiety and offering mutual support, managing their time, and taking responsibility for their ideas and plans in a highly visible way. Indeed, these skills have extended themselves long beyond the day itself to the writing of this article in May. Members of the original group have come together to tape their impressions and share their memories, even though school has been over for a few weeks. Then two members of the group have worked together constructing this article. Some members of the group are now considering having another such event at the school one evening over the summer. This will give people the opportunity to get together over the holidays and share their experiences. Finally, one of the very interesting factors that we

had not expected was the participation in the celebration of people outside school. Some women who heard about it came and spent the whole day with us. We were intrigued that women who had only marginal dealings with the school should want to come and spend so long in our midst. While we certainly welcomed them and were glad that they were there, we also realized that they were with us because they had a need to celebrate their womanhood with other women on that day. There was little going on in the city at large that would provide them with this opportunity to share their experience of being women. Next year, perhaps, we should think of opening our day more fully to the public, to that unknown number of women who would like to drop in, to share these special moments with others. Our conclusion, of course, is that the whole world should celebrate International Women's Day. Look at it this way: if educational institutions can provide paper napkins and Christmas trees, pretty eggs for Easter, and pumpkins and UNICEF boxes for Halloween, they should also give full space, time and creativity to celebrating the existence of fifty-two per cent of the world's population.

## An Institute for Women's Studies

Mair Verthuy, July, 1978.



As if to commemorate International Women's Day, the Board of Governors of Concordia University, Montreal, gave its approval on 8 March 1978 to the setting up of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute for Women's Studies.

The university was already a pioneer in Women's Studies in Canada. After the introduction in 1970 of the first interdisciplinary course on the Nature of Woman, a program was steadily built up, covering a wide area of subjects, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary. Courses in Sociology, History, Political Science, Economics, Psychology, literatures of the French- and English-speaking worlds, Religion, etc., are completed by seminars on special topics, such as the problems specific to Amerindian and Inuit women or a comparative history of feminist movements in French- and English-speaking Canada. Students may already register for a Minor or Major\* in the field, and it is hoped that we shall soon be able to add a B.A. with Specialization.\*

Why then a special Institute? After merging the Faculties and departments of Arts and Science on the Loyola and Sir George Williams campuses in 1977, the Administration recommended that the student need for a greater degree of personalization in their education be met by the creation of 'smaller units such as colleges'. Each of these 'colleges', membership in which would be optional, would have a single unifying theme or philosophy. Students would register simultaneously for the degree of their choice and within one 'college', if they so chose. While these smaller units would not necessarily offer their own courses, it was expected that they would respond to student demands in various co-curricular areas at least.

It was a heaven-sent opportunity, and forty women — faculty, professional and support staff, students — immediately began the long and demanding task of justifying the need for a 'college' organized round the theme of Women's Studies, of defining its goals and structures. It was the first of the smaller units to be approved.