

## The Dawn of the Women's Liberation Movement at Penn. From Connie Bille

On New Year's Eve Dec 31, 1969, I spoke on a panel of recent Penn grads who had formed the core staff of Philadelphia Resistance, which was the “grad school” version of our undergraduate activist experience as “The Viet Nam Week Committee.” On campus we were best known for decorating the fence surrounding the construction of the Fine Arts building. (My co-chair for that project was Steve Kiyoshi Kuromiya who later founded the AIDS organization ACT UP. Steve provided Congressional testimony that accelerated drug approval process and saved many lives.) We also persuaded the head of the Interfraternity Council, future Futurist Jeremy Rifkin, to march with us up Fifth Avenue in New York to protest the War. (I told him to wave at the cameras; there was no hiding from the FBI.) After graduation, with support from Philadelphia’s Quaker community, Resistance opened an office on Walnut Street and organized local demonstrations like draft card barbecues and bus trips to Washington DC (as in Mailer’s *Armies of the Night*) So no doubt due to our local notoriety and many dust-ups with the Civil Disobedience squad, we were invited by WHYY Station Manager Andrea Mitchell (later a broadcasting legend and Penn Trustee) to share our ideas about the impact of our activism on the 1970s decade ahead.



I was the only female on the panel, the designated speaker on women’s issues because by then I was deeply involved in the women’s movement locally and nationally. The others were males living under the threat of their draft status - e.g., Bob Brand, Josh Markel, Marty Goldensohn. The guys said (to paraphrase) "The War in Viet Nam has changed our generation’s consciousness and will have the most lasting impact on the future." They felt the War had “radicalized” young people. I was the last to speak and I disagreed. I did not perceive that the threat of the draft had made my party-loving peers into progressive activists. I foresaw that the war would eventually come to an end and our classmates would party on at Woodstock, put on running shoes and eat organic foods. They would focus on their own lives and stop thinking about overthrowing the Establishment.

I said "No. The Women's Movement will have a much more fundamental and profound impact on the future" I said it was not merely because women had an epiphany after reading the *Feminine Mystique*, but because the new birth control pill had given us a tool to control our lives. "Women will not be forced into early marriage and childbearing. They will have more choice. And every family will be impacted." I am not sure I convinced the guys on that panel then, but fifty years later, I think they'd agree with me now.

Even as a freshman at Hill Hall I was aware of students who sought abortions or had shotgun weddings like the young woman who was my resident adviser. I grew up in the working class where my high school friends were more vulnerable to hardship than my college classmates, and I understood that if women cannot control when to have children, they cannot control their education, their occupation, their financial security, or their health. After graduation I went on to lead the first Women's Studies course at Penn in September under the auspices of Students for a Democratic Society's "Free University." We read Simone de Beauvoir and examined the lives of Mary Ann Evans/George Eliot and Margaret Sanger. No academic credit involved. Within a year I started the Pennsylvania Abortion Rights Association at 3618 Powelton Ave with a Penn employee named Phyllis Ryan, and a few months later in 1969 I become a founder of NARAL and served on its Executive Committee until 1973 when *Roe v Wade* was decided. In 1969 I got LIFE Magazine to come photograph Penn student Diane Sjolander in a toga standing on the steps of Van Pelt holding a coat hanger in a guerrilla theater performance of "Lysistrata Day."

Wow. Fifty years later women are once again battling for physical autonomy. Failure is not an option. WE'RE NOT DONE YET!