

SOCIETY'S CHILD

by
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Six years ago a young girl left her home in Philadelphia to study in Simmons College's safe, uninvolved academic seclusion. However, after one year, school for her became a series of protest marches and anti-war rallies. Her lessons were the Vietnam war, assassinations, and Kent State. It was the late sixties, the period when tweedy professors and students alike were shaken out of the stacks to face a surging discontent with the status quo. The loud, complacent silence of the fifties' generation had grown unbearable and got shouted down.

Some students found the tension too much and dropped out either to retreat or to experiment; others got caught up in the movement's faddish elements of mindlessly mouthing such catch slogans as "End the War" and "Free Political Prisoners." They, too, eventually disappeared, probably back into the status quo mainstream. However, many doggedly hung in to have their social consciousness awakened, to become seriously involved with changing the system.

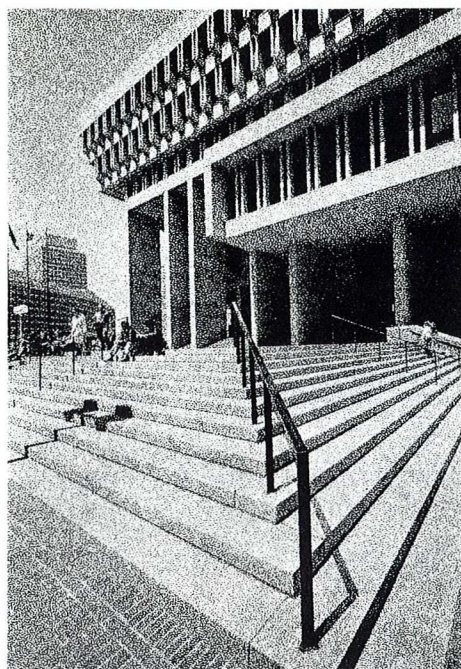
These students made commitments not so much to the intellect as to their fellow humans. The young girl from Philadelphia was such a person. She is Lisa Zankman, society's child.

Today, Lisa is Director of the Mayor's Commission to Improve the Status of Women. Her job is the logical continuation of the commitment, which for her has crystallized into feminist advocacy.

Lisa brought the seed of commitment to social action with her to college. She had wanted to be a social worker. However, after a semester she changed from social work to government. The activism of the sixties and Simmons' strong career orientation nurtured the seed. "The thing at that time was not to be an academic star but to be an activist and to get out there and work," Lisa explains.

She recalls the "big change-around" at Simmons. "When I came in as a Freshman, we had 11:00 P.M. curfews during the week, 12:30 A.M. on weekends. We could not stay out overnight. No men were allowed in the dorms. Although we had to wear skirts to classes, we wore dungaree skirts and sweatshirts. Suddenly, the following year, there were no curfews. Everything turned around socially. The year after that we were under the pass-fail system."

Outside Simmons, the national crises



were brewing: "I was there for the whole mess, Martin Luther King's assassination, Kent State, the March on Washington. I'm sure that's what made me want to get out and do community organizing."

As part of a government field-work seminar, Lisa went to work at the South End Little City Hall. She was so stimulated by the experience that, when she graduated, she continued to do the same work at the Jamaica Plain Little City Hall.

Feminism was not an issue for her at that point. When injustices occurred, she rationalized them. She cites a case in point: While she was at the Jamaica Plain Little City Hall, she ran the show. Yet,



the City ignored her executive ability and brought in a man to be the manager. She told herself, "Of course, you can't have a young woman manager."

Once Lisa went to work with the rent control office in City Hall downtown, her rationalizing stopped. "I noticed that things were out of kilter. I began to feel stirrings that women were not being treated the same as men. So I started reading more, listening more, and going to seminars. Finally, we started a group called City Women for Action."

The group, "a strange coalition of young Turks and older women," tackled affirmative action and the sexist civil service system.

The civil service system's sexism was the very reason why the women's group was not broad-based. The women in this vast system — a system which rarely promoted them beyond head clerk — refused to join because many feared being fired for their involvement. Most of them considered their personal involvement pointless, since, after all, sexism was entrenched. Why not simply leave the system and get married?

Even without the support of the women in civil service, the group still fought a winning battle. Today, most city jobs are open-posted. Lisa believes that people in city government are becoming more conscious that they need women in their departments. The status of women in city government is not yet completely equal with that of men. Not all jobs are open-posted. Too many departments try to kill two affirmative action birds by hiring one black woman.

As a result of her feminist activism, Lisa was given the job of organizing the



Mayor's Commission to Improve the Status of Women. "I don't know how it happened," Lisa insists. At any rate, once again, as with her Little City Hall experience, Lisa turned indignation into action. She recalls, "I thought at the time, maybe I am being co-opted by the system. However, that's O.K., because now, I'm in a position where I can do what I want to do."

Lisa understands that coordinating women's issues into solvable problems takes some doing. Yet, in only seven months she has formed a 23-member commission. In addition, she has organized the commission on a community basis rather than on an issue basis. With her Little City Hall background telling her to "go with neighborhood representation," she chose women with years of community activism behind them rather than feminists in the traditional sense.

In so doing, she ran headlong into the major problem of convincing these women that the issues they were working on were indeed women's issues. When first approached, the women did not want to associate themselves with "women's lib." "I'm not a bra-burner," they would say. Perhaps not, but they had been working for equal sports facilities for girls, adequate health care for women alcoholics, and improved living conditions for women in housing projects.

Lisa's problem in organizing the women points out the on-going need to clearly define feminism and remove the absurd bra-burner stigma from it. Lisa defines a feminist as "someone who respects herself as a woman and can translate that respect into some kind of action."

In translating women's self-respect into action, the members formed eight task



forces which, in turn, focus on the major women's issues. The areas that they confront are rape, employment, education, housing, child care, and health care. An overall task-force, Outreach, coordinates all the other task forces and publicizes the commission and programs available to women in the city.

Since the Commission is only seven months old, the task forces are still shaping their specific programs. Yet, many exciting ideas are already emerging.

In the housing task-force, for instance, the organizers plan to use a weightwatchers group to bring the women of the Mission Hill project together. Although to the middle-class women this idea may seem trivial, to the women in the blighted project, where life is so base and services are almost non-existent, the idea is revolutionary. Too often these women are isolated in their struggles to survive. However, under this plan, they will now be able to share their problems and rally around larger issues such as voter registration and sports facilities.

The Commission's capacity is limited to the role of adviser. "Nevertheless, we do have the tremendous power of persuasion," Lisa acknowledges. "It is the mayor's clout behind us that enables us to go into a department and say, 'You need to hire forty women within the next three years because you don't have any women other than secretaries.'" Since the Commission is representative of all the neighborhoods, it has a power of influence over the mayor. "We represent his constituency," Lisa says.

Satisfied that within her present staff position she can accomplish her feminist goals, Lisa sees no reason for ever running

for elective office. "There are too many things you can't do because you have to remain very conscious of the fact that you are an elected official, and that you're running for office all the time. Also, I don't want the voter pressure."

In a sense, her Simmons field work at Little City Hall launched her career in city government. As a result, she remains in touch with the one who made it possible, her Simmons adviser in government studies, Professor Carroll Miles, Chairperson of the Department of Government. Does he still advise her? "No, we're friends, now. I have a tremendous amount of respect for him. Sometimes we don't always agree, politically, but that's fun, too." Lisa goes on, "If it hadn't been for his seminar in city administration, I don't know what I would have done when I graduated."

Dr. Miles and Dr. Margaret Hennig, Associate Professor of Management and Co-Director of the Graduate Program in Management, provided her with the greatest support in becoming a career woman in government. "Dr. Hennig was a real inspiration in terms of feeling 'I can do it.' It was in her course that for the first time I thought of myself in terms of having a career *as a woman*."

Dr. Miles, on the other hand, never thought of Lisa and the other students as *women* in government. Rather, he saw them simply as his students in government. "He was very encouraging. I don't think he had any doubts that we could make it, so I have never had any doubts that I could make it."

Lisa Zankman will undoubtedly move up the career ladder, but she will always remain society's child: active, committed, fearless.

"A feminist is someone who respects herself as a woman and can translate that respect into some kind of action," says Lisa Zankman, '69, Director of the Mayor's Commission to Improve the Status of Women.

