

to Sarah Almond, her intrepid assistant; and to Elisabeth Calamari, our memorably named and highly effective publisher.

Jill Grinberg, our agent, neighbor, and friend, initially pushed us to turn our "activist idea bank" project into a book. We owe her thanks for that and for her graceful assistance on many other fronts.

Thanks to Mia Herndon, Elizabeth Birdsall, David Brotherton, Liz Maki, Sarah Taylor Cummings, Jessica Baumgardner, and Gloria Steinem for insightful readings of a probably embarrassing draft. Merci to Julie Felner and Irad Eyal for brainstorming titles when we still were calling the book *Recipe-tested*.

Most of all, we thank our friends, families, and Gordon and Peter, for their support and belief in us—we also thank our sons, who were born during the writing of *Grassroots*.

## Introduction

by Winona LaDuke

I have spent my entire adult life as what you might call a political activist. I have testified at hearings, demonstrated at countless protests, and been involved in litigation. I've worked in a number of Native communities across the continent, and founded the White Earth Land Recovery Project (WELRP) on my home reservation. With our work here, we've been able to recover more than seventeen hundred acres of our land and create a land trust, while we work toward recovery of more of our own birthright. We also continue to work to protect our wild rice from genetic modification and ecosystems from contamination by pesticides, and to stop clear cuts of the forest. From inside my own house, we roast fair-trade and organic coffee. I have written books about the environment, run for vice president twice (as Ralph Nader's Green Party running mate in 1996 and 2000), and been arrested because I don't think that a thousand-year-old tree should become a phone book.

The perception of me, or of any well-known activist, is probably far from reality. Activists, the thinking goes, must be organized, focused, always working on the next strategy.

My real life, the one in which I conduct all of my activism, is, of course, messy. If you came over, you might find my five children, ages four to sixteen, three dogs, fifteen horses, a few cats, several interns from around the country, and many friends who double as coworkers helping with WELRP's work. The 2000 veep campaign was conducted with me breastfeeding my newborn son before and after each stump speech and during many an interview. I still coordinate the sustainable food projects central to the White Earth Land Recovery Project literally from my kitchen table at the same time as I figure out meals for my kids, take coffee orders for Muskrat coffee company, and pop in videos for my youngest to watch on TV. I talk to Native community leaders from across the country as I cook meals and clean up (sort of an endless job). I write books at the same table where I make rawhide ornaments for sale as part of WELRP and help with maple syruping in the spring season, and my house is filled with labels that spell out the Ojibwe words for "bed," "book," "cupboard," and "table" as part of my ongoing commitment to indigenous language and culture preservation. My activism is simply in my life—it has to be, or it couldn't get done.

My own life as an identified activist has made me wonder at the term itself. What separates simple "responsibility" in life—motherhood, for example—from the fine line that one crosses to become an "activist"? I have been surprised and moved by encountering so many other mothers in my years as an activist: mothers in Chiapas breastfeeding their babies like anyone else, but who mask their faces as they speak with me because they can't afford to have their identities known; Mohawk and Ojibwe mothers who face down General Motors and Potlatch Corporation, knowing that if they don't, their kids won't ever know clean water, and generations ahead will have contaminated breast milk.

I have developed longstanding friendships with women who are engaged in struggles of responsibility—for their land, their own community health, and the water their children drink. Are these women feminists? That depends on who defines the term. Many of these women, including myself, are committed to the process of self-determination and believe in our inherent rights, as bestowed by the Creator, to live with dignity, peace, clean air and water, and our duty to pass on this legacy to our children and the generations to follow.

At the United Nations Conference on the Status of Women in Beijing, China, in 1995, I asked women from small countries around the world why they came all this way to participate in what was, in essence, a meeting. "I came because the World Bank is here," explained Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, an Igarok woman from the Philippines whose village is targeted for a World Bank-funded dam. "I believe that those people at the World Bank and the IMF, those who make the decisions which will transform my life, should see my face." That sentiment applies whether you are an Igarok woman from the Philippines or Sherry Honkala from the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, challenging federal budget cuts to aid for dependent families or tending to the needs of homeless families. The message of self-determining women is the same for all people: *We want control over our lives, and we will challenge those who impose laws on our bodies, our communities, and our future.*

I believe that women move to activism out of sheer necessity. As a group, we are not of privilege—budget cuts devastated our household, the military wreaks havoc on our bodies and our homelands. The National Priorities Project reports that \$152.6 billion spent on military aid in 2003 could have provided Head Start for an additional 20,211,205 children, health coverage for an additional 89,780,249 children, affordable housing vouchers for an additional

22,894,974 families, or salaries for 2,673,864 new elementary school teachers. Feminist activism, then, doesn't begin or end with my uterus: this is about my whole body, my life, and the lives of my children. We are women who redefine "Women's Issues," and say all issues are women's issues. I say: *We are the mothers of our nations, and anything that concerns our nations is of concern to us as women.* Those choices and necessities move us to speak out and to be active.

I happen to come from a line of these women who speak out, and I continue this work—our work. Women's work. My grandmother Helen Peskin, a Jewish woman from the Ukraine, recently passed into the Spirit World. Her early years were formed by the reality of war, first the Cossacks who overran her village and then the Nazis. With her life came a sheer determination to not be a victim, to speak for peace, to make a better life, and to demand dignity. Of her ninety years on this earth a good forty were spent as a seamstress: a purse maker, a member of the Pocket Book Makers Union in the garment district in New York, a folk dancer, and a peace activist. *A woman's work is about economic justice, and about quality of life.* My mother, Betty LaDuke, made her own path as a muralist and art professor, one of the first women on the faculty of her college, and like other women, she had to do it better than any man around because it took that much to get recognized. She has done this work in a way that celebrates life, and celebrates the work of other women. And she has done this work by linking with women in Eritrea, Nigeria, and Peru. *A woman's work is about creating and celebrating life.* Our parents' struggles become our own, in our own time. We can't escape from that history, nor can we escape from our time in it.

In the lives of women in my family, it was never about just our own selves, it was about the collective dignity and everyone's health and rights. This is counter, in many ways, to

Americanism. Americanism teaches individualism. My family, and indeed movements for social transformation, are not about anything as limited as the better job or the better advantage for the individual woman. Even the tragic deaths of three of my closest friends, activists all, are lessons in the urgency of change on a broader scale. Marsha Gomez, a gifted artist, was killed by her own son, who lacked the psychiatric medical attention he so desperately needed; Nilak Butler passed from ovarian cancer because she did not have adequate health coverage; and Ingrid Washinawatok El-Issa was assassinated by the FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, with a gun and a bullet that came from my tax dollars in the second most highly financed recipient of U.S. military aid in the world.

The compelling reason behind activism is that our most personal lives—even the intimacy of death—are actually embroidered in the reality of public policy, foreign policy, military aid, and economics. Each day, then, I, like the women in my family before me, and like so many other women in the world, recommit to continue this struggle for life, and to celebrate its beauty in the process. That struggle and that celebration are who we are as women, as we take responsibility for our destinies.

The book you hold in your hands, *Grassroots*, is a call to understand and undertake action. The authors, Jennifer Baungardner and Amy Richards, have their own flawed, chaotic, and activist lives, which they share with you in an attempt to prove, as I hope I have done, that you don't have to be Superwoman to change the world. You just have to take responsibility for your life and your community—and realize that you have the power to do so, even from your own sticky kitchen table.

—White Earth Reservation, MN, August 18, 2004

Prologue:  
Portrait of  
an Activist

Noam Chomsky looks like an activist. He wears practical, worn clothing and eyeglasses. He's old and he clearly cares not about Prada's or Gucci's designs, just about how and under what conditions the clothing is made. A venerated professor of linguistics at MIT, he lectures around the world and has written seventy political books thus far (and at the rate he is going will write twenty more before he is through). Chomsky's beat is demystifying world politics, global economies, and the media. His specific message is that average citizens like *you* have the power to hold those huge forces accountable. When activists want to know how to protest the war in Iraq or how to dismantle the World Trade Organization, they turn to Chomsky for analysis. He always knows where injustice lies, cutting through complex worlds with his laser IQ. "You've told us what was wrong, but what can we do about it?" is a frequent question in the Q and A after his talks. "You've got to organize," is Chomsky's perennial response.

But what does it mean to organize? What does organizing look like? According to a profile of Chomsky in *The New*

*Yorker*, even his wife describes his "You've got to organize" response as his "fake answer," given to comfort people from his depressing predictions about the state of the world. We don't see his answer as false, but simply as too broad. As feminist activists, we are confronted with this question, too, and we've concluded that an accurate and responsible answer is different for each individual. The details of organizing vary depending on who you are and what you seek to change.

For ourselves, that awareness came slowly, but eventually we grew to understand that being an activist didn't mean adding an identity or tasks to our lives, but simply recognizing the opportunities for change that our lives (as responsible, passionate citizens) already included. We asked ourselves, "Do we have a few dollars to give, or a few friends who might help protest the execution of a young man on death row?" Our mode and expression as activists are based on what jobs we have, where our talents lie, what we care about, where we live, and other individual details. What Chomsky himself does to organize is write best-selling polemics such as *9-11*, lecture, analyze a problem clearly for others, and reveal how the media and big business work to, as he puts it, manufacture consent. Not everyone has the power of Chomsky to draw crowds or the IQ (or time) to read hundreds of pages of wire-service reports each day, but everyone has the power to impact the world—indeed, that is Chomsky's message. The problem, to which even Chomsky contributes, is getting to the next step: action. That, we realized, requires demystifying activism for those eager to be involved but confused and possibly intimidated by what that might entail.

When we sat down to write *Grassroots*, we were ambivalent about even using the word "activism." We wondered if more people would relate to the terms "volunteerism" or "charity,"

or something more fuzzy—like "do-gooders united." On the one hand, the word "activism" sounds so dramatic, as if this book was for people who chain themselves to trees or ruin dinner by lecturing to their families and friends about factory farming. On the other hand, we believed that social change was simple at its core and the book could be a call for people to find the activist within.

Since we ended up committing to activism as a term as well as a process, we want to make sure readers know what we personally mean by the word. The two of us define activism as consistently expressing one's values with the goal of making the world more just. We use feminism as our philosophy for that value system; that is, we try to take off the cultural lens that sees mostly men and filters out women and replace it with one that sees all people. We ask: "Do our lifestyles reflect our politics?" "How can we make sure that we all receive the same breaks—and basic necessities—traditionally awarded to white males?" An activist is anyone who accesses the resources that he or she has as an individual for the benefit of the common good. With that definition, activism is available to anyone. By asserting that anyone can be an activist, we aren't trying to weaken or water down its power. We believe that activism is by definition profound, a big deal, revolutionary. However, we are challenging the notion that there is one type of person who is an activist—someone serious, rebellious, privileged, and unrealistically heroic.

If we had to name one person who embodies our ideal activist, it's eighty-something Lois Weisberg from Chicago, Illinois. We learned about her through an article by Malcolm Gladwell in *The New Yorker*, "Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg," in which he characterized her as a "super-connector." Lois looks at her friends, family, garbage collector, neigh-

bors, shoe-shop clerks, and co-workers as resources for her to solve problems and make the world better. As former commissioner of cultural affairs in Chicago, she created a ping-pong project (Ping-Pong tables set up all over town, inviting harried urbanites to play a game), a youth arts initiative called Gallery 37—where professional artists mentored low-income kids—and she was responsible for those life-sized painted cows (“Cows on Parade”) that invaded several cities in 1999, among many other things. Though her achievements are numerous, Lois Weisberg won’t go down in the history books with Malcolm X and Dolores Huerta, because she is an everyday activist. She approaches her daily life as a conduit for change, as a big game of Concentration wherein a random meeting or request can ultimately be matched with a parallel concern or solution—and in that way she is affecting the world.

Elle Woods does not immediately come to mind either when you think of a radical change-maker. She wears pink, is more perfect than Gwyneth, has more shoes than Carrie Bradshaw, and carries her chihuahua, Bruiser, in a Gucci bag. Elle was president of her sorority (Delta Nu), keeps a regular hair and nail appointment, and is unequivocally a super-activist. Oddly enough, she is the epitome of Chomsky’s call to organize.

For those of you who haven’t seen *Legally Blonde I* and II, we should say that Elle Woods is the charming hell-raiser portrayed by blond screwball comic actor Reese Witherspoon. In the first film, she leaves golden Bel-Air to compete with pale, Brooks Brothers grade-grubbers at Harvard Law School. Her initial motivation is to win back her WASP-y boyfriend, but she soon learns that she has an affinity for solving problems using her wits, her willingness to

ask the “dumb” question, and the law. In the sequel, Elle translates her stellar record at Harvard into a job on Capitol Hill, working for a congresswoman who was a fellow Harvard alum. Elle’s cause is saving Bruiser’s mother and other animals like her from being cruelly and unnecessarily used for the testing of makeup. Rather than engage in the stymied and age-old bureaucracy of The Hill—bartering for votes using backdoor deals, waiting for the day that someone would owe her enough favors to hear the bill, and compromising her ethics in the process—Elle uses her particular resources to find another way.

At doggie day care, for instance, she befriends the conservative chair of the Committee on Energy and Commerce that will hear her proposed bill. She aligns with a doorman/dog walker to find out which of the representatives own dogs and would, thus, have an emotional stake in this bill, if pushed. When she can’t get an appointment with a powerful Thatcher-style Texas congresswoman, Elle figures out which hair salon she goes to and talks to her in that setting. Wearing a beauty-salon robe and with her hair mid-color process, the Texas Iron Maiden is revealed to be a Delta Nu sister. Elle finds out who wears the makeup that the animals are being tested on, and makes the connection between one congressman’s moisturizing gloves and another congresswoman’s “raspberry macaroon” lip gloss and the abuses of animals via unregulated testing. Her bill gets a hearing, but when backdoor maneuvers threaten it, Elle needs to beat the bushes to demonstrate that there is public support. Elle turns to her sorority—an organized network of women fiercely loyal to each other—and accesses “Phone tree #255.” Within a day, thousands of young, hyper women show up to march in D.C. Elle wins and what is revealed is the potential power

and efficacy of the many invisible organizations an individual already has at one's disposal—resources which can be leveraged for one to become a successful activist.

Elle Woods does not exist, but the conflict—and resolution—that she illustrates does. Acknowledging that someone like Elle is an activist brings us to one of the central theories of *Grassroots*: it's not who you are but what you do. We came to this understanding through our years of traveling across the country in support of our first book, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. One of the most popular questions we were asked points to this truth. The question almost always came from a young woman, someone who reports she has taken her first women's studies class the year before and it changed her life. "I see the world through feminist-colored glasses now. Issues make so much more sense. I am electrified!" she'd gush. "I'm volunteering at a battered women's shelter and I can't wait to do more and . . . um, I wear a thong. Can I still be a feminist?"

At first we laughed, and answered that her underwear neither qualified nor disqualified her feminism. After getting this question at several schools, though, we realized that the woman wasn't asking for clothing advice. She was saying, "Can I be myself and care about these issues?" And the questions in that vein kept coming. *Am I good enough? Am I pure enough? If I don't eat red meat, do I also have to forgo leather? Can I never shop at the Gap again? Do I have to give up my religion? I think I'm a feminist but . . . I diet. I listen to rap. I'm pro-life.* We realized that one of the main barriers to seeing oneself as someone who could truly make change in the world is that we feel trapped in our own contradictions. As Amy says, "Can I wear Nike running shoes and still protest their labor practices in Indonesia?" There is a huge fear

that we'll be revealed as hypocrites so, in search of moral perfection, we're paralyzed from doing anything.

The two of us are not advising people to deck themselves out in Nike gear and get a bikini wax every week—or even to disavow careful reflection about the challenges of participating in a capitalist economy. We are advocating, quite simply, that if you wait until you are perfect and free of conflicts, you will never change anything in the world. In fact, all of our most-loved social justice superstars have lives that are riddled with contradictions. "Mother of Modern Feminism" Betty Friedan had a husband who used to give her black eyes, yet Friedan didn't complain publicly, nor did she report him to the police or leave him flat. Inspiring civil rights activist Al Sharpton took Republican funding for his radical bid for the 2004 Democratic nomination for President. Beloved feminist author bell hooks advocates a Marxist critique of capitalist society but nonetheless has been known to love her red BMW and charge large speaking fees. The filmmaker Michael Moore advocates workers' rights but we've met a few disillusioned former employees who note he doesn't apply the same pro-labor standards to his own workplaces. The Center for Third World Organizing eviscerates major corporations like Levi's in its magazine *Colorlines* and yet takes money from Levi's foundation. We're not telling people's dirty secrets but demonstrating that these accomplished, effective, respected activists still have issues to work out—just like the rest of us. Each of us has to begin where we are to address the slew of inequities that present themselves in our lives.

Once you begin to address the problems you see in your own life, you discover how interconnected all issues are. One anecdote that bears this out: in the 2004 book *The*

*Working Poor: Invisible in America*, David Shipler documented the story of an eight-year-old asthmatic boy living in Boston public housing. The asthma (treated medically but not improving) caused the boy to miss school and his mother to have to stay home from her much-needed job. A nurse paid a visit to his home and discovered the likely sources of the boy's intractable asthma: a leaky pipe causing mustiness as well as wall-to-wall carpet riddled with mites. The boy's mother attempted to get the landlord to fix the pipe and remove the carpet, but to no avail. Finally, lawyers from Boston Medical Center (the employer of the nurse) sent a letter to the landlord, who—under legal threat—fixed the pipe and replaced the carpet. What was the result of this one direct action? The boy's asthma cleared up almost immediately, he returned to school, and his mother was no longer in danger of losing her job. Helping people living in poverty isn't always about convening a think tank, changing a law, or writing a letter to your representative. Sometimes it is ripping out mite-infested carpet. Many issues were contained in this story—welfare to work, Medicaid, the environment, education—and the act that resolved it is one that might be accessible to any of us.

The people you will meet in this book are each addressing an issue that directly impacts their community, and we profile their process in creating a solution from the grassroots up. The point of each chapter is not the issue they tackle but the steps for change they outline. In other words, a description of how Lauren Porsch—as a college student in New York—created an abortion fund isn't just a guide to financing the termination of unwanted pregnancies; it's a plan for creating a financial distribution network. A reader in Texas might use Lauren's advice to put together a fund for the defense of murder defendants who are not

provided free legal services by the state. Your fund might award scholarships to smart but low-income African American students who want a college education and have no other means of affording it. Our chapters about what high-school students and artists can do isn't meant to be limited to those demographics—the examples can apply to any skill set or any community, from carpenters and computer programmers to transgendered people and stay-at-home moms.

The real portrait of an activist, after all, is just a mirror.



|||||chapter I|| Why the World

Needs Another

Advice Book

"How do we bring attention to [an] issue and make change, not just discuss it, not just march about it, but make change?"

—Ruby Dee, actor and activist

**JENNIFER AND AMY**

In 2002, New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire who believes in the bottom line, slashed recycling in America's most densely populated city. The mayor's office claimed it could save \$40 million in crew and export costs. True or not, the city has 8 million citizens, many of whom buy several liters of coffee in paper cups and ask for it in a bag with seventeen napkins and four individual sugar packets—*every day*. Thus our city's contribution to the world's garbage problem is indisputably significant. Recycling was our one bit of moral credit, not to mention it kept

us from drowning in Starbucks frappuccino cups and Glacéau Vitamin Water bottles. In a mere month, a ten-year process of training New Yorkers in garbage-sorting behavior was demolished. Standing in our tiny New York City kitchenettes tossing pounds of recyclables into the trash made us realize how much we waste—and how necessary the recycling program really was.

Soon many people were angry with Bloomberg and so eager to have the service back that some were willing to pay for it, and most assumed that somebody else (Giuliani? Nader? Oprah?) would soon be informing us of the new strategy. The two of us also waited for someone else to have a plan. And waited, and waited. Then we realized that we weren't practicing what we preached unless we took some action ourselves. We called a colleague whose family started the garbage removal company BFI (yes, it's helpful as an activist to have a wide variety of friends) and attempted to tackle the recycling problem ourselves.

One solution immediately jumped into our heads: Since many of our friends said they were willing to pay for the service of recycling, why not research how much it would cost to have private contractors pick up recycling? We knew this was how other places, such as Marin County, California, dealt with their recyclables. On another track, we noticed that homeless people have always acted as de facto recyclers in the city, returning cans and bottles to grocery stores for the five-cent deposits. The fact that the garbage was no longer sorted impeded their efforts to gather cans and bottles for deposits. As a stopgap solution, perhaps we could amplify the work of the homeless who recycle to make an income. We envisioned placing giant bins outside grocery stores and on street corners as drop-off centers for

cans and bottles. Then homeless people or other can collectors could return them for the deposit.

We began gathering information. As so often happens, we started with strong assumptions about what was going on, which turned out to not be nourished by facts. We placed a call to the city's Department of Sanitation and were connected with Kathy Dawkins, their PR person. That one call yielded this important fact: recycling wasn't *abolished*, as we had thought, but merely scaled back. Plastics and glass were no longer considered recyclables, but aluminum cans, newspapers, and cardboard boxes were. Furthermore, businesses in New York were still mandated by law to recycle, a service they paid for out of pocket. Knowing that recycling was technically still in place made us even more depressed since that fact wasn't being publicized. We became obnoxious, seething at our neighbors for throwing away their cat food cans, returnable bottles, and magazines.

Our approach was shaping up to be a full-time job, including private contractors, public education, and homeless outreach. This moonlighting couldn't pay the bills, so we decided that if we could mobilize our own neighborhood, that would be a start. We reached out to our local city council representative, Margarita Lopez, who, as a vocal "out" lesbian council member, is known for being radically progressive. Our interns, Liz and Anna, called her office—many times—but never received a response to our request for a meeting. One day we just walked over to the office, knocked on the door, and were able to get an appointment to meet with the councilwoman for the next week. From this we learned that when at first you don't succeed, make a house call.

At the meeting, we learned that we were right about her

being an ally: she was the only city councilperson (of fifty-one members) to vote against the reduction in recycling. She pointed out how lucrative recycling could be and, if done correctly, the city should have a vested interest in maintaining it. Further, the program in New York wasn't actually in the red. "Even with losing money from glass and plastic," Lopez told us, "the city was making money from recycling," a point that had been kept from the council members until after they voted. We told Lopez of our desire to get our neighbors to subsidize curbside recycling, which she promptly shot down. "I represent a poor district," she said. "And having your garbage and recycling picked up is a basic service that citizens deserve." Lopez characterized the service as an equalizer—"whether you are rich or poor, your garbage is picked up." Although, at the time, it was the *lack* of recycling we were sharing equally, her point was well taken.

We left the chaotic but productive meeting, jettisoning the idea of paying for pickup, but with a plan to move ahead with public education and getting returnables out of the trash and into the hands of can and bottle collectors. Lopez also encouraged us to call the council member in charge of sanitation.

Ideally, we wanted a homeless organization to work with us. So we pursued a meeting with the outreach coordinator for the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), only to learn that they could not help us with our project for two reasons. First, people who go to shelters (mainly families) don't tend to be the same people who collect cans. Second, NCH prioritizes direct services for homeless families, from providing clothes and food to finding permanent housing. Recycling was not on the list.

The coordinator told us about WE CAN, a redemption

center in midtown that serves the poor and homeless who collect cans and bottles to support themselves. WE CAN has paid more than \$30 million in rebates since it began in 1987. Some collectors even make a decent living. According to an article in *The New York Times*, one man who collects cans full-time made more than \$35,000 a year in income. When Liz and Anna called the founder of the organization, Guy Polhemus, he said that "it wasn't a good day to talk," because they were getting evicted.\* It turned out that Christine Quinn, that district's usually progressive councilwoman, didn't want WE CAN there since it primarily served homeless people who, being homeless, don't have access to bathrooms and often use the neighborhood as a rustic latrine.

With WE CAN too beleaguered to help, we moved on to phoning the councilman in charge of sanitation. We assumed his office would be hostile to our calls or he would put us off as our councilwoman's office did initially, but we were wrong. Counsel to the NYC council committee on sanitation, Carmen Cagnetta, called us back immediately and set up a meeting for the following Friday.

Cagnetta was pro-recycling and seemed pretty shocked that there hadn't been more outcry from New Yorkers when the service was reduced. We said there had been—even the volunteers in Margarita Lopez's office were complaining about how dispiriting it was to throw away soda bottles. People just didn't know they had to direct their dissatisfaction at the Department of Sanitation rather than at each other.

Amey asked how New York City could get away with not recycling given the state law requiring it. "The law states

\*After receiving several eviction notices, WE CAN moved locations.

that you only have to recycle if there is an economic market associated with it," said Cognetta. From him, we learned that the scaling back of recycling had been a disaster, even economically. One of the justifications for cutting back recycling had been the assumption that it would reduce the number of truck shifts the city had to pay for. But with more waste being generated each day, they had to add just as many shifts to pick up the extra garbage.

We also discovered that paper is always profitable because you can mix all sorts of paper together; plastic is less profitable, and all of those glass beer, tea, and wine bottles are a nightmare. In New York, paper is particularly viable because it goes directly to a pulping company, Visy, which pays the city \$20 or \$30 a ton. The problem with plastic and glass was twofold. First, the city had to pay a middle man to have plastic and glass picked up, who then sold it to recyclers—so the city saw no profit, whereas the contractor profited twice. Second, both substances were hard to clean well enough to meet industry standards for reuse. "Glass especially is very difficult to recycle: it breaks, the colors mix, and that mixed-color glass is not reusable," Cognetta told us. The main use for recycled glass is fiberglass landfill covers. (Ironically, the less we recycle, the more need we will create for recycled glass's most popular product.)

Glass is also incredibly cheap to produce, he continued, given that it's manufactured from sand, which is plentiful. It costs less to make bottles than to recycle what we have already used. While we mentally tallied all of the glass waste we had created in our lives, Cognetta told us about two forward-thinking plans to deal with the glass issue. Recycle America Alliance, a division of the garbage behemoth Waste Management, worked with the Gallo wine company to develop a glass that uses all three colors (green, clear, and brown).

Across the Atlantic, Germany has instituted a fifty-cent deposit on every bottle sold, so that it is not economically feasible to simply treat glass as disposable.

Since there was so much confusion about what could be recycled and whether there was economic incentive to do so, we determined that public education was the most pressing issue. Cognetta said that changing behavior required constant education (TV advertising, subway posters, and radio announcements, to name a few), but in New York, the media market is so outrageously expensive that only cheap PSA spots in the middle of the night are affordable. Meanwhile, you don't want to make tons of posters and booklets for a recycling campaign—all of that trash defeats the purpose. Cognetta showed us the material the Department of Sanitation created for schools—we were impressed that they had them—but they were encased in three-ring plastic binders and the city had no idea how or if the materials were being used. The one staffer in charge of bringing the recycling message to the city's public schools had been laid off.

Then, as we were formulating a public education campaign, plastic recycling was reinstated after the city received a financially viable offer from a recycler. A year and a half later, glass was phased back in. We didn't come close to resolving the city's recycling issues, but we did accomplish a few things.

1. We learned that many public servants were available to us as citizens, from our city council member to counsel for the committee on sanitation. (Don't Be Afraid to Pick Up the Phone.)
2. We learned how much we didn't understand about recycling, from the fact that recycling bottles doesn't do

- much for the environment to the fact that New York City technically hadn't stopped recycling. (Challenge Assumptions. Don't Believe Everything You Hear)
3. We learned that we shouldn't ask people to pay for recycling, because it's a basic public service. (Don't Provide to the Few What the Government Should Provide to the Many—You Only Siphon Off Those Who Are Most Likely to Pressure for Change.)
  4. We learned about WE CAN and other social service agencies as well as homeless or low-income individuals who act as recyclers. (Align with Complementary Activists.)
  5. Most important, we learned how to change our own personal stake in recycling. We both began returning beer bottles to the corner stores in order to get our five-cent deposits after we learned that millions of dollars in deposit nickels go uncollected by consumers and retail businesses get to keep this as pure profit. (Change Your Own Behavior Before Demanding Changes of Others.)

As we poked around our city's garbage issue, we were able to speak with more authority to our friends and community, and move beyond just complaining that our feckless mayor dismantled the panacea of recycling. The moral: trying projects, even if they don't work out, has more activist value than doing nothing.

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I just finished reading Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* and I have to say that I've been inspired. Ever since I can remember, I have always felt unique for being a woman and if I can feel that way so can ALL women. I want to help the women in my community in any way I can but since I'm

only 17 and don't really have any money to donate, I was hoping you could give me advice on what I can do to help out.

—Sarah Rocha  
Bakersfield, California

The above e-mail is a typical request, in its urgency, sincerity—and in its vagueness. It happens to be from Ask Amy, Amy's online activist advice column. But we hear questions just like this all the time. We hear it when we speak at colleges and students raise their hands and ask, "Do you have advice for getting involved?" We hear it when we are on radio shows and stay-at-home moms call in to ask how to connect with other feminist-minded mothers. We hear it when we are at dinner parties and investment banker friends say that they want to do something besides push paper for Citibank. We hear it from professors, retired CEOs, privileged high-school students on Manhattan's Upper East Side, and crunchy college students in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Like Sarah, everyone wants to know "What can I do?"

Traveling around the country, we learned how hungry people were for ways to change the injustice they found in their midst. They wanted to be heard and visible. It was a universal need, not just an interest of the marginalized people and do-gooders presumed to attend feminist events. Sometimes questions were more urgent in specific regions—such as people in Portland, Oregon, talking about transgenerism and students in Indiana, Pennsylvania, talking about women in the military. Regardless of the issue at hand, we were always brought back to passionate conversations about activism. People didn't dwell on "What do you think?" for long; they were dying to know "What can I do?"

September 11 underscored that most people—not only self-identified “activists”—wanted to help when faced with injustice. Among the many poignant responses to that tragedy was the sheer number of people stepping forward to contribute. People lined up at blood banks and hospitals in droves. Hundreds of non-Arabs turned up at the Arab-American Center in Brooklyn to escort Muslim kids to school and women in hijabs to the grocery store. Schoolchildren painted murals. Thousands of people donated food and local chefs from Manhattan’s best restaurants set up kitchens on boats to feed the rescue workers. New Yorkers were shocked by the support and sympathy they received in their time of need. Sadly, though, much of the millions of dollars the American Red Cross collected at groceries and schools across the country ended up in the hands of wealthy New Yorkers. Even when would-be activists were activated, the institutions they turned to often let them down.

The frustration we were witnessing at our lectures could be heard by anyone who was willing to listen. When Julianne Malveaux criss-crossed the country promoting *Unfinished Business: A Democrat and a Republican Take on the 10 Most Important Issues Women Face* (with co-author, Republican Deborah Perry), she heard the rumble. “Regardless of whether our listeners [were] mostly Democratic or mostly Republican, mostly black or mostly white, one of the first questions [would] always come from a young woman who wanted] to know how she [could] get involved in social change,” Malveaux stated. Barbara Ehrenreich had a similar experience as she promoted *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, her best-selling book detailing the plight of the country’s working poor. As she told the *Democratic Left*, the newsletter of the Democratic Socialists of America, the top question she got after the publication of the book was “What

can I do about it?” Social justice organizations, too, were haunted by this question. At Planned Parenthood New York City alone, they field one hundred calls every week from citizens outraged enough by that week’s news to pick up the phone and become part of pro-choice forces.

Given the vast number of pleas to get involved, why don’t we have a totally activist, voting, engaged citizenry? Why do so many issues remain unsolved? Why do shelters have to turn homeless people away and why don’t more women hold political office? Where is the disconnect between these would-be revolutionaries and the pressing issues? We believe that the problem lies in how the question “What can I do?” is answered. Too often the response is what we’ve labeled The Generic Three: “call your politician,” “donate money,” and “volunteer.” *Grassroots* is our attempt to move beyond these knee-jerk, minimally effective answers. We believe that in order to maximize this passion, we must have better, more specific, and *active* answers to the question “What can I do?”

Good answers might come from revisiting John F. Kennedy’s famous inaugural quote: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Many older folks say that the last time they felt hope was during the Kennedy era. Perhaps it was Kennedy’s message—citizens don’t need to wait for their country to save them; they have the power to save themselves and their country—that gave them such hope.

Don’t get us wrong: participation via contacting politicians, making donations, and doing volunteer work is all very crucial to the life of social justice organizations. These types of contributions give organizations the power to influence others. But it is also a one-sided relationship that encourages passivity in the would-be activists. The act is iso-

lated from the larger world of direct action and solutions, which makes the individual often doubt whether his or her check or letter was effective. You know you gave \$20 to Stop Hunger Now, but there are still people who don't have enough to eat.

### MOVING BEYOND THE GENERIC THREE

The questions are basic and general, but the answers—the activism—*can't* be. Two stellar organizations, Dress for Success and Women on Waves, each began with one person identifying a problem—women on welfare don't have clothes to wear to job interviews and women in many countries don't have access to abortion. The people asking those questions—Nancy Lublin and Rebecca Gomperts, respectively—were reasonably average citizens whose sphere of influence was no greater than yours or ours. Nancy created a way to get suits to women, and Rebecca, a doctor, bought a boat to perform abortions in international waters.

Although the two of us are both longtime organizers and supporters of progressive nonprofits, we didn't really notice this lack of good answers until around 2000. We had just published our first book, *Manifesta*, to acknowledge the feminism and the activism that we saw among our peers every day. *Manifesta* was a response to the assumption that our generation was slack and had a dangerous sense of entitlement when it came to feminism—that we were too self-involved to care. We presented numerous real-life examples of young people acting on behalf of themselves and their community. We were surprised and heartened that the most popular sections were “What Is Activism?” and the resource guide that made up the last eighty pages, including

contact information for every organization mentioned in the book. Even the feminists and academics who criticized us for our lack of Marxist analysis or relative naïveté about transgenderism had to keep our book around because their students wanted the resources. It was our goal that people use *Manifesta*, to encourage the reader to make feminism his or her own, rather than simply complain that feminism didn't sufficiently address sweatshop laborers, for example. Usefulness is not the usual mode of political writing, but we took this extra step because we noticed that even a very accurate book with activist theories could drop the ball on providing solutions—to the detriment of social justice. For instance, Naomi Klein's insightful and well-reported book *No Logo* takes readers through a cornucopia of obscene corporate misdeeds. At the end of the book the reader is left outraged but still thinking “Now what can I do?” with no direction in sight. (Klein *does* have a resource-rich Web site at [nologo.org](http://nologo.org).)

Although *Manifesta* was a call to action, we were nonetheless surprised at the number of people who turned to us for guidance in that endeavor: “What can I do?” became the big question of the years we spent touring with *Manifesta*. Sometimes the question was born of privilege: “How can I use my college education or my trust fund, or the fact that I've never gone hungry to help others who are?” Just as often, it was an urgent personal need: “I work at Sammy's Clam Shack and I'm five months pregnant. My boss says he'll fire me if I try to take maternity leave. What can I do?” At first we tried to arm ourselves with possible suggestions. Before arriving in a new town, we made sure to contact the local Planned Parenthood or independent bookstore to learn what they had going on so we would have something to offer when the question inevitably arose. Soon, however, it became apparent

that the groups we referred people to didn't *really* have an answer. They still relied on The Generic Three. What people needed were tangible and specific steps, not boilerplate platitudes to "do something." Clearly, the organizations needed better answers, too.

Initially, Amy started toying with the idea of forming an activist idea bank housed at the Third Wave Foundation: a "place" where people could deposit their good ideas for others to borrow. Then, as we began to offer more detailed solutions to people's problems, Jennifer realized that some of our presumed-brilliant activist ideas hadn't exactly been tested. We didn't know where the snags might lie or what to do about them when they arose. For instance, is it legal to do voter registration in an abortion clinic in Iowa (one of our suggestions for using clinics as organizing spaces)? What happens if you call Loews Theater and ask them to donate twenty tickets a month to a local battered women's shelter? (*Whom* do you even call at Loews?) We decided to work one-on-one with the people we met in our travels. We found out what issues they cared about—for some it was getting studio art classes in their high school, for others it was getting dioxins out of the rivers, and for others it was protesting a sexist ad. We helped them figure out what resources they already had—a fall Rolodex, or money, or an office with a new photocopying machine, or a big conference room. If they were seasoned organizers, we asked what worked for them in the past. We listened to their organizing problems and brainstormed different approaches. *Grassroots* was born. Persistence paid off: these activists stuck with their idea, and now each has contributed to changing the lives of many others.

Looking at the people who have contacted us, it is clear

that individuals, just like Lublin and Comperis, are spurred to action because they have confronted injustice in their own lives. It begins by taking seriously what otherwise could be passed off as a personal frustration: the teenager, for instance, who is outraged when she hears that one can enter a secret code on Play Station's Tomb Raider and watch Lara Croft get gang-raped and doesn't know how to find out if it's true and what to do if it is. Or the woman in Texas who gets married and changes her name for \$31 (the cost of a marriage license) but must pay \$450 to petition the court and hire legal counsel to undertake her case when she decides to change her name back. Or the historian from Southern Oregon University who, while doing research using census data, learns that the census doesn't allow women to be traced by their maiden names, thus preventing him from documenting women over the course of their lives.

There is probably no more impassioned an activist than a victim who has healed from a trauma such as rape or incest and now, several years after the incident, has the perspective and insight to act on the issue. The actress Anne Heche, for instance, was sexually abused as a child, but it wasn't until she was already a well-known actress that she dealt with her past, raised her consciousness about the prevalence of incest, and committed to join the movement to end childhood sexual abuse. (As a public figure, one of the most influential things she can do is to speak out about her own experience.)

Sometimes a step toward activism is, in fact, to reveal what makes us insecure. It could be your transgendered father, your alcoholism, the fact that you have acne, or that you are or were once poor. A woman we met at a Planned Parenthood conference in Philadelphia admitted that she

Peter  
Peltier



didn't have any sense of urgency for the rights of disabled people before she had her legs cut off in a car accident several years ago. Until recently, she had the privilege of being ignorant about accessibility. She is now a fierce activist for the rights of people with disabilities and a great bridge between the disabled and able-bodied communities. Acknowledging vulnerability not only gives you a reason to be an activist; it releases you to join a community of people who may have issues to resolve as well. You can fight together.

Taking action can be a brief moment in your day: Jennifer Locke wrote to us from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, wanting to raise public awareness about the two rock radio stations in her city that were marketed entirely to a male demographic. "I love rock music," she wrote. "Radio should not be so degrading for a woman that she has to only listen to CDs." She e-mailed both station managers and asked if there was any way she could convince them that their female listeners are just as important as their male listeners.

Or it can be a years-long endeavor: Brenda Gillming, from Owasso, Oklahoma, used to be a poultry factory worker. She had the lowest position in her department—"floor person"—which consisted of picking up chickens that have fallen off the conveyor, washing them, and placing them back on the belt for packaging. Brenda brought a sexual harassment suit against Simmons Industries in the early 1990s after years of being called "floor dog" and pelted with meat by her male co-workers. She sought two things with her suit: for a sexual harassment policy to be formed and for it to be enforced. "It took so much from me and lasted about three years till all [was] said and done," Brenda wrote, "but I'm glad I stood up for my rights and also for all women in the future."

Often "What can I do?" means taking a good look at what resources you already have and committing to using them. After September 11, Julia Pershan noticed a sign on one of the businesses on her block in Tribeca, a neighborhood just north of Ground Zero. Directed at local business owners, the sign simply stated: "Should we get together?"

Though Julia was not a business owner, but a recent business school graduate, she attended the meeting. At Julia's suggestion, they decided to form a coalition—the Tribeca Organization—with the express purpose of preserving area business during this catastrophic time. They raised money to take out an ad in *The New York Times* that made the connection between patronizing Tribeca and rebuilding New York. They offered incentives, such as a weekend where everything was 10 percent off in the neighborhood, and agreed to defy typical capitalist rules of competition and cooperate. What made the difference between Julia and others in Tribeca who felt helpless and worried is that she turned the question on herself and asked, "What can I do?" What she could do was use her business degree, use the fact that she had just graduated and didn't yet have a full-time job, and use her neighborhood connections to strengthen the economic foundation shaken by the terrorist attacks.

### WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT FEMINIST ACTIVISM?

We didn't always think that we were qualified to help those who wanted to get more involved. With *Manifesta*, though, we came into our own—and got the confidence to answer questions about feminism. Our qualification was that we

took the initiative. We were as entitled as the next person to do our homework and present a perspective. And a necessary part of that perspective involves an understanding of women's struggle for equality. Now, we lecture frequently on the topics of feminism and activism. We begin our talks with a thumbnail sketch of the last 160 years of feminism in America. Knowing that this activist history exists and that others have turned their idea or thought into a piece of legislation, an organization, or a changed attitude had proved to be inspiring; thus we've included that history lesson here.

To begin with, a definition: feminism is the movement toward full political, economic, and social equality for men and women. We add to that simple definition that feminism implies having enough access to information to make informed choices about one's life. Therefore, it's not so much the choice you make that reflects feminism, but your power to make a choice. For example, you can be pro-life and a feminist, but you couldn't actively undermine another woman's ability to have an abortion and call yourself a feminist.

The first formal women's rights conference occurred in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York. Many of the 240 attendees were part of the flourishing antislavery movement of the time and also were inspired by the example of equality by local Iroquois. Within those native communities, each woman controlled her own personal property, violence against women rarely occurred and was treated seriously when it did, and women could vote. The abolitionists applied their raised consciousness to their own lives and realized that they didn't have the rights they were fighting for others to have. So they called for women to be able to own and inherit property, to divorce, to be educated, and, most controversially,

to vote. In the seventy-two years it took to get the vote, those other rights were earned. In 1923, suffragist Alice Paul realized that the right to cast a vote was meaningless if society itself remained unequal. That year Paul wrote the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution.

We don't yet have the ERA, but many strides have been made. Beginning in the sixties and continuing into the seventies, laws were passed guaranteeing equal access to education (Title IX), outlawing gender discrimination (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act), and coining phrases for rape domestic violence, and sexism—serious problems that used to just be called life. In hindsight, these two movements for women's rights have been organized into waves—the First Wave dedicated to the rights of citizenship and the Second Wave dedicated to equality under the law and in opportunity. We are still working on those goals, but younger people have begun acknowledging a Third Wave of feminism, that continues to work with and toward the same goals as the Second Wave, but as a generation raised with the privileges of feminism.\* If the waves can be reduced to their central goals, the First Wave was about women's rights to citizenship, the Second Wave concerned women's equality, and the Third Wave stresses the power and the responsibility of the individual.

The concepts of "giving back," public service, and activism are not feminist preserves. However, we believe that feminists are positioned particularly well to become power-

\*The Second Wave was instrumental in creating access for women but mostly benefited those who were white and middle-class. Third Waves grew up not only with feminism, but with a critique of feminism from within by women of color, poor women, gay women, and women with disabilities. In that integration, the Third Wave is an evolution of feminism.

ful change-makers. After all, the whole politics of feminism is based on going to the root of the problem, providing prevention rather than a cure. Meanwhile, like punk rock, feminism is also based on the idea that you, an average *schemo*, have the right and the power to take matters into your own hands. You don't have to rely on someone like Ralph Nader, Oprah Winfrey, or Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton to save you. Sometimes using Dr. King or Gloria Steinem as a role model has a paralyzing effect, like "Oh, someone legit is taking care of it" or "I could never do that." In fact, that is why *Grassroots* will mostly focus on what non-famous activists did.

Making tangible change is often the way women and men come to feminism and it is always the way the movement transforms the world. Activism was behind abortion rights, girls' sports teams, the right to vote, and fighting sterilization abuse. Because both of us are feminists, we see our activism through that lens. When people express confusion about feminism or discomfort with the label, it is because feminism is presented as a concept or a theory (what books we have read or classes we have taken) and not action or experience (what we have done that affects the status of women or changed our own lives). Activism and feminism-in-action aren't different concepts.

While activism shouldn't just be about sacrifice, manifesting our values in the world can be hard work. It's like building a new house rather than just living in the old dilapidated one you inherited. It requires faith, because you are imagining something that doesn't exist and you have to believe not only that it should exist but that it *could* exist. We might all use different words to describe ourselves as activists—volunteer, environmentalist, good friend—but

what unites people is that we have a commitment to translate our politics into action, getting from the point of asking "What can I do?" to establishing a group, a petition, a line of organic tampons, or anything. We hope that *Grassroots*, our activist advice book, unveils the process of becoming active.