

Astraea Fund Takes Risks

LAURA FLANDERS

Sometimes it feels as if there is just no good news out there. Under the onslaught of media stories about abuse—Lisa Steinberg and Tawana Brawley—it is easy to get despondent. But despite the apparent increase in unabashed, straight, white, male aggression, there are still some success stories around: progressive groups actively confronting violence against women and managing to survive as activist organizations in the Reagan era.

"It is political to learn that you are not a victim... that you are not at fault—that you didn't do anything wrong," says Annie Ellman, Director of Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts (BWMA) in New York City.

BWMA was founded 14 years ago to help women combat powerlessness through physical training and empowerment. Today, the group's school in Brooklyn offers a special strand of karate and self-defense for women and children from all New York's various communities. The classes are offered for a sliding fee, to all women regardless of their ability to pay, and to girls and boys through 6th grade. Free quality child care is available for all students.

"We believe that self-defense and martial arts training are just one aspect of do-



Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts program

Progressive projects are always in danger

ing education around violence against women," says Ellman. "Our teaching encompasses a political response as well as a physical response to violence. We talk about where the violence comes from, who has power in this society and who gets abused."

Empowering the Powerless

Within a clearly articulated political context, BWMA makes martial arts training available to those who have traditionally been the most powerless in our society: poor women, women with children, women of color, teenage girls, lesbians, older people and non-athletic women. And thanks to funding from the Astraea Foundation, an independent fund for women's projects in the northeastern United States, BWMA is now working on a series of workshops for progressive and community organizations under attack.

"The issue is not just self defense," says Lucy Grugett, BWMA staff member and karate teacher, "but also group self defense." In the last year, MADRE, a women's organization in solidarity with the women of Central America, has been one of several groups subject to severe harassment and has even received death threats against people connected with their work. BWMA workshops help groups like MADRE "combat feelings of isolation and powerlessness," says Grugett.

Another project that has received help from the Astraea Foundation is the Equity Institute of Amherst, Massachusetts. For several years the Institute has been holding workshops on organizational development for groups ranging from the Boston Women's Health Collective to the Board of Directors of the Junior League. "Our work is a mixture of human relations and organizational development," says Dr. Joan Lester, one of the Institute's directors, "with an emphasis on multi-cultural development for progressive and community groups."

Fighting Homophobia

In 1984, the Institute sponsored a project to help combat violence associated with heterosexism and homophobia in the public school system. A teacher-developed curriculum intervention poster was distributed, along with training materials for in-class use. In addition, workshops

were held to help educators confront their students' hostility to homosexuality and to help teachers with their own attitudes about sexuality.

Astraea funding enabled the Institute to translate the entire project, called "How To Stop Name Calling" into Spanish for use in predominantly Spanish speaking school districts. Now public school teachers and guidance counselors are using the program all across the country.

"It's always such a surprise to develop a project and then have a teacher call up and say that it really works," says Lester.

Without funding from a group like Astraea, the Institute's anti-homophobia project would have had a hard time getting realized. "We have met extreme hostility and hatred from many foundations," the Institute wrote to Astraea in 1986. Indeed, after almost 20 years of organizing against violence against women (particularly women of color and lesbians), funding for women's empowerment is as hard to come by as ever.

"Funding decisions are always political," explains Sandra Camacho, co-director of another Astraea-funded group, New York Women Against Rape (NYWAR). On the verge of their 15th anniversary, NYWAR is facing a severe financial crisis despite their nationally acclaimed programs and growing success. Last year, with less than a month's warning, The Crime Victims Board chose to defund NYWAR. The cut represented 25 percent of their annual budget.

Political Funding Cuts

NYWAR was one of the first organizations in the United States to devote itself solely to the prevention and treatment of rape and sexual assault. Since 1973, NYWAR's hotline has helped more than 15,000 survivors free of charge, and given counseling training to hundreds of volunteers. Speakers have gone into schools, hospitals and even police departments, and this year, in collaboration with Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts, NYWAR is running a program on sexual assault for homeless women and children living in the Martinique Hotel in midtown Manhattan.

"Our work goes beyond just crisis-care," says Margie Metsch, NYWAR co-director. "For example, unlike hospital-based centers, NYWAR will deal with women who are only just 'remembering' abuse that may have taken place years in the past." And NYWAR's work is clearly political, working from the premise that sexual assault is an expression of power-relations in general, and inextricably connected with other power-abuses based on race, class,

age and sexual orientation. "We are both a social service agency and an activist women's organization," Camacho explains.

When it comes to funding, NYWAR has found that government sources are increasingly favoring "establishment" groups staffed by professionally accredited counselors over community-based, woman-controlled anti-violence groups like NYWAR. Meanwhile, NYWAR's programs, which are unique in the city and taken as a model around the country, are always at financial risk.

Astraea Funds Essential

The Crime Victims Board cutbacks made it impossible for the group to pay a full-time bilingual counselor, but funding from the Astraea Foundation enabled the group to expand their services to the Latino community of the Lower East Side by running a bilingual/bicultural training program.

"We know that funding is a political issue," says Kathy Acey, Director of the Astraea Foundation. "Without economic autonomy, progressive projects are always in danger." These days, women like those who support Astraea are facing up to a certain responsibility. "We are go-

ing to have to support the groups we care about financially, as well as emotionally, if we want them to survive," says Acey.

Astraea is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic social change foundation which raises funds that help support women's projects ranging from school posters like those of the Equity Institute to the self-defense programs of Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts.

As the media continues to be obsessed with women victims, rather than with survivors, and with re-victimizing those already abused, like Tawana Brawley, many of us feel hopelessly at risk. But as Annie Ellman of BWMA put it: "The key is knowing that there is a context for the violence that is threatening you," and having "something to look at the fear with... means of taking power."

With the help of foundations like Astraea, women's groups around the country are offering a way to transform fear into action. Long may they flourish.

Astraea Foundation, 666 Broadway, Suite 610, New York, NY 10012.

Laura Flanders is a free-lance writer living in New York City.