

# Grassroots

A Field Guide for **Feminist Activism**

Jennifer

Baumgardner

*and*

Amy

Richards

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**N e w   Y o r k**

# 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 Cwyneth, 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, thousand; 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, *Manifesto: 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 afeminist 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.