

Margo St. James: Founder of the Prostitutes' Rights Movement in the U.S.

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What's a nice girl like you? was the usual reaction of men to my becoming a feminist as well as my becoming a prostitute. The difference for me was I chose to be a feminist, but I decided to work as a prostitute after being labeled officially by a misogynist judge in San Francisco at age twenty-five. It was 1962. I said in court, "Your honor, I never turned a trick in my life!" he responded, "Anyone who knows the language is obviously a professional." My crime was I knew too much to be nice girl.

The forerunner of COYOTE was WHO, Whores, Housewives and Others. Others meant lesbian, but it wasn't being said out loud yet, even in liberal bohemian circles. The first meeting of WHO was held on Alan Watt's houseboat. The name COYOTE came from novelist Tom Robbins who dubbed me the COYOTE Trickster. I was living in Marin. Richard Hongisto, a liberal sheriff elected in San Francisco about that time attended my parties. He had been a cop, and had a sociology degree. I cornered him at a party once and asked him what it would take to get NOW, and Gay rights groups to support prostitutes' rights, because he seemed to have most of the support of the liberal groups in town. He said that we needed someone from the victim class to speak out, and that was the only way the issue would be heard.

I decided to be that someone, even though I had only worked for four years, and wondered what effect speaking out would have on my life. I received support from my family, my mother, the housewife-secretary, my sister, the gospel singer with eleven children, my sailor brother, my son, the salmon fisherman, their families. Together with friends across the country and around San Francisco, they convinced me that speaking out was the right thing to do. My father stopped talking to me.

In 1973 I decided to reconnect with the lawyers and bail bondsmen I had known and I hoped the hookers would join me. The PR people responsible for getting the sheriff elected volunteered to help me with COYOTE. They still remembered me. I had gained some notoriety at the time of my trial and I successfully appealed the conviction, but it didn't help me find other gainful employment. A professor at UC gave me some good leads and resources. Another old friend got a job as a jail doctor, so I had inside information from him and from the girls. Prostitutes were still being quarantined at the time which meant you had to be examined for VD before you could get out of jail. We stopped the practice the following year.

A liberal mayor was elected, George Moscone, and he hired an out-of-town Police Chief who the cops didn't like because they had so far managed to keep minorities and women off the force. We all know what happened to the Mayor, and a Gay Supervisor, murder by a former cop. The climate changed after the murders, and the liberals became afraid to speak up about the issue.

I started organizing internationally with a close friend, Jennifer James, an anthropology professor in Seattle in 1973. She coined the word decriminalization and was responsible for getting NOW to make it a plank in their 1973 convention. COYOTE published a newsletter from 1974-79 and the Hooker's Ball became popular, attracting 20,000 people in 1978 at Cow Palace.

I began attending international conferences starting with the United Nations Decade of Women Conferences in Mexico City, the 1976 Tribunal of Crimes Against Women in Brussels and the 1977 International Women's Year Conference in Houston, the 1980 Decade of Women Conference in Copenhagen, and 1976 Democratic Convention in New York, where St. James organized 'loiter-ins,' and the Republican Convention in Kansas City. She worked closely with Gail Pheterson, (editor of Vindication of The Rights of Whores from Seal

Press and author of Prostitution Prism from University of Michigan Press) beginning in 1983 in Rotterdam, and with Priscilla Alexander (co-editor of Sex Work from Cleis Press) since 1977. In 1984 COYOTE hosted a Hooker's Convention and drafted a Bill of Rights which was the underpinnings for the World Whores' Charter drawn up by the International Committee For Prostitutes' Rights in the European Parliament in Brussels. The conservative swing in the US and the women's movement prompted me to move to Europe so I could put more energy into international organizing, Although those wanting to abolish prostitution were more active than ever, there are politicians and women's groups willing to stand up for prostitutes in many countries.

In 1993 I moved back to the United States, married San Francisco Examiner journalist Paul Avery, and resumed my efforts to repeal the prohibition and claim human rights for hookers in San Francisco, which had been my home since 1959. COYOTE was going strong again thanks to the efforts of Samantha Miller and others who kept it alive.

Editor's Note:

Margo has been very active since she came back, in COYOTE, on the San Francisco Task Force on Prostitution, on the Drug Abuse Advisory Board, in the Harvey Milk Lesbian, Gay and Bi Democratic Club, and in many other groups and contexts. She is currently running for Supervisor in San Francisco. With her broad-based support (no pun intended), we expect to win.

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