

Continuing the Conversation: Intergenerational Student Feminist Activism

by Sam le Nobel and Julie Glaser

Sam le Nobel (she/her) is a student, a feminist, and a social justice activist. She is the co-founder and President of the Women's Studies Student Society at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) where she is completing her Master's of Women and Gender Studies graduate degree. Her research concentrates on feminist social movements and bridging the gap between feminist theory and feminist practices.

Julie Glaser (she/her) is a feminist and human rights advocate working in the film and cultural sectors. She also consults and engages with communities in social change on issues of homelessness, sexual and gender identity, diversity and inclusion, the environment, and accessibility. She is published in numerous anthologies including *This Wasn't on the Syllabus*, *Fireweed*, *Tessera*, *Bent on Writing*, *Womanisms & Feminisms*, and *Filling Station Magazine*. When not on horseback, she can be found in the garden, furiously trying to finish a novel.

Introduction

In March 2025, Julie was featured as a panelist in a discussion on gender-based violence at Canadian universities, co-hosted by the Alexa McDonough Institute for Women, Gender, and Social Justice and the Women's Studies Student Society at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Drawing from her own lived experiences as a student activist in the late 1980's, Julie offered valuable advice to current students undertaking similar advocacy.

Between the second and third waves of feminism, in 1989, Julie was a student at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. She was among the influential group of women who protested rape culture on campus, refused to be silenced, and demanded institutional accountability and protection from gender-based violence and sexual harassment. From sit-in protests in the principal's office, to disrupting previously unquestioned hazing rituals, Julie, and her fellow activists, successfully advocated for institutional protection against sexualized and gender-based violence. They created what has become the foundation of the sexual violence prevention and response policies that students benefit from today. This dedicated group of feminist-student activists adopted the name *Radical Obnoxious Fucking Feminists (ROFF)* as an act of self-empowerment after a group of male engineering students harassed them with this name after a protest on the misogyny and sexual violence that was occurring on campus. Julie explains in more detail how the group got their name in her contribution to the anthology *This Wasn't On the Syllabus* (2024, 100).

Julie's commitment to feminist and social justice advocacy is influential and inspiring. Her work rests on the contributions of the feminists who precede her and will continue to be built upon by the feminists who succeed her; social justice is a continuous, collaborative endeavour that relies on prolonged, multi-generational efforts. The following interview is inspired by Julie and the feminists who have worked diligently, tirelessly, and thanklessly to develop a safe and inclusive society for all and is intended to continue the conversation, collaboration, and support among generations of feminist activists.

Interview

Sam le Nobel: When do you consider to be the beginning of your feminist-activist journey or career? Is there a moment in particular that stands out to you as your starting point, or, perhaps, when you came into feminist consciousness?

Julie Glaser: Feminist consciousness blew my mind open in 1986. I took a course called Women in Literature that led me to Women's Studies 101. No doubt, both of these courses would look much different today than they did back then, but the experience opened me to a reality that, all of a sudden, I realized I was living, although unconsciously, without the words to explain the experience. Consciousness shone a light upon injustice, inequity, bias, discrimination, and systems of oppression designed to keep some of us down while sending others to the front of the line. It's startling when it hits, and it hits hard. Nothing is ever the same afterwards.

SLN: What does activism mean to you?

JG: Activism is the ability to act on injustice in all of its forms. It's the opportunity to improve upon humanity, to create new systems to lift us all up, and to honour life in all its forms on this earth. We must act for kindness, for each other, for the planet, and for a future that we imagine and that we must believe can exist.

SLN: What was your experience as a student feminist activist at Queen's University in 1989? What did you learn during that time?

JG: The experience was filled with friendship, fraught with incredulousness, and led with bravery and ingenuity. It was a time of exchange, openness, righteousness, foolishness, and belligerence. There was a lot of affection, dancing, tears, cheers, many potlucks, laughter, lovers, and late nights. Activism leads to finding your voice, your power, and filling your timeline with deep bonds by doing all the things to make a difference in this life, for oneself, but mostly for others.

SLN: What can contemporary feminists learn from their predecessors? What does it take to be a feminist activist? What skills or resources does one need?

JG: Creativity and humour must have a seat at the table. Our predecessors were goddess icons out of reach - Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Simone de Beauvoir, Gloria Steinem, Audre Lorde, Frida Khalo, Maya Angelou—and we ate them up while screen-printing t-shirts and placards for our next rally. Their creativity and tenacity inspired ours; we were fired up with banter, critique, exploration of new ideas that blew our minds but made so much sense. Our feminism was party to a party.

We have to be able to be open and bend our minds to reshape our beliefs. We also need humour, heart, tenacity, and the willingness to know you'll get knocked down, but you can get back up again and the compassion to know when you need to retreat, recharge, reset.

SLN: What do feminists of 1989 and contemporary feminists have in common? What are some of their differences? What did you wish you knew when you were a student feminist activist?

JG: We're still fighting the same fight, only today, the issues are more complex and we have a more developed understanding of intersectionality than we did in 1986. That makes things more interesting and beautiful. Moreover, the crime of misogyny has grown in its heinousness since 1989—a year forever etched in my soul. Just when you think it can't get any worse, it does.

Contemporary feminists have to spend more time uncovering the dark depths of misogyny, which apparently know no limits. I often wonder what we'd all be doing for ourselves and others if we didn't have to exert so much energy

dealing with morally reprehensible behaviour and exposing misogynist networks. What beautiful things would we create? How would we spend all that extra time not fighting for equity and peace? What I never imagined is that 35 years later we'd still be having to do this.

SLN: Being a student activist often means resisting the authority that you rely on to grant your degree. How do you navigate the power imbalance as a student challenging an institution such as a university? How can students prepare themselves for the inherent opposition that they will face from university officials?

JG: I don't think you're ever prepared for the injustice you're about to face while fighting injustice. In 1989, we weren't using the word "gaslighting" and we were pretty gob-smacked by the lack of attention and complete inaction of the administration to the "no means kick her in the teeth" backlash to our consent education campaign. Having a really good therapist is probably the best advice I can give to endure and grow from the experiences and to develop the skills to make decisions in the moment that you can live with.

SLN: In your contribution to the anthology *This Wasn't on the Syllabus*, you mention that your fellow activists had some conflicting opinions about next steps during your sit-in protest in Principal David Smith's office. How did you and the ROFFs manage this conflict? How did you stay aligned and unified? What advice do you have for students who experience internal disagreement?

JG: This was an interesting and unexpected outcome of the activism: that we would grow so big as to splinter in our rapid expansion. We tried to manage the conflict with consensus (it didn't work; we didn't have enough experience among us to pull that off successfully), with what we, the original ROFF group, saw as reasoning (which also didn't work as others saw things an entirely different way), and attempts at pulling rank—"We started this, therefore we should finish it and everyone else should fall in line"—(this also didn't work, as everyone else was now a bigger group than our small core, and this larger group was energized by their newfound activism and power).

Today, I suspect activists would be much better equipped to deal with conflict, having been exposed to more opportunities for conflict resolution, consensus building, and learning to facilitate difficult conversations. We just jumped into everything without a solid foundation of skills. We were babes, really. When our group was small this worked for us; when we grew with enthusiasm and numbers, we lost control of the message and the plot and had a hard time getting it back.

SLN: As you are aware, gender-based violence disproportionately impacts women, with men over-represented as the "doers" of violence. Many argue that it is not women's behaviour that needs to change, it's men's. They warn that it is essential to involve men in feminist conversations if there is to be any real and sustainable change. What do you believe is an effective way to involve men in feminist activism? How can men be feminist activist allies without becoming the dominant presence or voice in a female-centric space?

JG: If men truly want to disrupt the cycle of male violence against women, there needs to be a much larger, organized, and strategic movement of men working together to change the legacy that has been passed from one generation to the next, once and for all. I truly believe that this is their work, not ours, and it goes beyond allyship to ownership.

SLN: What can non-students do to support student feminist activists? What can parents of university students do to be supportive allies? How can community members be involved?

JG: Stay in touch with what's going on, show up, speak up, help out. Bring food to the potluck.

SLN: Do you have any advice for young feminist activists who wish to remain involved after they graduate?

JG: Never stop. Your circle of sisters will continue to grow your whole life, there will be an ebb and flow to the activism, and the subjects will evolve and be remastered. You'll be hurt by the process and elevated by the outcomes. Envision what you know is possible and believe it into being.

Works Cited

Glaser, Julie. 1989. In *This Wasn't on the Syllabus*, edited by Addy Strickland and Emma Kuzmyk, 98-109. Rising Action Publishing Co, 2024.