



WOMEN'S VU

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

May 2004, Volume XXVI, Issue 9

Feminist Mothering: A Mother's Perspective

by Dr. Linda Manning, Director
Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center

I had the great honor recently of having dinner with a hero of mine, Dolores Huerta, after her recent talk at Vanderbilt. She said something during that dinner that has stuck with me ever since. I asked her if I could quote her for this article and she readily agreed. Ms. Huerta raised eleven children while co-founding the United Farm Workers Union with Cesar Chavez and playing a major role in this country's civil rights movement. She said, "I could never give my children material things, but I gave them values."

When I think about the topic of feminist mothering, I believe that statement sums it all up. After all, feminism represents a very specific set of values. As bell hooks tells us, feminists work to end sexism and all forms of oppression.

I certainly never raised *eleven* children! But I have a daughter, Michele, who is 34, and a son, Todd, who is 32. Their father and I divorced when she was four and a half years old and he was eighteen months. And for the next eleven years, I raised them as a single parent. For much of that time, I was a full-time student and a full-time employee, completing three years of undergraduate education and all of a doctoral program. I could not give them much in the way of material things, but I tried hard to give them values.

Sharing my feminist values and my passion for social justice was not always easy. We are, after all, embedded in the culture around us. It was not possible, nor necessarily preferable, to shelter my children from the dominant cultural views. Michele played with Barbie dolls; Todd loved Matchbox cars and Big Wheels. Rather than hide from the culture, I tried to engage with it, to share with them my critique of the culture rather than forbid them to take part in it.

Sometimes this critique was kept private, among the three of us. I tried hard to respect their feelings and not to expose them to ridicule from their peers. I remember well the afternoon that Todd's football coach in junior high called the team a "bunch of girls" because they were not performing up to his standard. Standing on the sideline, I caught the pleading look he sent my way and held my tongue. We talked about it later, not in public, so that he would not have to endure the endless teasing of his teammates. I must add though that I talked to the coach when Todd was no longer on the team.

Other times the critique was very public. When Michele was being harassed in elementary school and on the school bus by a bully—mostly because she was "too smart" for a girl—I tracked down his parents, the teacher, the principal, and anyone who would listen. I am sad to report that very little was done; he continued to terrorize her any time that he could get away with it. But at least she knew that his behavior was totally unacceptable to me and that I tried everything I knew to make it stop.

I also worked to find alternate cultural models for them. We owned and soon wore out the record album *Free To Be You And Me*. Todd heard the song "William Wants A Doll" played in our house. I combed the bookstores to find a story with a strong female lead character (not an easy thing to do - then or now!). Michele and I read *Hooray For Captain Jane* many times.

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For more information, please see our website:

www.vanderbilt.edu/WomensCenter

May 9th is Mother's Day: Celebrate and Remember

The Women's Center Thanks its many Volunteers and Supporters

On Thursday, April 15th, the Women's Center and Project Safe held a special Appreciation Reception to thank and recognize our many volunteers and supporters who assist us in our programming. We laughed, we cried, we ate!

We Appreciate YOU!



Jennifer poses with her much appreciated friends from ISSS (clockwise) Laura Flower, Judith Pennywell and Heather Dearing.



Above: Moments after presenting volunteer Sarah Weissman with her certificate of appreciation for the many hours of computer tutoring, Sarah turned the tables and presented Associate Director, Jennifer Hackett, with her own certificate for "Computer Savvy!"

Left: We love Becky Spires! Project Safe Co-Director, Vicky Basra, presents Becky with her certificate.

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Address changes: Please contact our office manager, Robin Van Arman

Deadline for newsletter: 1st of the month preceding publication

THE WOMEN'S CENTER PRESENTS ITS ANNUAL MULIEBRITY AWARD

This annual award was established in 1996 in honor of the student newspaper, Muliebrity, which was published in 1992-93. It honors an undergraduate student who demonstrates leadership in activities that contribute to the achievements, interests, and goals of women and girls or that promote gender equity.

Two recipients were honored this year. "The Jessicas" as they are often called, consist of graduating seniors, **Jessica Bearden** and **Jessica Heaven**. Both Jessicas are double majors in women's studies and political science.

The Jessicas were nominated together because they have formed a strong partnership on many women's issues. One of their greatest achievements was the Pregnancy Resource Forum that occurred just a few months ago. It was a night that brought together professionals from counseling, student health, housing, academics, adoption agencies and agencies that mention abortion as an option. This night was an outstanding collaboration between the pro-life group on campus and the Vandy Fems, and it went off without a hitch.

Additionally, the Jessicas are working on a national level, to bring women to the *March for Women's Lives* on April 26. On a day-to-day note, the Jessicas have sat countless hours on "the Wall," working to educate the campus about breast cancer, gender issues, pay equity, body image, and so much more. They are a constant presence on campus and are excellent models for tireless dedication and often thankless work. **Congratulations!**

Feminist Mothering: A Mother's Perspective

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More than anything else, however, feminist mothering meant practicing what I preach. It meant trips to Washington, DC and Chicago by Greyhound bus to fight for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). It meant founding the first Sexual Harassment Committee in my graduate program. It meant designing a training program for psychology interns that taught culturally sensitive counseling skills. It meant fighting to change a street name to *MLK Blvd.* and petitioning the City Council for a domestic partners benefits ordinance. It also meant treating my children as full human beings and equal partners in family decisions, within the obvious limits of their developmental abilities. "Because I said so" was not a phrase used in our home.

When my children were small, I was a young woman, a young mother, and a young feminist during what was a tidal wave of the feminist movement. Obviously, I made many mistakes. The t-shirt mentioned in Todd's story was one of them! In many ways, we raised each other. But the rewards I reaped from incorporating feminism into my mothering are infinite. I raised two children who value activism and live their gender in a healthy, positive way. Have I raised two feminists? Well, you

would have to ask them that question, but I always hope that the answer is "yes." I do know that I have raised two children who know and value their right to choose who they are, who they become, and what they believe.



VANDY MOMS invites you to learn more about "*Empowering our children: mothering with a feminist touch,*" with Dr. Linda Manning on Thursday, May 13th at 11:30am at the Women's Center. Dr. Manning will be on hand to answer questions and discuss techniques for handling the intricacies of gender issues in mothering.

Vandy Moms meet on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month from 11:30am to 12:30pm at the Women's Center. Vandy Moms is a support network that provides advocacy for working moms in the Vanderbilt and larger communities. Open to all Moms in the community, partnered or single. For more information or to RSVP, please contact misa.culley@vanderbilt.edu or call 343-4367.

Feminist Mothering: A Son's Perspective

by Terrell Freemon

One of the first things I thought of--one of the first thoughts to pop into my head--when my mother asked me to write about being raised by a feminist, was a T-shirt my mom used to wear when I was a young kid. It was one of those great 70s shirts with the iron-on decal and the wide, swooping letters with curly, circular endings to them. Hers read: "When God Created Man, She was only Joking!"

Now, I sit here writing this as a thirty-two year old man and I chuckle to myself, because it is a funny, edgy line. But when I was eight or nine years old and my mom was thirty-two, I was pretty offended. I pointed out to my mom that one day I would be a man and did the message on that shirt not seem a little bit mean to her only son?! She respected my feelings, but money was a little bit tight at that time so instead of throwing the shirt away, she spent the better part of an hour or so picking the decal off! Problem solved.

So, when I was a kid, I had a somewhat different perspective on the world around me. I knew I liked Roger Staubach and the Dallas Cowboys; I knew I wanted to be an astronaut; but I also knew what the term ERA stood for. I knew it very well,

because another early memory I have is being worried that my mom's Greyhound bus might crash on its long drive from Austin, Texas to Washington D.C. where she was traveling for the march in support of the amendment. I did not have a high-level understanding of the concepts behind the ERA, but I knew more about it than any of the other kids in my class at school or my friends from our neighborhood!

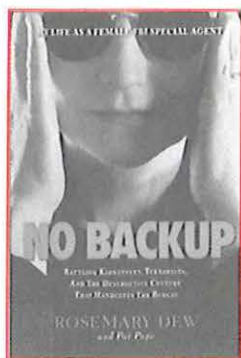
The practical application of feminist mothering meant to me a certain sort of freedom and independence in the way I was raised. Because one of the great purposes of my mother's life was a dedication to the idea of trusting an entire gender to chart their own paths in life and make their own self-aware life decisions, I think that early on she realized that she would have to apply this to her own children or live the life of a hypocrite.

So I was trusted to make my own decisions and to have my own opinions. And because the household was filled with opinionated people, discussion and learning, I grew up to think that these were important things simply because of their everyday nature in my upbringing.

As the son of a feminist parent I never had to worry about expressing an opinion, *continued on page 7*



THIS MONTH: A LOOK AT LIFE IN THE FBI AND HOW THE MEDIA PORTRAYS MOTHERHOOD



Rosemary Dew was an enthusiastic young woman when she arrived at the FBI Academy in 1977, one of four women in her class of twenty-one. Although she soon became disillusioned with life in the FBI, she remained there for 13 years, eventually becoming one of the highest-ranking female agents. In *No Backup: My Life as a Female FBI Special Agent* (Carroll & Graf, 2004) Dew, with the assistance of Pat Pape,

discusses her fascinating experiences as an agent and in more recent years as a government consultant dealing with the FBI bureaucracy.

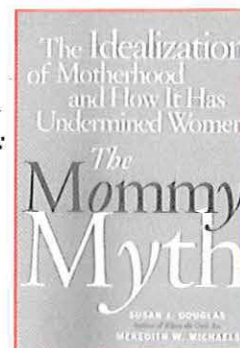
From her earliest days at the Academy, Dew, a single mother with two young children to support, discovered a climate where women were demeaned and harassed and where sexist remarks and dirty jokes were common. She also found that inefficiency, corruption and discrimination were widespread and that in many ways little had changed in the FBI for generations. J. Edgar Hoover had become head of the organization in 1924 and his stodgy ideas and influence remained strong long after his 1972 death. The FBI valued loyalty above all else, considered its public image to be all-important and seldom cooperated with other agencies.

In 1985 Dew became the seventh woman to be promoted to the position of supervisory special agent, working at first in Washington and later in Denver. It was in Denver that she realized that the degree of prejudice and discrimination she had faced throughout her career was unique to the FBI and that women in other branches of law enforcement were more accepted and respected. Her authority was still being undermined. After her resignation in 1990, Dew joined a consulting firm, which later merged with a top defense contractor. In her capacity there she worked with the FBI and found that little had changed since she had left. Being an agent still carried more weight than being an expert on any subject; inefficiency still prevailed, as did sexism and racism. The organization still attempted to maintain its public image of perfection and those who complained or requested investigations were subject to threats or retaliation.

The writer illustrates how the failure of the FBI to change has serious consequences for national security. Their internal problems and lack of cooperation with other agencies may have contributed to the success of the September 11 attacks. Dew's

unique volume may be summed up as "the story of a system that evolved through history, of what it was like to be on the inside, and what steps should be taken to make the FBI the agency the public once thought it was – the agency America needs it to be in years to come."

The differences between reality and the current idealized concepts of motherhood are analyzed in *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined Women* (Free Press, 2004) by Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels. The writers, both of whom are mothers and academics, focus on the unrealistic portrayals of motherhood, especially the "new



momism," in the media and show how this contrasts with the real lives of ordinary women. The media's version of new momism insists that the true woman must have children, must care for them herself and must be completely devoted to them all the time. Douglas and Michaels are tired of the constant myth "that motherhood is eternally fulfilling and rewarding, that it is *always* the best and most important thing you do, that there is only a narrowly prescribed way to do it right, and that if you don't love each and every second of it there's something really wrong with you." They feel that while the new momism was influenced by feminism, it also repudiates it.

In a very entertaining and witty style the writers illustrate how for the past three decades the media have been obsessed with images of motherhood and how the standards of the new momism are impossible to achieve. As these standards grow ever higher, mothers feel even more stressed and guilty. Momism also redefines women through their relationships to children.

The researchers show how the media have depicted apparently-perfect celebrity mothers. Ordinary women cannot compete with such flawless images, even though they know that the famous mothers have nannies and maids. A popular theme has been whether mothers of young children should work, with both stay-at-home and working mothers often being made to seem failures. Other topics include how the media have portrayed childcare as being dangerous for children; the importance of buying educational toys; Martha Stewart's version of domesticity; Dr. Laura's antifeminist advice; and the increase in the number of child-rearing magazines and books on motherhood.





May 2004 Calendar of Events

PLEASE SAVE AND POST

Unless otherwise indicated, all groups are open to all people and are held at the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center at 316 West Side Row on Vanderbilt University's Campus.

For directions, please consult the map at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/WomensCenter/contact.html>. For more information, please call 322-4843.

FRIDAY, MAY 7

Single Women in Ministry

We'll meet in Tillett Lounge at the Divinity School at 6:00pm, then go to a member's home for dinner!

What: A time to join with other women in sisterhood for rejoicing, relating, and telling stories about being a single woman in ministry.

Who: If you are single, female, going into (or in) ministry, come to the women and ministry group. This conversation is free and open to women of the Vanderbilt and larger Nashville communities.

RSVP to Ginger Skaggs, M.Div. candidate and Women's Center intern at gingerskaggs@hotmail.com or 615-319-3144.

TUESDAY, MAY 4

T-BLAST (Transgendered, Bi Women, Lesbians and Straight Women Together)

Topic: No Borders. No Boxes. No Labels. Current research indicates that many women have fluid sexual identities across their life span. Join us in a conversation about the role of fluidity in women's lives.

What: Women throughout history have had loving friendships with their mothers, daughters and best friends despite differing sexual identities. Please join us in for our monthly conversation group.

Who: This discussion group is free and open to all women. Refreshments will be served. Co-Sponsored with the VU GLBT Office.

When: 6:15-7:15pm at VU's GLBT Office. A special location for our spring celebration! (The group meets the first Tuesday of the month.)

For more information, contact jennifer.hackett@vanderbilt.edu or patricia.k.gardner@vanderbilt.edu

For info about how to get to the GLBT House, go to www.vanderbilt.edu/glbt/ Once there, visit the Campus Map, and under Building List, go to Community Partnership House. The GLBT House is the Annex to the Community Partnership House that has the red telephone on it in the map.

TUESDAYS, MAY 4, 11, 18, 25

Creative Life Planning Group

What: A group for all dedicated to living life intentionally and creatively. Open to everyone in the community and is usually attended by women between 40 and 90 years of age.

Who: This group is free and open to everyone. For more information, call 322-4843.

When: @12:00noon - 1:00 pm (Meets every Tuesday)

TUESDAY, MAY 25TH

Creative Writing Group

What: The Creative Writing Group is opening to new members! We look forward to hearing your piece. No writing experience necessary.

Who: This group is free and open to everyone. For more information, contact jennifer.hackett@vanderbilt.edu

When: (Usually meets the 2nd and 4th Tuesdays. This month, just the 4th due to school transition)

THURSDAYS, MAY 13 AND 27

Vandy Moms

Who: Working Moms of any age! Women who juggle! Superheroes! Open to all working mothers, partnered or single.

What: A support network that provides advocacy for working moms in the Vanderbilt and larger communities. It also provides programming to inform, empower and enrich. The meeting on the 13th will feature speaker, Dr. Linda Manning, Director of the Women's Center, on the topic of "*Empowering our children: mothering with a feminist touch.*"

When: 11:30-12:30pm (Meets the second and fourth Thursdays.)
To RSVP, contact misa.culley@vanderbilt.edu or call 343-4367.

MONDAY, MAY 10

Book Group

Who: This is a group for anyone of any age who loves to read.

What: This month the group will be reading *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* by Alexandra Fuller and will be facilitated by Carmen Gherman. Look on our website for upcoming books under the book group at www.vanderbilt.edu/WomensCenter/getconnected

When: 5:15-6:15 pm (Meets the 2nd Monday). For more information, contact Carmen Gherman at cggherman@yahoo.com



On Thursday, April 1st, Project Safe sponsored its annual **SPEAK OUT!** against domestic violence and sexual assault as part of the month-long activities of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Despite the cloudy skies, cold temperatures and light rain, about 100 people showed up to voice their concern and show their support.

Photos by Misa Culley



Co-Director Sandra Harrell speaks to the crowd



Co-Director Vicky Basra hands out leaflets to passersby



On Friday April 2, 2004 Chancellor Gordon Gee announced that Project Safe will be funded through the University for the coming year. Chancellor Gee made the announcement to students stating that:

"Vanderbilt is committed to maintaining a campus environment that is safe and secure for all, that encourages immediate reporting of violent incidents, that ensures offenders are dealt with swiftly and appropriately, and that provides support services for victims...I am pleased to report to you, as I did to our parents last week, that Vanderbilt University will take over the funding of Project SAFE for the next year in order to continue the good and important work that has united our campus in a common campaign against violence."

The Margaret Cuniniggim Women's Center and Project Safe would like to take this opportunity to thank the volunteers and everyone who has been a part of our programs for the last four years. We are excited to continue to work towards the prevention and elimination of violence against women.

Feminist Mothering: A Son's Perspective

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but I knew I would have to defend it. My mother and my sister would see to it that if I decided to weigh in on a given subject I would have to explain myself. And even if the opinion was counter to what they were saying, as long as I could present my case in a thoughtful way it was all right. And being the one male in the household, this of course happened all the time and quite often my motivation was just to be the little brother who disagreed!

Having a feminist mother definitely gives a son a unique perspective as a high school and college-aged young man. You quickly learn that your perspective on the issues of the day related to women is so often very different from those of your peers. You realize that your choice is to defend those positions and hold your ground or to conform to the opinions of those around you who were raised in a "traditional" family with a more patriarchal structure and therefore a patriarchal bias. This can be a very difficult struggle when you are trying to be accepted and "fit in" with the crowd.

It is also a very powerful training, if you will, for life in general. If you have respect for those social-movement struggles your parent went through in their personal life while raising you, you back down from the positions they fought for with

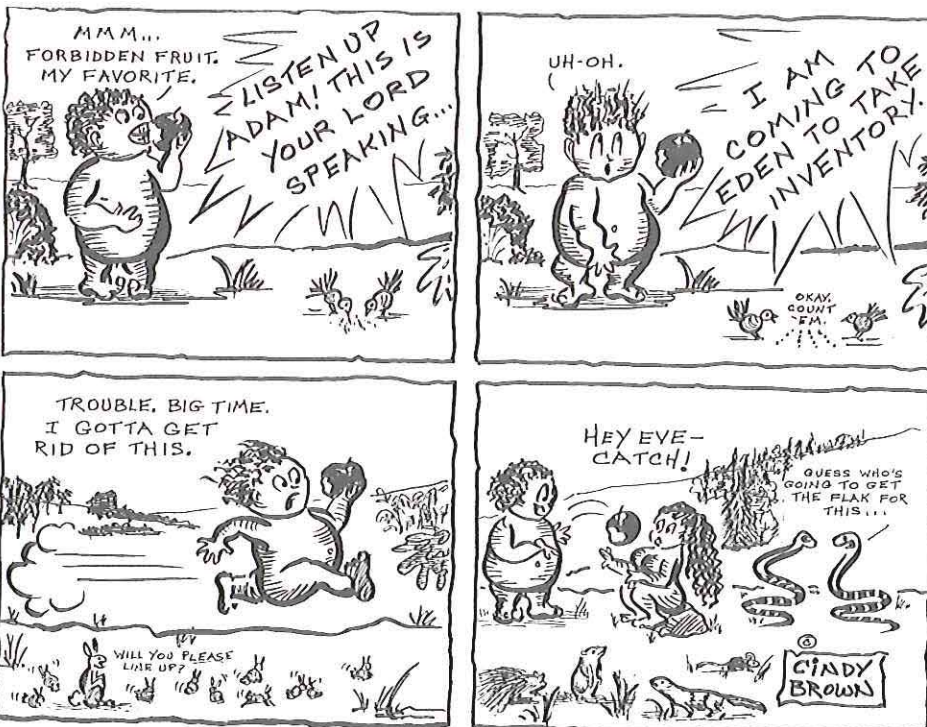
great reluctance, even if those positions do not fully become your own. How can there not be some truth to what they have taught you, the way they have lived their life, if that living and that fighting was passionate and so obviously meaningful to them?

This feminist upbringing then can become a way to live your life--confident in the opinions and positions you choose as an adult.

And one final result of feminist mothering, for me personally, and I would imagine for many men like me: as a man, you have a deeper connection with your mother and sister than a lot of other men do. This is not to say that I understand them fully <<insert standard male/female lack-of-understanding joke here,>> but that I know it is important to try. And should I have a daughter when it comes time for me to have children of my own, I know I have a very good foundation from which to try to teach her independence, self-empowerment and the history and importance of standing up for that which she believes.

--Terrell Freemon lives with his partner Lori Koniski on Manhattan's upper west side and is actively involved in progressive politics and causes. He definitely considers himself a pro-feminist man.

Women's Center Cartoonist Cindy Brown Shares Her Favorite Cartoon



Several months ago, our cartoonist, Cindy Brown, was asked to pick out her favorite cartoon. She has been active at the Women's Center for years. This is what she chose, and she shares her thoughts on it as well:

"This is one of my favorite cartoons because it goes right to the heart of the matter: I've always been suspicious about the story of Adam and Eve because it gave the scribes a chance to record their divine inspirations with a spin. Women didn't participate in these activities. In fact, they were so busy doing essential life tasks that they probably wouldn't have had time even if they could read or write! The depiction of Eve as the Primal Sinner has been used ever since to validate so many insults, deprivations, accusations, and abuses against women that they are too numerous to try to calculate. Who's to say what we might have if women had recorded THEIR divine inspirations?"

ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL FOR ARTISTS

The Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center is currently accepting proposals for exhibitions for the 2004-2005 academic year. The Gallery at the Center is an intimate space with approximately 40 running feet. The Women's Center Arts Committee is interested in reviewing strong two-dimensional work by emerging female artists in the Middle Tennessee area whose work has not had much exposure. Proposals are due May 31, 2004. For additional information, please call the Women's Center at 322-4843.

Requirements for Proposals

The following items must be included in the proposal:

- A brief letter expressing interest in being exhibited;
- A brief "Artist Statement"
- 10 slides of work (or a CD)

Proposals must be received by May 31st. Please send to the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center, Vanderbilt University, 2301 Vanderbilt Place, Box 351513, Station B, Nashville, TN 37235-1513, Attn: Jennifer Hackett

VANDY MOMS

Upcoming Speakers and Topics

Please join us as we continue to host speakers for the summer months.

May 13th: Dr. Linda Manning on "empowering our children: mothering with a feminist touch."

June 10th: Margie Gale of Vanderbilt University will speak about EAP and its programs.

July 8th: Recipe Exchange--come and share your favorite recipes!

August 12th: VUPD's Andrew Atwood will discuss "teaching children about personal safety."

Vandy MOMS is open to all Moms in the Vanderbilt community, partnered or single. For more information or to RSVP, please contact misa.culley@vanderbilt.edu or call 343-4367.

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