

THE

*S I N G L E
M O T H E R S '
S U R V I V A L
G U I D E*

nova scotian edition

BY

BRENDA THOMPSON

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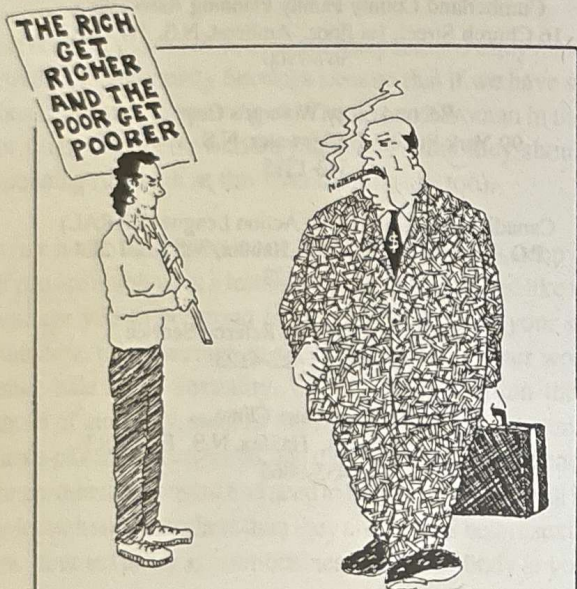
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YA! SO WHAT! THAT MEANS
THE SYSTEM STILL WORKS!

HOW TO BECOME POLITICALLY ACTIVE

The Canadian government and multi-million dollar corporations are extremely nervous about the "common" (a.k.a. exploited) people coming together and organizing for change. They have a vested interest in keeping the rich richer and the poor poorer. Poverty is big business for some people. If we organized for an equal society where children, women, and men were not hungry and homeless, it would mean these multi-million dollar corporations and their friends in the government would have to give up some of the money, power, and privileges they have stolen.

Canada does have a pretty broad list of democratic rights for most citizens. However, as more and more people are becoming poor and going hungry, it is clear that this system is failing to work for the people who need it the most. Our federal, provincial, and municipal governments are supposed to work for ALL people. In the last two years, however, we have seen a large number of demonstrations, protests, and street rallies taking place outside the provincial legislature. People are organizing and demanding their rights in response to government cutbacks and oppression.

Single mothers must organize. Our numbers are growing every year and we must make our voices heard. The word "grassroots" is a slang term used to describe people who do not have any more power than their vote. "Grassroots politics" are a form of political practice in which people attempt to change policies by influencing the opinion of other voters. This becomes known as "political opinion".

ORGANIZE, EDUCATE ... AGITATE!

When we organize a grassroots group, we are getting together to educate and make our opinions known to the general public. We are also trying to make them see our point of view.

Grassroots organizing usually starts when a few people run into a serious problem they cannot overcome by themselves. At first, each may take the blame personally and keep quiet about it. Eventually we start to ask other people, "Hey, have you been having this problem?" We find we are not the only ones with the problem and we're not the only ones who feel this way. We're frustrated by the way we have been treated and by the lack of good, solid answers. We decide we want to do something about it right now instead of waiting for the next election. This is the start of organizing — the recognition that working alone is not the answer and that to achieve our goals we must work together.

Many people don't think of themselves as organizers. We don't think we can do it. We see organizing as difficult, dangerous, and maybe even a little heroic. Wrong! Anyone can organize. All you need is to know how to talk with people. One of the biggest tasks of organizing is finding other people who believe as you do and who want to achieve the same goals.

You can start to find other groups who are interested in the same issues by calling the Help Line and asking for a list of groups working with single mothers. Start reading publications written by and for people in situations such as ours — magazines such as Pandora and New Maritimes. Check libraries and bookstores for books on organizing grassroots campaigns. (Check the Resources list in the back of this book for some titles to start with.) Go to rallies, protests, and marches to support other groups and meet the people who are doing the work.

WHERE TO START?

The best place to start is with the people who you work and live with. These are the people who share your concerns and goals. You don't have to be a big group to be successful. A small group of well-organized people can achieve great things.

It will take a while to build up your confidence as a group, so start with people you are already comfortable with. We are more than a vote, a file number, or a "client" in an overloaded welfare office. We are a group of human beings with feelings and emotions and we need to be friends with each other.

Once you have decided to start recruiting people you do not know into your group, you must figure out a strategy for doing this. In a city or town you can put up notices telling the name of your group, its aim, where and when you will be meeting next, and the person to contact if more information is needed. These notices can be placed on buses, on community bulletin boards, passed out at gatherings such as other meetings, shopping centres, schools, or universities, and, of course, the grocery store. In rural and urban areas you can do telephone networking. That is, each member is to call two friends and tell them about your group and its next meeting. If some of them come to the meeting and find they are interested, you ask them to call their friends and try to get them to come. These are just a few examples of low-cost advertising for your group.

If your group decides to have a protest in front of city hall, the legislature, a grocery store, or wherever, you will need to know some important things. **FIRST AND FOREMOST**, depending on where you want to hold the protest or rally, you may need a protest permit. If you are staging a protest on government property, you will definitely need a permit. You can find out if you need one and where to get it by calling your municipal council, town office, or city hall. If you do need one, they will probably need twenty-four to forty-eight hours to arrange one, so be sure to call ahead of time. They will need to know the time, place, date,

name of the group, and the route and/or location you have chosen for your protest rally. When you have your protest, make sure that one of the organizers has the permit in her pocket if the police or RCMP want to examine it.

Make sure the group of people or person to whom you are directing your protest message will be in the building when you are doing your protest. If you want to know when the Premier will be in, call one of the other political parties and ask them. Or phone city hall or the municipal council office and ask when the mayor or councillors will be in. It's really embarrassing to organize a protest rally and then find out the person you are directing this protest at is out of town and has been for two days!

You will need numbers of people for a protest. You will want not only members of your group to be present but also any supporters of your group. Again, organize a telephone network and let people know. Or distribute leaflets by putting them around the community. You can also mail these leaflets directly to groups you know will be interested. You can get a mailing list of other groups by asking a political party or a coalition such as Women's Action Coalition of Nova Scotia for a mailing list of grassroots groups. The leaflet should contain information about the time, place, date of your protest, who your group is and what your aims are, and the purpose of the protest.

Recently the provincial government has developed a new tactic to deal with people who protest outside the Legislature. They lock the gates to the grounds of the Legislature and try to keep us out. First of all, I would like to know why they are locking out the people who own the Provincial Legislature. If they lock you out, demand to be let in. If that doesn't work, switch to Plan B. Scream, shout, chant, and generally make as much noise as possible. Take pots, pans and cooking utensils with you and bang on the metal fence surrounding the Legislature.

During one protest I participated in, we went up on the Citadel Hill and approximately two hundred protesters banged on the guard rail with pots, frying pans and rocks. It made the most incredible noise! If you decide to use this method of making noise, do not use a rolling pin, large sticks, or handles. The police could view these objects as weapons and

charge you for having it on your person. Being charged with the dangerous use of a rolling pin may seem funny, however, I have been warned! Also, don't damage the fence or those in power could get picky and charge you with damaging public property. Bang the fence, bang your pots and pans, scream, shout, sing songs, chant slogans and make our voices heard! We will not be silenced!

AUDIO AND VISUAL MESSAGES

To have a successful protest you must have both audio and visual ways of getting your message across. For the audio message you should make up a list of chants or slogans for the crowd to shout. They should be short and clear. For example, during a march in Halifax in support of the Mohawks at Oka, we shouted "ARMY OUT OF OKA!". You should also have a speech or two made up for the crowd of protesters — one to rally up the determination of the supporters at the beginning of the protest and another speech when you arrive at your destination. The last one is to get your message across to the intended party.

You may need a battery-charged megaphone. If you are in the Halifax area, you may be able to rent one from the Red Herring Co-op Book Store on Granville Street. In other places, you may be able to borrow one from the local fire department.

For the visual part of protesting, you should have placards and leaflets. The leaflets should contain the information previously discussed. These are handed out to bystanders. You can also circulate petitions for people to sign. You don't have to circulate leaflets only. During a protest rally to increase the food budgets of welfare recipients, protesters handed out Kraft Dinner noodles to demonstrate what women and children on welfare were living on.

Placards are really fun to make! You will need bristol board, wooden pickets, felt markers, and a staple gun. You can get wooden pickets relatively cheap at a hardware or building supply store.

The placards are whole pieces of bristol board which are folded in half length-wise. You write your message or slogan on both sides of the folded bristol board, then you put your picket inside the fold and staple the board to the picket. These are sturdier than a whole piece of bristol board tacked to a picket.

Your message on the bristol board should be clear and just a few words long so it's easy to read at a glance. This is important so that bystanders and television audiences can pick up your messages at a glance. Don't be afraid to be imaginative and bold with your placard messages! When I was involved in a demonstration about the cruelty of politicians and judges towards women in poverty, we wanted to let the public know that not only were we fighting against this cruelty, we were also winning. We did up a huge placard that said: "Mike Laffin, Judge Bartlett, Edmund Morris: Three Down..." The media went nuts over that placard and it was shown on television and in the newspapers. So get the group together with your placard-making materials, have a bottle of wine, play some Tracy Chapman or Lillian Allen and have fun! It will bring you all closer together.

MEDIA COVERAGE

Once you have decided to hold a protest, rally, vigil, street theater, or march, you may want to invite the media to come. "Media" means newspapers, radio, and television. Media coverage is a way of letting your opposition know that you are strong in what you are doing. It also helps spread the word about your group and get other people involved. It says that we are a force to be reckoned with.

When dealing with the media, try to look at their job from their shoes. No matter how glamorous the job appears, most of them put in long, hard hours that go well beyond a regular nine-to-five job. You will find some members of the media are wonderfully supportive and warm. You will also find some are egotistical and pushy, and still others just don't care because it's simply another story.

If a reporter makes a sexual pass at you or says anything racist or homophobic, go straight to their supervisor. Ignore that reporter at other media events. Don't forget that people who work in the media are not always as objective as they would like the world to think. They are human too. And some of them have their own ideas about who single mothers are. I have dealt with a few reporters that everyone thinks are just peachy-keen and wonderful, but they go around saying the most horrible things about single mothers. (I am very proud to be disliked by some journalists! They are so right-wing that it is a compliment to be disliked by them!)

On the other hand, I have also dealt with reporters and journalists who think single mother activists are absolutely wonderful women. Needless to say, it's a good idea to try and to establish a good working relationship with the supportive reporters. Keep a record of how each of the reporters and journalists treat you and your group. Make sure and put the word out on the street about which journalists are decent and which journalists to avoid.

Most importantly NEVER, NEVER say to a reporter "This is off the record". The reporter's job is to get information to put together a story. Whether they are sympathetic to your group or not, you will be putting your group and the reporter in a difficult situation by telling the reporter confidential information and then asking her or him not to use it.

There are other types of media coverage besides the news. There are talk shows on radio and television. Newspapers have opinion editorials for guest writers and space for letters to the editor. There are also public service announcements and community newspapers. For example, Pandora Publishing puts out a newspaper four times a year in which they do women-positive stories and have a whole page devoted to the activities and events of women's organizations. Their advertising is also very inexpensive.

Finally, remember the saying, "You only have freedom of the press if you own the press". Keep in mind who owns the newspapers, television, and radio stations. They are generally rich, politically well connected,

and they are powerful. Sometimes they will not allow certain media coverage because they may feel you've had "too much" attention already. Perhaps you are getting so much of the public's favorable attention that you and/or your group have become threatening to the establishment. Or perhaps the interests of your group are in conflict with those of their advertisers. Hence, the controllers of the media may try to stop this publicity by refusing to acknowledge your work and your activism. Consequently, you will find that some media have certain political slants to their stories.

A few years ago I was involved in a grass-roots group which was very vocal. A local newspaper columnist wrote about us, referring to us as "a gaggle of girls" with "border line intelligence". We demanded that the editor print an apology or we would have a demonstration outside their editorial office and invite all the other media to come and do stories on it. We had the written apology the next day.

Again, keep in mind who owns the media and keep records of how each of the newspapers and radio and television stations present your stories. As an activist friend of mine says "Selected reality: brought to you by your media."

PRESS RELEASES

Press releases are a basic tool used to get media coverage for a group. It lets reporters know you are staging a particular event and when that event is happening. It should provide enough information so the media can decide whether to cover it or not. If the media decides not to cover it, there should be enough information to put together a story from the press release.

A press release should be typed, double-spaced on one sheet of paper. On the top right-hand corner should be typed "For Further Information" and the name(s) of the contact person(s). List their telephone numbers; it is important that the media know how to contact your group. On the

left-hand side of the release, put the date on which you have sent the release out followed by the words "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE". This means that the reporters are free to use the information as soon as they receive it.

Next, write a heading for the release. State it as clearly and as simply as possible. For example, SINGLE MOMS PLAN 12:00 NOON DEMONSTRATION AT LEGISLATURE. The opening paragraph should tell the who, what, when, where, and why of the event. The paragraphs in a news release should be short with only two or three sentences and these should be factual. A press release should only have an opinion if you are quoting a spokesperson for your group. The media cannot quote a press release opinion. However, they can quote an opinion from a member of the organization.

At the end of the release centre and type either "- 30 -" or "#### " to indicate that there is nothing else. If there is another page put "(more)" in the bottom right-hand corner.

Deliver the press release about forty-eight hours before your demonstration. Go through the yellow pages of the telephone book and look under radio, newspaper, and television stations to get the addresses of the media you want your press release to go to. If you want media coverage, time your event between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. That way, there is enough time for reporters to get their stories together for the evening news or the morning paper.

VOTE!

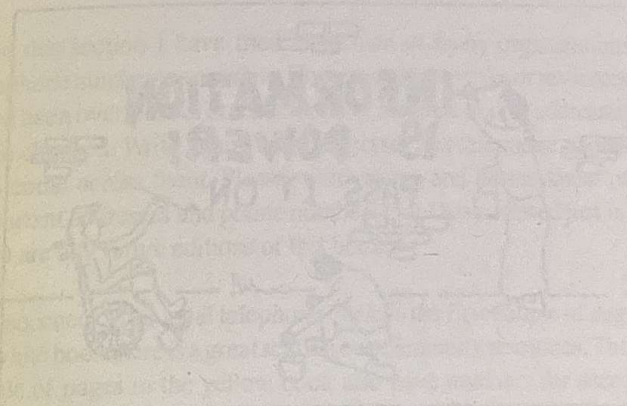
The most basic way to begin to make changes and become active is to vote. You only have to do it every couple of years and it takes very little time. The important thing to keep in mind is that you should vote only for the candidate and/or the party you feel has your best interests at heart. There are far more working class and poor people than there are rich people. If you believe a politician or political party is doing work only

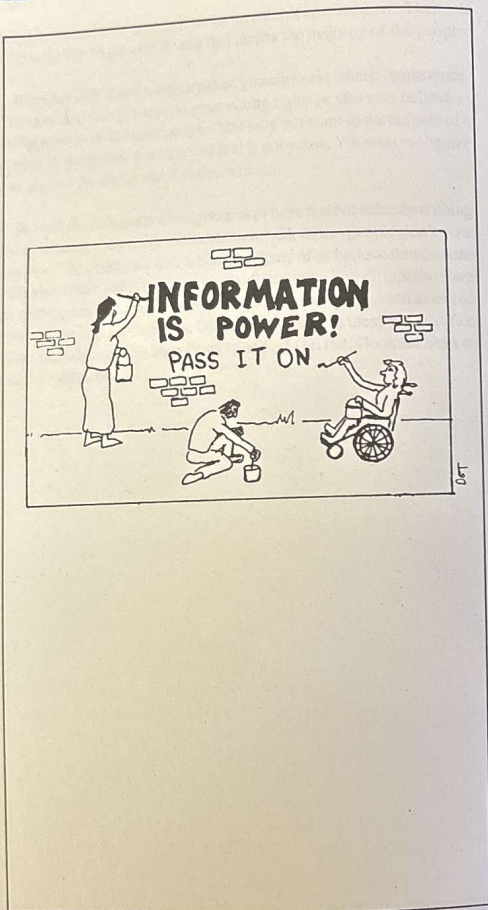
for the rich and the big corporations then don't vote for them. Their job is to work for all the people and that means the majority of the people.

If you are a Mi'kmaq single mother, you are in a special circumstance. You may not wish to exercise your voting rights as you may believe in self-government for your people. You may not want to participate in a system of government which you feel is not yours. We must recognize and respect the decisions of native women.

Many times political parties ignore us or have done absolutely nothing for us because they think to themselves, "Oh those people don't vote anyway!" Generally we don't, because many of us believe that our one little vote won't make a difference. Well, it can make a difference if we all vote together. We can force our politicians to pay attention to us and to start meeting our demands. Otherwise we'll vote them out of office in the next election! So be politically active! Get out! Go vote! Start to make a difference!

NUMBERS TO KNOW IN NOVA SCOTIA





NUMBERS TO KNOW IN NOVA SCOTIA

In this section I have tried to include as many organizations and telephone numbers as possible. However, some groups or resources may have been overlooked. Some telephone numbers and/or addresses may have changed. Write in any extra addresses and telephone numbers as you come across them. Please, write to me and let me know of any important addresses and phone numbers that I have missed just in case there are any future editions of this book!

Also, check your local telephone book. In the first couple of pages of the white book there is a great section on community resources. The first couple of pages in the yellow book also have numbers for accessing legal, medical, and transportation information.

The main thing to remember is that if you need help and you don't know where to turn, try either your local women's resource centre or your local Help Line. Both are clearing houses for information and should be able to give you some idea of where to go for help.

Don't be confused by the lack of addresses provided for transition houses in your area. Remember that transition houses provide safe shelter for women leaving abusive situations and for this reason their addresses are never published.

The resources and government departments included in this section have been arranged in alphabetical order and by areas of the province.

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Women Aware
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Nova Scotia Dial-A-Law Foundation
Marion L. Pape
Victims of Family Violence Association
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