

Annie Welman

### **Women Against Thirteen: Upholding Local Queer Rights**

Looking back at the early stages of public queer activism, it is often the largest, highest-profile demonstrations that receive the most recognition, like the Stonewall uprising, or the election of Harvey Milk. While these moments were immensely influential, it is local, small-scale movements that queer people rely on to maintain their basic human rights each day. In 1978, “sexual minorities” were protected from discrimination in housing and employment in Seattle, through city ordinances that were passed several years before (McKenna and Aguirre). Despite these political triumphs for the local LGBTQ+ community, the path towards equality is never linear, and queer people soon found their rights challenged once again. Initiative 13 (I-13) was proposed that year, which would strip those existing legal protections away and remove Seattle’s Office of Women’s Rights, which handled cases of discrimination against both women and queer people (Crowley). For Seattleites, the organization Women Against Thirteen (WAT) provides an admirable example of influential civic courage, as this group worked tirelessly to maintain and improve local queer rights throughout the late 1970s and onward.

In response to campaigns in support of I-13, women across the city banded together in opposition, forming WAT. Though the group began as a small coalition of women, they soon found strength in numbers. Rather than choosing a single designated leader to attend press conferences and act as a public figurehead, they sent different members to each event (*I-13 STORIES*). They used this approach to prevent opposing groups from attacking the character of a single leader. Though civic courage is often thought of as acts carried out by brave individuals alone, WAT’s civic courage was collective and strategic. Their main opponents were two Seattle police officers who sponsored the initiative, David Estes and Dennis Falk, and the organization

Save Our Moral Ethics (SOME) (Crowley). The far-right John Birch Society was also involved in I-13, along with other groups. These supporters of I-13 were associated with Christian fundamentalism and right-wing political movements, and they sought to remove “sexual minorities” from those protected by nondiscrimination ordinances (McKenna and Aguirre). Following a series of similar policy reversals in other cities, led by conservative public figure Anita Bryant and others, these Seattle groups hoped to join a wave of anti-gay policy changes (Crowley). WAT pushed back against these efforts, focusing on local anti-homophobia education as they fought against the upcoming initiative (*I-13 STORIES*). WAT members focused on intersectional activism, emphasizing that I-13 was not only a threat to queer people, but also signaled a worrisome trend for women, people of color, and other minorities (McKenna). Throughout the months leading up to the election, WAT spoke out in forceful opposition to I-13 to protect their own rights and the rights of other vulnerable Seattle communities.

In addition to I-13, WAT also dedicated time towards opposing Initiative 15 (I-15), which “allow[ed] greater leeway for police in using deadly force” (*I-13 STORIES*). Though this initiative differed from I-13 because it did not directly target queer communities, opposing I-15 aligned with WAT’s intersectional mission. WAT recognized that police firearm usage threatened minority lives, so they included the issue in their campaign for queer rights. Standing up to police officers by opposing both I-13 and I-15 required bravery from the group and demonstrated their willingness to push back against opponents in positions of power. Despite their best efforts, I-15 passed that same year (“Seattle gay activists speak out, How We Defeated 13”). Though WAT took a risk and used valuable resources in their ultimately failed opposition of I-15, their efforts were a key symbol of their broader fight for equality, which was not limited to I-13. Opposing I-15 showed other minority groups that they had WAT’s support, which was

not true for all queer activist groups at the time. In fact, some attribute WAT's failure with I-15 to the lack of support from other queer groups, who decided to focus solely on opposing I-13 ("Seattle gay activists speak out, How We Defeated 13").

There was also tension within the queer community about I-13 itself, as different groups employed different approaches in their opposition (*I-13 STORIES*). The group that was most aligned with WAT was the Seattle Committee Against Thirteen (SCAT). Though the two groups were separate in name and identity, they shared office space, had similar goals, and used similar tactics to reach those goals. WAT provided many queer women with a more accepting version of SCAT, as it focused on lesbian issues that were occasionally left out of the male-dominated queer conversation. Many women were active in both organizations, though, and both groups focused on "street-level" activism that involved working directly with community members. This included ringing doorbells in swing districts, printing ads in local newspapers, passing out leaflets, and seeking union endorsements. In contrast, there was a third group that opposed I-13, which was distinctly separate from both SCAT and WAT. This group was entitled Citizens to Retain Fair Employment (CRFE), and they approached the issue with more broadly socially acceptable tactics. From the perspective of one SCAT member, "CRFE ... was operating, you could say, at a different level. Higher up -- schmoozing with politicians and business interests..." (*I-13 STORIES*). Also, rather than publicly arguing for queer rights, they avoided using the words "gay" or "lesbian" in their messaging, and instead focused on appealing to moderate Seattleites. They painted I-13 as a privacy issue for all, rather than a case of queer discrimination. Though there was a certain level of mutual respect between all groups who opposed the initiative, these conflicting approaches created hostility as well. For instance, as SCAT member John Sheets described, "... CRFE was ... never interested in having drag queens

doing anything public; they were never interested in approaching the people in bars; they were never interested in being gay, it seemed” (*I-13 STORIES*). This method frustrated SCAT and WAT members alike, who were interested in long term political changes and LGBTQ+ acceptance.

It was this unapologetic outlook that demonstrated the civic courage of WAT members. Rather than simply taking down I-13 in the most publicly acceptable ways, they used grassroots activism to reach out to a wider range of queer individuals. They also recognized that while SCAT’s work was valuable, it often left out female voices (*I-13 STORIES*). Instead of accepting the existing forms of anti-I-13 activism, they created their own group to fill the gaps they noticed. With future queer Seattleites in mind, they thought of I-13 in the context of broader homophobia and did not tone down their proudly queer message in search of public approval (“Seattle gay activists speak out, How We Defeated 13”). To CRFE, this approach seemed risky, but WAT was not willing to sacrifice authenticity for agreeable political tactics. Though they faced defeats with I-15 and other initiatives, their methods finally paid off when I-13 was voted down (Crowley). In 1978, Seattle voters opposed I-13 by a ratio of nearly two to one. This dramatic success brought out a hopefulness in the queer community that was often difficult to find, as this moment represented one of the first democratic successes for the US queer rights movement (“LGBTQ+ Activism and History in Seattle” 4:53).

The impact of WAT’s work was not limited to a single moment. The protective city ordinances that were maintained allowed queer people to retain vital rights, which promoted safety and equality for the community. As a WAT campaign document argued, the rights to housing and employment were essentially rights for survival, as it would have been significantly more difficult to build a life in Seattle without guaranteed access to those essentials (Raymond

and Rae File). Additionally, beyond basic needs, this victory in 1978 allowed queer people to find a greater sense of belonging and protection in Seattle. Dr. Phil Bereano, an ACLU member and a founding member of Act/UP Seattle, described this satisfaction, recalling the "... great joyfulness out on the streets when we defeated 13" ("LGBTQ+ Activism and History in Seattle" 5:42). Partially because of WAT's work, Seattle continued to become a haven for queer people in the years following 1978, where they began to feel safer, freer, and more supported by voters at large ("LGBTQ+ Activism and History in Seattle" 5:48).

Though political movements take place regularly throughout the country, the efforts of WAT exemplify particular civic courage because they were a new and bold attempt to protect queer rights. Outwardly queer people were already subject to potential violence and cruelty, and the members of WAT who came forward to push for queer rights were vulnerable to an even greater level of danger. By going into swing districts to campaign and taking fundamentally homophobic voters head-on, they risked daily abuse and brutality. Harvey Milk, one of the first openly gay elected officials in the US, was assassinated that year, so there was reasonably heightened fear of anti-LGBTQ+ violence among WAT activists ("LGBTQ Activism in Seattle: A Timeline"). In return for their risk taking and commitment, they earned a political victory that would give queer people equal access to housing and employment and prevent future discrimination. WAT's civic courage was not only defined by their continuous risk taking, but also by their courage to keep fighting for minority rights despite the failure with I-15 and pushback from mainstream groups like CRFE. WAT was followed by decades of other groups working towards queer equality, but the movement they took part in helped set the stage for LGBTQ+ rights and safety in Seattle. WAT is one of many groups that has helped make it possible for others, including me, to be openly queer women today. Decades after I-13 was voted

down, we can now live in Seattle without worrying about our opportunities to find housing, jobs, and above all a welcoming local community.

## Works Cited

Crowley, Walt. "Seattle Voters Reject I-13 and Uphold Gay and Lesbian Rights on November 7, 1978." *History Link, 1978.*, 22 June 1999, <https://www.historylink.org/File/1403>.

"LGBTQ+ Activism and History in Seattle." *YouTube*, uploaded by Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project, 16 Feb. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxsWe3F8OUE>.

"LGBTQ Activism in Seattle: A Timeline." *The Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project*, Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, [https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq\\_timeline.htm](https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq_timeline.htm). 24 Feb. 2023.

McKenna , Kevin, and Michael Aguirre. "A Brief History of LGBTQ Activism in Seattle." *The Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project*, The University of Washington, [https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq\\_history.htm](https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq_history.htm). 24 Feb. 2023.

McKenna , Kevin. "LGBTQ Organizations and Periodicals." *The Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project*, The University of Washington, [https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq\\_organizations.htm#thirteenwomen](https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq_organizations.htm#thirteenwomen). 24 Feb. 2023.

Raymond, Dennis, and Nila Rae File. *Seattle Committee against Thirteen - Jstor.org*. 1978, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.29381084>.

"Seattle gay activists speak out, How We Defeated 13." *Socialist Worker: Paper of the International Socialist Organization*, Dec. 1978, pp. 7.,

[https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/sw-us/1977-81/SW\\_019b\\_December\\_1978.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/sw-us/1977-81/SW_019b_December_1978.pdf).

“Women against Thirteen (WAT).” *I-13 STORIES: Women Against Thirteen* -- © 2021

*NWLGHMP*, [http://www.lgbthistorynw.org/13\\_WAT.htm](http://www.lgbthistorynw.org/13_WAT.htm).