

Taking a Stand to Silence Violence

In Frederick, Women in Black Act in Solidarity With Worldwide Peace Movement

By Fredrick Kunkle_Washington Post Staff Writer_Thursday, March 23, 2006;
GZ19

Every month, at one of Frederick's busiest intersections, a group of women gather at nightfall.

They wear black. They keep silent. Their silence conveys a message.

And month by month, vigil by vigil, these women -- as young as 16, as old as 86 -- join others in public squares around the world who also stand in silent protest against violence. They call themselves Women in Black.

"Okay, so we're all here," said Andrea Norouzi, 55, co-founder of Women in Black Frederick, as more than two dozen women (and two men) gathered at the city's Square Corner last month. Three stragglers arrived from a Women in Black group in Westminster, one of whom resembled Yoko Ono with her dark glasses and large hoop earrings shaped like peace signs.

Norouzi asked the group to take a moment and gather their thoughts. Their theme for the night would be focusing attention on violence against women.

"This is something new we've been trying to do to put us in that space, that kind of sacred space, of women who are silenced," Norouzi said. "We are choosing silence in sympathy for the women who are silenced involuntarily."

Two boys zipped by on scooters as Norouzi lighted candles in four lanterns. The women broke into smaller groups on each corner of the intersection, as a symbol of the four corners of the Earth. They unfurled their signs, and their silence seemed to magnify even the smallest sounds around them.

Melting snow dripped from a bank building's faux Greek facade.

Traffic lights cycled through their colors. A candle winked out, and someone re-lighted it. Drivers gawked or honked their horns in a friendly salute.

Randy Royer, a businessman from Jarrettsville, did a double take.

"As I was approaching, I saw a bunch of people in black, and I wasn't sure if it was a funeral gathering or a protest gathering," Royer said.

Joel Petrohilos, 13, of Frederick, dressed like a punker with his green hair and leather jacket, was also uncertain what to make of the group.

"At first I thought they might be grieving the loss of their children in Iraq," he said.

After 30 minutes it was over, and the women walked to the Orchard, a nearby restaurant. Over salads and tempura, they discussed upcoming events, such as a traveling exhibit of military boots to commemorate U.S. soldiers who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. They reflected on the importance of pushing for peace in a world that seems awash in violence.

"Sometimes I feel like, 'What difference does it make that I go out and stand on a Wednesday and Friday,' and I know it doesn't make a difference," said Mary Costello, 67, a retired teacher in Frederick. "But the alternative is to do nothing."

Women in Black began in 1988, during the first Palestinian intifada against Israeli occupation, when a group of about 15 Jewish women began holding weekly vigils at busy intersections in Jerusalem.

But the group traces its roots to earlier peace movements with feminist overtones, such as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, who demanded answers from Argentina's military about victims of its rule from 1976 to 1983.

Today, there are Mujeres de Negro in Spain, Femmes en Noir in

France, Frauen in Schwarz in Germany. In the United States, Women in Black have organized in 39 states -- including Maryland and Virginia -- plus Puerto Rico and the District. In Maryland, in addition to Frederick, groups are active in Baltimore and Westminster.

"I just feel it's being in the right place. I have a friend who walked for civil rights in Selma, and he said that that was the only time in his life he felt like he was in the right place at the right time," said Eleanor Milligan, 77, a retired schoolteacher who lives in Knoxville, about 20 miles southwest of Frederick.

Frederick's group, whose rolls include about 145 names, conducts vigils twice monthly at Memorial Park and the intersection of Market and Patrick streets, known as Square Corner. Last Wednesday, the group marked the third anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

There are no chapters, no dues, no bylaws, no officers. The group's loose structure itself is intended to suggest an alternative to masculine norms of hierarchy and top-down control, Norouzi said. Many members have become good friends. When one got married, her bridal party included Women in Black members.

"We try to listen to all voices. If you talk to any one of us, you haven't talked to Women in Black, because it's all of us," she said. "It's a kind of a sisterhood."

Frederick's Women in Black, like so many other things, has its origins in Sept. 11, 2001. Amid so much death and hatred, Norouzi wanted to find a way to connect with people in other lands.

"9/11 did that to me. It politicized me in a lot of ways. It broke my heart," Norouzi said.

Even the war in Afghanistan did not seem justified, she said.

"I used to sit at the Internet and read the stories about Afghanistan, and I'd just cry," she said.

Iraq, she said, was even more clearly wrong.

But activism was something new for Norouzi, who was born in Jacksonville, Fla. She married an Iranian physician, raised two children and lives in Knoxville.

"Before Women in Black, I had never stood up for anything," said Norouzi. "I'm not political. I'm not a feminist."

The Frederick group held its first vigil on Nov. 29, 2002. A Korean War veteran was offended that the women held their protest in Memorial Park.

At another vigil, Alice Zalatoris, 34, of Frederick, said she felt unnerved as a pickup circled, its driver yelling angrily about his brother serving in Iraq. She wanted to write down the license number but told herself: "I can't be alarmed if I'm in a group of peaceful people."

During an international Women in Black conference in Jerusalem last year, Norouzi participated in a vigil at a time when emotions were especially raw because Israel was about to evacuate settlers from the Gaza Strip. Passersby spat on the ground and cursed the demonstrators.

"Traitors!" Norouzi heard someone yell. "May all your children be brutally murdered!"

Elsewhere, Women in Black members have been assaulted and even killed, Norouzi said. But she said that the experience in Jerusalem was rewarding in spite of the tense moments.

"First of all, you are completely exhilarated because you're meeting these little old Jewish ladies who have been doing this for 18 years," she said. "I figured if they could do it, I could do it. They're like our mothers."

Last month, as the Frederick vigil concluded, the women again formed a circle around Norouzi.

"The light we have represents the light of peace, the light of love, the light of hope. As we leave tonight, we leave with that light inside," Norouzi said.

The candles flickered out.

"Thank you, ladies, for coming," she said. "You were beautiful."

Women in Black hold vigils from 6:30 to 7 p.m on the third Wednesday of each month at Market and Patrick streets in Frederick, and from 12 to 12:30 p.m on the first Friday of each month at Memorial Park at W. Second and N. Bentz streets. For more information, contact <http://www.wibfrederick.org>, info@wibfrederick.org or 301-834-7581.