

## Changing a Culture of Rape & Racism

By Holly Pruett

Twenty-five years ago the creation of rape hotlines and battered women's shelters was a triumph of grassroots organizing. Today their maintenance requires more administration than activism. But the radical impulse that fueled the earliest Take Back the Night marches is alive in Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA).

CARA emphasizes a social change approach to a problem now typically relegated to the social service domain. This fledgling Seattle organization aims for nothing short of changing rape culture — a culture they see as inextricably linked with racism and other forms of systemic oppression.

CARA focuses its attention on people of color, people with disabilities (especially developmental disabilities), and youth. Alisa Bierria, CARA program coordinator, explains "These communities are marginalized not only in mainstream America, but also within the mainstream domestic and sexual violence movement."

The "mainstream movement," CARA believes, typically approaches members of these communities "as clients to be taken care of." CARA's methods, by contrast, are grounded in liberation theory and community organizing. CARA's interpretation of liberation theory, drawn from the work of popular education leader Paulo Freire, is the belief that "the people can lead themselves." Their approach to community organizing assumes that social justice is won through the interplay of dialogue and action.

Radical dialogue, says CARA's Black People's Project organizer Theryn Kigvamasud'Vashti, allows participants to "talk about what's problematic with the system." In CARA's three organizing projects, conversations get very specific. Kigvamasud'Vashti coaches, "Don't just blame 'the man' or 'the cops.' Take it apart. When you say 'white folks...,' what do you mean by that?"

Through radical dialogue and other forms of training, CARA organizers develop the leadership of individuals to act as organizers within their own

communities. Each of the three projects works with its own Community Action Team to conduct outreach and develop creative forums for learning from each other, engaging their larger communities, and building coalitions with other radical social justice movements. Methods vary, but might include 'zines, liberation theater, slam readings, and murals.

Unlike more traditional community organizing, says Bierria (who has experience organizing with Washington Citizen Action), CARA "doesn't target any one thing. The target is rape culture. We're working to subvert a cultural reality through radical dialogue."

"What happens if you give people's communities the tools to address domestic and sexual violence within the context of their own experiences?" Bierria asks. The answer: "cultural revolution."

The desire for an authentic response to sexist violence, embedded in community and culture, is expressed in CARA's Black People's Project.

The Project is framed around "people," not "women" because, says Kigvamasud'Vashti, "in our community, it's not possible *not* to talk about what happens to perpetrators." In a national climate where victim advocates may use domestic and sexual violence as justification for the death penalty, CARA seeks ways to hold perpetrators accountable without reinforcing institutional racist oppression within the criminal justice system.

CARA's critique of the criminal justice system has led to alliances with organizers who are fighting police brutality, and brought some backlash from parts of the "mainstream movement."

They're not aiming for popularity, though. They're aiming for change. "In order to eradicate rape in this century," CARA believes, "we must be allies in all struggles for liberation." 🐱

Contact CARA: (706) 322-4856 or [www.cara-seattle.org](http://www.cara-seattle.org).

*The focus of the Black People's Project is to forge new pathways of thinking and talking about rape and sexual abuse in African American, African, Caribbean, and Native communities. This program develops creative ways to challenge rape culture as it connects to slavery, lynching movements, sexual abuse, torture, police brutality, the prison industrial complex, the death penalty, and economic injustice in the United States.*

