



Bunch, Charlotte (b. 1944)

by Linda Rapp

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From student activist to "a key player in the movement for international human rights for women," Charlotte Bunch has devoted her entire adult life to feminist causes.

Bunch's parents were people of strong social conscience who had intended to go to China as Methodist missionaries. When the outbreak of World War II kept them in the United States, Dr. Charles Bunch chose to work in rural areas where medical services were much needed. The decision took the family to Ashe County, North Carolina, where Charlotte Bunch was born on October 13, 1944, and then to Artesia, New Mexico, where she grew up.

Her mother, Marjorie King Bunch, was a social worker prior to the birth of her four children. Always active in civic affairs, she became president of the Artesia school board, founded New Mexico's first community mental health program, and worked to help the homeless.

Charlotte Bunch came of age as the civil rights movement was gaining momentum. In the fall of 1962 she entered Duke University, and there she "went from a shy presence at 'pray-ins' protesting segregation at the local church to a life full of movement activism." She took part in civil rights marches and also demonstrations against the war in Vietnam.

Bunch graduated *magna cum laude* with a degree in history and political science, and moved to Washington, D.C. to continue her efforts on behalf of racial equality. She was also working to create a national organization for the University Christian Movement, a short-lived radical Christian group of which she was the first president.

Through her involvement with Christian student groups she met Jim Weeks, a Californian with whom she carried on a long-distance courtship for several years. The two planned "to build a life together around [their] commitment to social activism" and were married in 1967.

In Washington, Bunch was first engaged in efforts to organize the black community but soon concluded that it would be more appropriate for her to work to combat racism among whites. She received a tutorialship at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) but was disappointed to encounter male chauvinism there. "I'd make a comment at a meeting and nobody would even acknowledge me. Then some man would say that same thing and they'd all nod and say, 'Good idea,'" she recalled. She left IPS and immersed herself in the women's liberation movement.

In 1969 Bunch moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where her husband continued his education. Although she was active in the women's movement, Bunch felt isolated there, and so when she was offered a fellowship at IPS, where the atmosphere had become more congenial to women, she returned to Washington.

Bunch calls 1970 a "year . . . of constant activity." She worked tirelessly organizing events for D.C. Women's Liberation, a group that included a number of openly lesbian members. In addition, she saw her friends

Joan Biren and Sharon Deevey come out. Bunch "was gradually discovering lesbianism both politically and personally."

The following year Bunch divorced her husband and came out publicly as a lesbian. She was dismayed to discover homophobia and heterosexism within the feminist movement. Since she had grown up in a liberal family in a conservative small town, she "was accustomed to being in a political minority" but had not previously felt the sting of belonging to a group that "was loathed, stigmatized, and feared for its very existence."

Seeking to establish a specifically lesbian feminism, Bunch joined with Biren, Deevey, Rita Mae Brown, Ginny Berson, and several others to form a collective called The Furies, who named themselves after the serpent-haired figures of Greek mythology to express their anger over society's pattern of male supremacy. The group produced a newspaper, also called *The Furies* (1972-1973), to present their views.

The Furies, of whom there were eventually twelve, lived together in two houses. The intensity of their interaction and their isolation from others led to friction, and the collective disbanded after a year.

Afterward Bunch and Nancy Myron, another of The Furies, traveled together, first to New Mexico and then to Africa, where Bunch was able to observe at first hand the different situations of women in several countries.

After returning to the United States, Bunch co-founded *quest: a feminist quarterly*, which became the leading theoretical journal of lesbian feminism. She and her colleagues sought not only to study questions of class, sexuality, race, and power, but also to explore effective strategies for change.

In addition to editing *Quest* and feminist anthologies, writing, and teaching college courses on feminist theory, Bunch was becoming involved in the cause of global women's human rights. She traveled widely, attending conferences and meeting feminists from around the world.

As a member of the board of directors of the National Gay Task Force (later renamed the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force), Bunch forged coalitions with women's organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National Women's Political Caucus to promote lesbian rights. She also became increasingly aware of the threat that the political right posed to progress in both gay and women's rights.

Although Bunch's own theoretical perspective is one of lesbian feminism, she has addressed a wide range of women's issues, especially abuses against women and girls in Third World countries. She has organized United Nations conferences on women held in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), Vienna (1993), and Beijing (1995).

Bunch is currently Distinguished Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University and the Executive Director of the university's Center for Women's Global Leadership, which she founded in 1987. She is committed to ending oppression and violence against women in all its forms, including domestic abuse, economic exploitation, violence and discrimination against lesbians, and war crimes against women.

Bunch has received numerous honors for her work. Among them are community service awards from the Lambda Legal Defense Fund (1982) and the National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation (1986) and the White House Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights (1999). She is also a member of the National Women's Hall of Fame (1996).

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