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Author

Tewes, Amanda`

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"They Got Woken Up": SLATE and Women's Activism at UC Berkeley

By Amanda Tewes

BATTLE OF CITY HALL

400 Cops Fight Student Crowd



Photo Caption: On the steps of San Francisco's City Hall, police blast anti-HUAC protestors with fire hoses, April 13, 1960. This was front page news, including in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Photo of newspaper courtesy of Cindy Lembcke Kamler.

For students across the country, college is a time of political awakening. And perhaps no other university has earned its reputation for radical student politics quite like UC Berkeley. Indeed, mid-century political activism around civil rights, the Vietnam War, and the Free Speech Movement has shaped how students, faculty, and administrators experience life at Berkeley today.

However, one important part of Berkeley's political history that often gets left out of the conversation is the New Left student political party SLATE. SLATE—so named because the group backed a slate of candidates who ran on a common platform for ASUC (Associated Students of the University of California) elections—operated between 1958 and 1966, and ignited a passion for politics in the face of looming McCarthyism and what many perceived as

the University of California's encroachment on student rights to free speech. These students translated political theory they learned in the classroom to action, even when it went against University policies. Perhaps SLATE's most important ideological contribution to Berkeley's campus and to other social movements is the "lowest significant common denominator." This concept allowed the group to form a big tent coalition between Marxists, liberal Democrats, and others by only choosing political positions and actions on which the whole group could agree. As a result, the group became involved with civil rights, labor organizing, and anti-war protests on campus and across California. Most notably, in May of 1960, SLATE and other student activists protested the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) hearings at the San Francisco City Hall. In response to the peaceful sit-in, police blasted students with fire hoses and dragged them down the stairs, before placing them under arrest. This event was emblematic of SLATE's commitment to activism, even when it came at personal risk.¹

In recent years, the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library has conducted a series of interviews with members of SLATE to keep alive memories of the group's influence on ideology and political infrastructure at UC Berkeley.

And an essential part of SLATE's story is the contributions of its women members. SLATE operated at a time before the women's movement, but its work became an important introduction to political organizing for a generation of women students at Berkeley. These women were dedicated members of the group, but often felt sidelined in SLATE leadership. And yet, their work helped to change political culture and campus life at Berkeley. Three of these groundbreaking Berkeley women are Cindy Lembcke Kamler, Susan Griffin, and Julianne Morris.

Cindy Lembcke Kamler was just a freshman when she connected with SLATE in the spring of 1958, drawn in by the political ideals of the group dominated by male upperclassmen and graduate students.² Susan Griffin and Julianne Morris were among the second generation of SLATE activists and joined the group around the same time in 1960—after the famous HUAC protest.³

All these women came from politically left families who feared encroaching McCarthyism. Griffin and Morris also had connections to Judaism. These backgrounds helped ignite a political consciousness in these women that led them to SLATE.

¹ Mike Miller, "Mike Miller: Establishing SLATE on the Berkeley Campus," SLATE Oral History Project, conducted by Martin Meeker in 2018, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2018.

² Cindy Kamler, "Cindy Kamler: Student Activism in SLATE," SLATE Oral History Project, conducted by Martin Meeker in 2018, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2018.

³ Susan Griffin, "Susan Griffin: The Joy and Power of Community," SLATE Oral History Project, conducted by Amanda Tewes in 2019, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2019; Julianne Morris, "Julianne Morris: SLATE and Student Activism," SLATE Oral History Project, conducted by Amanda Tewes in 2019, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2019.

Certainly Kamler, Griffin, and Morris's oral histories contribute to the larger archive of SLATE history, but they also speak specifically to their experiences as women in this group. For instance, Griffin and Morris recalled instances of feeling marginalized and of being left to do what Morris called the "scut work," like mimeographing fliers and cooking for hungry activists.⁴ This work, while essential to maintaining operations, felt to them like gendered tasks. For her part, Kamler doesn't remember gender discrimination in SLATE. She insisted, "Oh, no, I never made coffee or any of that stuff."⁵ And yet, Griffin recalled that several years later at a meeting of SLATE women in the 1970s,

We were recounting how there was this prejudice against us and we were never allowed to have leadership positions. And husbands and boyfriends and guys from SLATE showed up at this meeting and started making fun of us and broke the meeting up. They thought that was the end of the story. Little did they know, [laughs] that was just the beginning of the story.⁶

These tensions came to a head at a 1984 SLATE reunion in which women newly empowered by feminism expressed displeasure with the way they had been treated while working for the campus political group. Many of the men denied there had been discrimination, but others took it to heart and sincerely apologized. Morris explained, "There were a lot of women who were really angry about how it had been. I don't know that I was angry, in the sense that I really felt it was a different time and one can't judge one time by another. But there was no question that that's the way it was, and that's what kind of was accepted."⁷ Watching these events unfold, Kamler recalled, "I was just sitting there stunned. I didn't do any of that stuff. I ran for office, I got elected, I was chairperson."⁸

Indeed, while there may have been invisible barriers for many of the women involved in SLATE, there were still opportunities to grow as individuals and leaders. Kamler ran for second vice president in the spring of 1958 and lost, but ran again for representative-at-large in spring of 1959 and won. She also served as the chair of SLATE for some time, helping to shape the group's platform and activist agenda.⁹ Even Griffin and Morris were encouraged to run for ASUC office in the early 1960s, and had to learn how to campaign and feel confident in public speaking.¹⁰ Morris, especially, found running for office to be a formative experience. She remembered,

And that was, for me, a big experience, because as I said, I was shy in terms of speaking out and I didn't think that I could do it. And Mike Miller kept urging me to do it and saying, 'You can do this. I'll help you if you want, but you can do this! You're going to be able to go to all of these fraternities and talk to them about

⁴ Morris.

⁵ Kamler.

⁶ Griffin.

⁷ Morris.

⁸ Kamler.

⁹ Kamler.

¹⁰ Griffin; Morris.

ROTC. I just know you can do it.' So I did it, and I really was very frightened about doing it, and I actually did fine. So that was, for me, kind of a breakthrough that I was able to do something like that, because it wasn't easy for me at the time.¹¹

But as their lives became less centered around the UC Berkeley campus, these women drifted away from SLATE. Kamler married and left the group after the spring of 1960.¹² Griffin and Morris had decreased their participation in SLATE or left campus entirely by 1964.¹³ And yet, as their oral histories reveal, the experiences these women had as Berkeley undergraduates in this student political party shaped their perspectives about politics and activism for years to come. For both Griffin and Morris, this activism took shape as involvement in the women's movement. Griffin explained, "The guys may not have known it, but they were training feminist activists in all that period."¹⁴

Thinking about the longer arc of SLATE's impact on the lives of its dedicated members, Morris recalled of a reunion in the 1990s:

One of the things that we did was that we went around as a group and talked about what our lives were like now. And no one in that whole group went into business. Everybody was an organizer, a teacher, a social worker, a psychologist. It was so interesting that this group of people kind of, in some ways, stayed true to what we all went through in college. It really formed our lives.¹⁵

But most importantly, what these women learned from their time with SLATE was the importance of building and sustaining community in activist groups. For Morris, joining SLATE helped her find a place where she belonged.¹⁶ Griffin pointed to organizations of politically like-minded individuals as ways to create belonging and "joy" through an almost spiritual experience of protest.¹⁷

And yet, the political work of Cindy Lembcke Kamler, Susan Griffin, and Julianne Morris wasn't just personally fulfilling. For these individuals and generations of other women students, their political activism at UC Berkeley left an indelible mark on the campus. In thinking of this legacy, Morris reflected, "...it was one of the first...of the Left student movements. And I think it influenced a lot of people in that regard...I'm not at all sure that the Free Speech Movement would have happened without SLATE." She concluded, "I think we were very successful in those years. We got a lot of people elected to the campus political organization, and I think

¹¹ Morris.

¹² Kamler.

¹³ Griffin; Morris.

¹⁴ Griffin.

¹⁵ Morris.

¹⁶ Morris.

¹⁷ Griffin.

people started thinking, at Cal, a little differently. They got woken up in a way that perhaps they would not have been."¹⁸

To learn more about these activist women at Berkeley and the history of this early student political party, check out the Oral History Center's SLATE Oral History Project.

¹⁸ Morris.

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