

Hollins University

## Hollins Digital Commons

---

Mildred E. Persinger Papers

Manuscript Collections

---

Winter 2012

### Unfinished Agenda

Mildred Emory Persinger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/persinger-papers>



Part of the [Women's History Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Persinger, M.E. (2012). Unfinished Agenda. *Journal of Women's History* 24(4), 186-192. doi:10.1353/jowh.2012.0043.

This Periodical is brought to you for free and open access by the Manuscript Collections at Hollins Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mildred E. Persinger Papers by an authorized administrator of Hollins Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [lvilelle@hollins.edu](mailto:lvilelle@hollins.edu), [millerjc@hollins.edu](mailto:millerjc@hollins.edu).

---

# UNFINISHED AGENDA

Mildred Emory Persinger

Why am I still working in the campaigns for civil rights and human rights after seventy years? The question has never come up—until now. Yet it is to be expected. Even as a child I was upset by hearing disparaging remarks about cherished black friends. In college I was stunned to learn that others had raised questions about the propriety of my invitation to a young Japanese student to spend the weekend with me. Later I was ashamed and worried for her that in Virginia she might have been rejected because she was not white enough.

## Civil Rights

When I moved to New York City with my husband, Dick Persinger, in 1942, a faculty member at Hollins University—who had once been on the professional staff of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) National Board—advised her former associates to “grab” me. With a war-time shortage of young people to serve on boards, they gave me real work. Initially I chose to join the Interracial Committee of the YWCA, which was a subcommittee of the Public Affairs Committee. My “staff partner” was Helen Wilkins, the sister-in-law of Roy Wilkins, founder and president of the NAACP. She assigned me to write a paper on peonage in the turpentine groves of Louisiana. Before I finished, I knew that I was where I belonged.

Being in the company of these women opened up a whole new world to me. Black or white, they did not hesitate to declare their faith as Christians. Guided by what was called the “social gospel,” the YWCA Board retained consultants in international, political, economic, religious, and racial affairs to support the organization's program of action on civil rights. Without power except in numbers, we took on entrenched institutions. We wrote letters; we visited congressmen; we testified; we boycotted; we held seminars; we demonstrated; we raised bail for jailed students. Most importantly, we turned out the vote for justice in employment, education, public services, immigration law, the armed forces, and in our own organization. We bought hotels, camps, and conference centers so that we could hold interracial meetings. Meeting on private property, however, did not prevent harassment, police raids, and even arrests. We invited women of all races, religions, and classes to join us. “Christian and open” was our mantra, justice our goal, and friendship our motivation.

In 1963 I saw the pull of justice and friendship, tinged with politics, played out at the pinnacle of power. One morning in early summer a tele-

---

gram signed "John F. Kennedy" came to our house in suburban New York. The message was a request for me to report to the White House East Gate by ten o'clock a day or two later. When I arrived a large crowd was waiting for the uniformed Marine guard to open the wrought iron gate. I saw seventy or more members of the national public policy committee that I then chaired for the YWCA.

The President had charged Vice President Lyndon Johnson, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall to discuss civil rights with us. He asked us to increase our efforts on five fronts: education, human rights committees, leadership training, and intergroup cooperation. Above all, we were urged to open our organizations to women of all races and support all or part of the proposed Civil Rights Act—"where conviction and programs permit."

Kennedy's reference to the pending Civil Rights Act was cautious and oblique, possibly because he was not sure of his audience. He said that civil rights for Negro Americans was a national concern and the administration sought to secure them in an orderly way. He did not urge us to press our representatives to pass his bill; the bill was last on his list of legislative priorities.

Whereas Kennedy's statement seemed to come from the head, I thought Vice President Johnson's remarks that day came from the heart. His empathy with black friends he loved in Texas and elsewhere was real. It was that quality that prompted the president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), Dorothy Height, after serving on a committee he chaired, to tell me that she could not believe she was so crazy about a white Texan.

I later learned that Assistant Secretary of Labor Esther Peterson had suggested to Kennedy, her boss, that if he wanted action he should call on the women. In fact, I saw her hand in some of what he said to us. When I protested that she had embarrassed me by inviting all seventy-five of "my" public policy committee when other organizations were represented only by their president or executive, she said, "We had to have people who would get the job done." The YWCA women did just that. Subsequently a flood of reports from YWCA women came into my office describing their work to support passage of civil rights legislation.

In July of 1963, I attended an unscheduled meeting of our board executive committee. It was called to consider a request from a group of five civil rights leaders headed by Martin Luther King, Jr. After outlining elaborate plans for security, they asked the YWCA National Board to co-sponsor the upcoming March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—now remembered as a famously peaceful demonstration. At the time, the fear and hostility to the March generated by civil rights opponents made this a risky step, but we were proud to take it. On August 28, 1963, thousands from the YWCA,

---

and what looked like a million others, participated in the ultimate celebration of justice and friendship. Washington was locked down. With some trepidation, the National Capitol Area YWCA opened up to give members who had not come on busses or trains a place to join a meeting of our public policy committee.

When several hundred of us had assembled, it was clear that we had our own parade and would need police permission to walk together from K Street to join in the march. After we agreed to stop at traffic lights we were free to go. On the way we experienced a joyous validation of our mission. YWCA national President Lilace Barnes and I were each carrying a pole displaying a large YWCA banner. As we waited at a red light, dozens of busses from the Deep South came toward us. When their young passengers saw our banner, they leaned out of the open windows, waving, cheering, and whistling, carrying the spirit of friendship and a shared vision of justice into the National Mall for that magical day.

Some marchers were cooling their burning feet in the Reflecting Pool. Others were sitting under the trees on the new turf the Park Service had rolled out for us the night before, laughing with new friends, strumming guitars, and singing old favorites. It was like a Sunday school picnic. There was also too much food for the multitude. Marchers had brought fried chicken and ham biscuits for others who might be hungry. Clearly the Biblical miracle of the loaves and fishes was the miracle of sharing.

The picnickers were not giving rapt attention to the noted speakers at the podium atop the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. I actually wanted to hear such luminaries as Marian Anderson, A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer, Jessie Jackson, Roy Wilkins, Bayard Rustin, Josephine Baker, and Mahalia Jackson. For a good view, I moved up the steps just below the right side of the podium. I was there when silence fell and Dr. King began the famous "I Have A Dream" speech.

### **"Human Rights are Women's Rights"**

Historians surely have their own theories of why a women's international revolutionary movement was born at this particular time and within a rigid institutional framework. Some of us saw it happen. The reluctant midwife was the United Nations. It was not an easy delivery, but help was on the way. While it was by no means a critical mass, a women's network was emerging in the UN Secretariat, the national delegations, and the NGOs.

For some time the UN had been declaring special "Years" to publicize world problems in urgent need of resolution on issues ranging from tourism to human rights. We pressed for our women's year. Tossing a bouquet to the ladies seemed harmless enough. There was precedent; the celebration

---

of International Women's Day, which had been celebrated for some years in Russia and Germany, had spread to other countries. In December 1974, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution establishing 1975 as International Women's Year (IWY).

Without budget or plans for the traditional world conference, International Women's Year attracted little attention. Few of the delegates may have read the relevant resolutions to learn what they were getting into—and with whom. Eventually the IWY turned into a "Decade for Women," and ultimately a mandate to undertake hundreds of programs to improve the status of girls and women. Did governments understand that they were bringing women out of the closet? Or were they? The twenty-ninth General Assembly was drawing to a close in 1974 without a resolution to hold and fund an International Women's Year World Conference.

Rumor has it that, in order to make the IWY conference a reality, some UN delegates whispered into the right ears at the U.S. State Department. The good news was that there would be a 1975 IWY World Conference after all. Carefully planned and well funded, it was scheduled for October and had already attracted registration by thousands of women from all world regions. The bad news: the venue was to be in East Berlin.

Prospects for an official International Women's Year World Conference to be held by the UN suddenly improved. Colombia was pressed to host it. It was expected that the Conference of NGOs (CONGO) would hold a parallel open forum or "tribune," to coincide with the official conference; these two types of meetings had been held the year before at the World Population Conference in Bucharest. But there were glitches. Colombia announced it could not accommodate an NGO forum. The next glitch threatened to eliminate a UN sponsored women's conference altogether. After a change of government, Colombia withdrew the invitation.

For reasons of its own, Mexico came to the rescue. Assured of a host country, on Human Rights Day, December 10, 1974, the UN's General Assembly invited all member states to participate in the World Conference of International Women's Year. It established a "Consultative Committee" to make plans for the IWY conference, to be supported by a voluntary fund.

Anticipating that the conference would attract motley, unorganized onlookers who might even protest in the streets, the Mexican government agreed to invite NGOs to hold an open forum, or tribune. Participants at the tribune were to occupy the state-of-the-art Medical Convention Center, with its glass-walled corridors, two large auditoriums, numerous conference rooms of different sizes, and spacious exhibit space in the basement. Mexico generously provided simultaneous interpretation in the auditoriums, secretarial assistance, and other services.

---

---

Fearing the influence of North American women on the local population, the Mexicans wanted control. When they heard that 500 women from Los Angeles alone had chartered a jet to come to the tribune, they did the math and panicked. Our efforts to avoid publicity in the U.S. had failed, at least in Los Angeles. Distress calls from the Foreign Ministry came in to the borrowed office of the NGO Planning Committee, informing us that the conference center could accommodate only 3,500 and we must limit registration. We dutifully complied, disappointing hundreds of applicants.

In late February Rosalind Harris, designer of the 1974 Population tribune and head of CONGO, and I were invited to confer with Mexican President Luis Echeverria. After stating his expectations he enclosed us in an unoccupied room in the Foreign Ministry with instructions to write down a detailed description of the tribune program. We did not mention that the planning committee had yet to decide on it.

Despite complaints from European NGO counterparts, the short preparation time necessitated organizing the tribune from New York where decisions could be made quickly. By the middle of March we had recruited Marcia Bravo as director, Linda Spielman as our one other staff member, and a part-time secretary.

I wondered how we could do so much in three months—convene meetings of the planning committee, plan and print the program, raise funds for travel and living expenses for resource persons from developing countries, identify women leaders in all world regions to be invited, recruit a media team, find an editor and professional staff for the daily newspaper *Xilonen*, and raise funds to support our small administrative and program budget—but we did. The NGO network was invaluable. National NGOs helped identify local and world women leaders in their countries. Eager to support women's struggle for equality and to be involved in a United Nations initiative, most accepted readily. Many of them continue to hold leadership roles today.

When our modest team arrived at the tribune, we were in for more unintended consequences. The nervous Foreign Ministry had quietly registered 2,000 additional Mexican participants. It was an opportunity for close encounters as well as chaos in an overcrowded building. To be sure that the participants would have the two-week conference program in their hands on arrival, we paid to have the huge containers come with us on the passenger plane. But there was another shock: customs officials would not release them, resulting in more chaos as women wandered about trying to find the meetings they planned to attend, crowding around hastily posted notices on bulletin boards, and loudly complained about the organizers' disorganization. After three stressful days, the ever-helpful U.S. Embassy interceded with the Mexican government and the programs were delivered

---

---

to the tribune. Only months later did we begin to suspect the reason for the delay.

The next shock was just for me. Marcia welcomed me with the news that to improve relations with our hosts, I should make my opening remarks in Spanish. Was she crazy? With two years of high school Spanish forty years ago, was I to demonstrate humility or would I risk offending them? That first day, like all the rest, saw crisis after crisis, both major and minor. There had been no time for lunch. The snack I had left in my desk drawer had disappeared. I had no chance to change into the outfit I had thought suitable for meeting invited guests in the big hall. An hour before we were to open I was sitting in the noisy corridor waiting for the promised Spanish translation of the remarks I had written out in English. When I asked for it my inquiry was met with consternation. After reading over the hastily typed draft with inked-in corrections, I was convinced I could not do it, especially on an empty stomach.

The feminist cavalry arrived just in the nick of time. My friend Betsey Rodriguez from Bogata, who I had not realized would be at the tribune, came strolling by. She said I was lucky that her volunteer job in the YWCA was helping English-speaking businessmen learn to speak Spanish. After I had read over the text aloud, she drilled me on my five worst errors. After standing before the packed audience in the auditorium, I was told that I did not mispronounce any of those. But I knew I had flunked this Spanish exam when several Americans rushed up to me after my talk and enthused, "You were wonderful; we understood every word!"

Just as we finished the Spanish lesson, First Lady María Esther Zuno de Echeverría arrived promptly at six with her Chilean friend Señora Hortensia Bussi de Allende, the widow of the slain Chilean leader Salvadore Allende, and embraced me at the front door. By all accounts the tribune was off to a good start. Little did we know that in the same room the cordiality and formality of the evening would change the next morning into more chaos when a rowdy mob disrupted the proceedings.

Part of the chaos seemed to be pre-planned. We could see signaling to the shouters from the projection booths. In fact, we had asked that there be no television or audio coverage to protect candid speakers from retaliation at home. We had to learn the hard way that the conversations in the smaller conference rooms were also recorded.

To give maximum exposure to the topics that the planning committee thought deserved priority, we had arranged for simultaneous sessions in the two auditoriums. Determined that the program would be lively, with maximum audience participation, we had commissioned a media team to prepare on-site "slideshow" to illustrate the problems being considered; these were shown along with brief comments from a panel. Some rowdy

---

---

audience members interrupted the discussion until a forceful Esther Boserup took the chair, gavelled down the screamers, and ruled that no one could speak a second time until everyone waiting at the floor microphones had spoken.

Despite every effort to derail the tribune, there was an eventual meeting of minds. Women discovered their "brand": in every country women and girls were treated as an inferior minority. In over 200 formal and informal meetings, emerging leaders formed new friendships. Recognizing that power is taken, not given, they forged a network for change.

### **Looking Ahead**

Have women's and girls' lives changed since 1975? Both the impoverished girl in the rice paddy and the abused wife nursing her fracture in the mansion are being brought into the network of concern. Women in the developing world, particularly in Africa, are working with energy and initiative to find remedies for the whole range of economic and cultural restrictions that deprive their communities and countries of women's perspectives and abilities. Moreover, men are beginning to help in small and large ways, especially now that research shows what women have known all along; that women's work is a stimulus to economic growth. With such impetus the movement is gathering steam.

Looking back, we know that a revolution was underway. At the time I was hearing writers and speakers at the UN and elsewhere telling us that, "Women are the only new force for change in the world." If asked how we could stage a revolution without Facebook or Twitter, we have the answer: the original social networking channel, the United Nations.

---