

Going Back to Go Forward: A Brief History of Women of Color in Georgia's DV Movement Jenny Aszman

I first learned about the proverb of Sankofa when I studied abroad in Ghana, West Africa in the Summer of 2007. Sankofa, which literally translates to “go back and take,” is a vital component of Ghanaian culture, emphasizing the importance of learning from the past, especially in an effort to make positive progress for the future. Sankofa is often represented by an Adrinka Symbol or depicted as a bird reaching its head backwards, shown below.



Image source: <http://knink.com/content/tattoos/adinkra-african-tribal-symbols.htm>

As an intern at the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence and a fairly new member to the Movement, I have continuously been amazed by the great number of strong, determined advocates who are fighting to end domestic violence in Georgia. I have also continuously been amazed by how much advocates against domestic violence must still struggle to make domestic violence seen as a priority for policy and funding issues.

As much as we fight today to secure funding for services for victims and raise awareness of the seriousness of domestic violence, I have often wondered how domestic violence advocates from the beginning of the Movement in Georgia were able to accomplish so much. After all, this issue was rarely even talked about in the early 1970's and there were no formal shelters in most states until the early 1980's. Who were these courageous women and men who broke the silence and began the movement to end domestic violence in Georgia? What hurdles did they overcome? How did we get where we are today?

In the spirit of Sankofa, I decided to do some digging around to see what I could find on the issue. Luckily, I was able to uncover some insightful information from the Women's Collection at the Georgia State University Library as well as some documents here at the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence. However, because the Movement has been so grassroots in nature, the history of what's been accomplished and how it was accomplished is often best told through personal stories and narratives rather than looking through the limited number of documents that have surfaced over the years.

In honor of Black History Month, I decided to compile some information on the history of women of color within the movement to end domestic violence, both nationally and here in Georgia. Many of you may be able to tell this story more accurately than I can, and for those individuals I hope this brief history provides a moment of remembrance and reflection on the past. For those of us who are new to the Movement or may not be aware of the history of the

Movement, I have put together a few key facts on the history of women of color in the Movement in Georgia.

Here's what I have gathered so far:

Women of color in the Battered Women's Movement first came together in a collective way in Washington, DC at the first national meeting of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence in February of 1980. At the conference, there was a severe lack of representation of women of color; the trainings, speakers, and workshops were rarely led by women of color and they barely touched on the experiences of women of color within the movement and shelter programs. This extreme sense of invisibility led the women of color at the conference to form the Third World Women Caucus. This caucus made several recommendations to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Their recommendations focused on bridging the information gap through forming alliances with organizations that addressed women of color, increasing sensitivity of women of color and increasing cultural-historical presentations, actively promoting women of color leadership and representation, and the establishment of a collection of anti-racism documents and tools to be used in domestic violence agencies. This caucus also led to the development of *The Gathering*, the first newsletter focusing on women of color working in the Battered Women's Movement, published by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Catlin Fullwood).

In Georgia, the Women of Color Task Force (WOCTF) grew out of an anti-racism training held by the Georgia Network to End Domestic Violence (GCADV's predecessor) in 1985. At the time, there was limited diversity on shelter staff and boards and the WOCTF was originally comprised of only a handful of women. Their mission was to actively promote the cessation of domestic violence, nurture, strengthen, and empower battered women of color, to increase the involvement and support of communities of color, and work to end the polarization of the shelter movement (GNADV Annual Report 1987-1988). The WOCTF focused on greater participation of women of color and implementing affirmative action policies and developing leadership skills. The WOCTF grew slowly during its first few years, steadily working to become an integral part of the Georgia Network to End Domestic Violence.

Women of color from Georgia went on to lead the Southeastern Regional Conference on Domestic Violence and organized a Women of Color Caucus in 1987. On the last day of the conference in 1987, the caucus became the Southeastern Regional Women of Color Taskforce. The Georgia Network Against Domestic Violence served as the clearinghouse for the Southeastern Women of Color Task Force and assisted in increasing visibility and outreach to communities of color in Georgia. The WOCTF hosted several workshops, trainings and conferences throughout the late 1980's including, "Battered Women & Battered Women of Color: Where do the differences lie?," which was keynoted by Loretta Ross in October of 1989 as well as a forum entitled "Domestic Violence in the African-American Community", identifying women of color working in shelters in Georgia, networking with other women of color in Georgia, the south and nationally (GNADV Annual Report 1987-1988).

Women of color in Georgia have played an integral role in the grassroots efforts of ending domestic violence and actively addressing the racism and oppression many experience in

Georgia. Since their creation, the Women of Color Task Forces in Georgia have experienced an unsteady history and currently, there are no active Task Forces in the state. However, GCADV recently met with the National Women of Color Network in an effort to understand the mistakes from the past in order to successfully move forward. From that meeting, there is now great hope of reinstating the Women of Color Task Forces and Caucuses in Georgia in the next few years.

Before my time at GCADV is over in April, I hope to interview willing advocates from the Movement in Georgia to help elaborate and fill in missing pieces of information on the history of how we got to where we are today. I would love to hear from any individuals who may have some more information they would like to add to the history of women of color in Georgia's domestic violence movement.