

Woke: The Austin Women's March

by Rachel Jennings

On Saturday, January 22, I awoke early to get ready for the Women's March in Austin, Texas. I felt excited and nervous. From social media, I sensed that the crowds at the march would be huge. Knowing that Donald Trump was now our President, however, filled me with dread and anger. Sworn into office the previous day, his lies about the size of inauguration crowds were an unneeded reminder of his narcissism and mendacity.

I rose early so that I could carpool with 3 friends who would be at the march. One of these women had generously offered to drive us in her car. Before leaving my house, I stashed some blank posters and permanent markers in my trunk. When we arrived in Austin, we would make posters together.

Fearful of arriving late, I arrived ahead of schedule. Actually, we did not live far from each other. Although we were acquainted from past encounters, it took a march in Austin to bring us into closer contact. As my friend finished preparing, I waited feeling more relaxed but anxious about an entire day during which I would have to think about Trump.

So we would not become hungry or dehydrated during the march, my friend packed water, bananas, and cheese sandwiches in her backpack. She confided that the march would be her "first protest" and wanted to be prepared. Since I was not prepared, I was grateful. As a longtime activist, I often become careless, failing to gather needed items such as water, sunglasses, or sunscreen. One of her friends, also a first-time protester, arrived. The three of us left to pick up Carolyn Atkins, a longtime friend of mine and veteran activist. We four then made our way north to Austin.

As we traveled down I-35, we shared our rage about the election of Donald Trump. We wondered how much Vladimir Putin had influenced the election and it might affect Trump's decision-making. Even now, Trump was still insisting that he would build a wall and "make Mexico pay for it." He would deport immigrants. He would ban Muslims. He would gut the EPA and the Department of Education. He would make abortion illegal.

Trump's contempt for women was especially enraging. Few women had been appointed to his Cabinet. We wondered if Melania Trump might be a victim of abuse or even sex trafficking. We recalled the insults Trump had directed at women. He had accused Hillary Clinton of being an "enabler" of Bill Clinton's affairs. He called Fox News journalist Megyn Kelly a "bimbo," saying she had "blood coming out of her eyes. Blood coming out of her wherever." On another occasion, he called Alicia Machado, the Venezuelan actor and Miss Universe winner, "Miss Piggy" and "Miss House-keeping." On a leaked video, Trump described grabbing women "by the pussy" because "when you're a star, they let you do it." It was no accident the protest march was organized by women the day after his inauguration. Trump's hateful, violent misogyny had been on display throughout his campaign, and it defined him.

After arriving in Austin, we met another friend and went into the Family Life Center of First United Methodist Church. The church had made its space available for marchers to use the rest-



Rachel & Carolyn making signs
Photo: Stephanilla

room, get water and make posters. It was packed with people preparing to march. Looking down from a window, I saw streams of people walking toward the capitol. I sensed that marchers were arriving from all over the city and the state.

The five of us made several posters, including ones that said "Respect for All," "We Are 3 Million More," "Walking for Women," "Shame on Trump!! We Heard You," "Abortion Rights," "Women's Rights Are Human Rights," "Stop Sexual Harassment," and "Would Jesus Grab Women's Pussies?"

Choosing our favorite posters, we left some for other marchers.

The march had more people than I could have imagined. Packed onto the lawn of the Texas capitol building, we could barely move as we made our way onto Congress Ave. Later, I saw aerial views of marchers that covered many city blocks numbering more than 50,000. Recalling past protests against the Gulf War, the bombing of Lebanon, the death penalty, and anti-abortion legislation, I could remember no event this widely attended with women and men from all walks of life.

Although filled with nostalgia for my student days in Austin in the late 1980s and 1990s, I had to admit that today was unique and like nothing I had ever experienced before. I hoped that our passion and commitment to resistance would make the 45th President hesitate before acting like a tyrant. I hoped, too, that the march would galvanize those in the resistance to unite and build organizing networks. Although some might say our march was "negative" in the sense of being directed against Trump, our march was actually the beginning of constructive resistance and imaginative solidarity. Our march embodied intersectionality, reflecting our awareness of racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, environmental injustice, economic exploitation, and threats against our educational system.

The march brought 4 women from San Antonio together. Women who had been vaguely acquainted became trusted friends. The two of us who were veteran activists became energized and filled with hope. The two who were new to protests became empowered to speak and to act. We all got woke.

Bio: Rachel, a local poet & teacher, is also buena gente of the Esperanza.

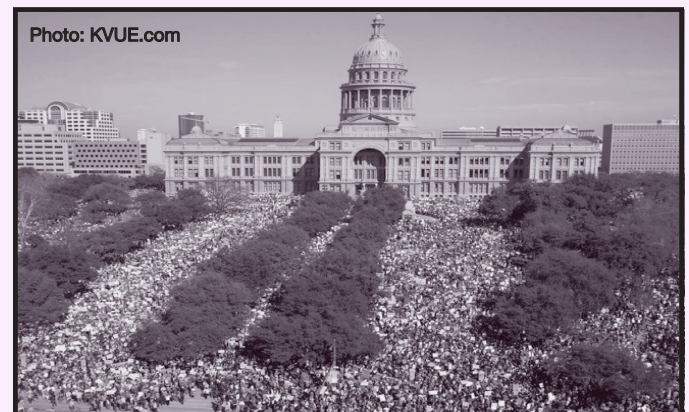


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