

## Panel discusses effect February Sisters had on women's rights at KU

February 5, 2012

It was a Friday. C.J. Brune remembers because she felt relief the week was over.

But then, right after she got home and started on an already-late English paper, she got a call: Meet me at this address — she'd later find out it was 1322 La.— and bring enough clothes for a week.

“Having been involved in activist causes for some time, I was used to clandestine messages,” she said. “But this one took the cake.”

Brune arranged care for her two children, put aside her homework and walked into history.

On Feb. 4, 1972, a snowy, frigid Friday, about 35 women, with four children in tow, occupied a small house on Louisiana Street, then the home to the East Asian Studies Department. From the start, they referred to themselves as the February Sisters, and by the end of that night 40 years ago, they emerged from the house challenging Chancellor E. Laurence Chalmers with six demands:

- An affirmative action program for women, run by women.
- A day care center paid for with student fees.
- That a woman be appointed to the then-vacant position of vice chancellor of academic affairs.
- An end to pay differences based on gender.
- A women's studies department.
- A women's health program, providing access to birth control.

At a panel discussion on Saturday at the Spencer Museum of Art, three women who were in the house — Brune, Mary Coral and Christine Smith — as well as three former KU professors who actively engaged in women's rights at the time — Beth Schultz, Marilyn Stokstad and Betty Banks — discussed the sisters' history and what it means to be a feminist today.

“We had peaceful demands that effected immediate, long-lasting change,” Schultz said, praising the collective action and civil disobedience of the sisters, who got Chalmers to agree to their demands between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m. that Saturday.

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The audience of about 100 was diverse — men and women, young and old — but all seemed to have an appreciation of the sisters' work in progressing women's rights.

“The results of their actions were positive changes for women on this campus,” Elizabeth Miller, recent doctoral graduate in American studies, said.

The sisters inspired another generation of women activists, including Carla Tilghman, who said that many younger women don't realize the work done in the 1970s and also that “we're not done yet” with advancing women's issues.

Some of the women on the panel pointed to perceived threats to birth control access in Kansas. But Brune was hopeful, in a way, that a challenge might spark renewed interest in activism.

“I think the women's movement is growing again,” she said. “It has to. Women's rights are being attacked in every state.”

Despite the challenges, Coral's message for current activists was upbeat, reflective of the successes of the sisters, including the founding of the women's studies academic department and Hilltop Development Center.

“Know that you can make a change,” she said.