

off our backs

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Taking Back the Clothesline: fighting corporate claims on a grassroots movement

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Taking Back the Clothesline:

fighting corporate claims on a grassroots movement

by Susan Cumings

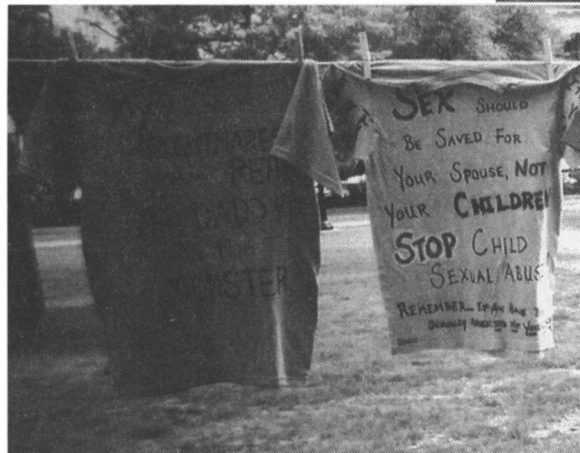
Corporate sponsorships are everywhere. It's not just a few sporting events anymore that carry brand names, it's also the stadiums they are played in, it's music venues, it's buildings and common spaces in schools and on college campuses. It seems, like Naomi Klein pointed out in *No Logo*, that there is very little public space or activity that is left unbranded. But when "brand association" extends to placing a corporate logo over the work of an important, and beloved, feminist grassroots movement, and diminishing the movement's work in the process, it has truly gone too far.

In the fall of 2004, five shopping malls and one hospital in the state of Georgia were visited by something called "the Verizon Clothesline Project." Promotional materials sent in advance to potential "partners" (and aimed primarily at trying to line up venues for display) promised that

this "Verizon Clothesline Project" (or VCP, as I will call it) was "self-explanatory" and took up "very little space." To those of us familiar with the *real* Clothesline Project, the idea that "our" clothesline could be branded was a shock. That promoters (a consulting firm named Trevelino Keller, speaking on behalf of Verizon) should believe it was easy to understand a Clothesline and should think it a *good* thing that a Clothesline not take up a lot of space sounded a lot like the very practices we were fighting: old customs of keeping women silent, contained, confined. This version of



Photos at right and above are from grassroots Clothesline projects in open air settings. At right, shirts read "My nightmares are real, my daddy is the monster" and "Sex should be saved for your spouse, not your children. Stop Child Sexual Abuse."



the Clothesline seemed to say: Sure, express your pain, but do it simply and quietly—don't make too much noise or take up too much valuable public space, which could be used for more important things.

The Clothesline Project, the real one, is an international grassroots movement raising awareness and promoting healing for women who were victims or are survivors of gender-based violence. It is participa-



tory, politically engaged public art. *oob* has been reporting on the Clothesline since it began over a decade ago, including covering its role in the successful lobbying efforts for the first Violence Against Women Act (VAWA, 1994). Any woman who has been touched by gendered violence can contribute to a Clothesline; participants are encouraged to decorate t-shirts that reflect their experiences of hope, fear, anger, despair or triumph, using pictorial, symbolic and/or verbal means of communication. Shirts are painted, written on, cut up, sewn, appliquéd,

airbrushed, and so on, according to the vision of each shirt maker, and then displayed in public spaces hanging shoulder to shoulder on a clothesline, thus “airing society’s

dirty laundry” by defying the assigning of gendered violence to the “private” sphere.

In addition, a color scheme is suggested, though not mandatory:



Photos. Above: Clothesline Project in open air public space. At right: the Verizon corporate clothesline display isolated in a corner of a mall.

red or pink shirts represent rape and sexual assault, yellow, brown or beige domestic violence, blue or green child sexual abuse, purple or lavender homophobic violence, black or grey for women attacked for their gender and physical disability, and white for shirts created in memory of women who have died as a result of gendered attacks. The many colors suggest a rainbow, symbol of hope, while also giving visual cues as to the broad variety of methods by which violence is perpetrated on women solely because they are women. Shirt making often takes place away from the public displays, sometimes done by women on their own, sometimes in group settings such as at shelters, but most displays also include areas and materials for the creation of additional shirts by viewers who are themselves survivors. Clothesline displays also typically provide resources and access to information on gender-based violence and service agencies that support victims, like crisis lines, counseling services, and local shelters. It's hard to witness a Clothesline Project and not be moved by the testimonies it makes visible.

When I visited the Verizon display at the Colonial Mall in Macon, Georgia, though, I saw a pale, muted, unstaffed and uninviting little rectangle that seemed lost in a space between escalators, a space more commonly used to park raffle-prize SUVs. People passed it by without even slowing down on their way from shop to shop.

Since I have been involved with a Clothesline Project in the community where I work for several years, and am myself a contributor (that is, a survivor of gender-based violence), I felt invested in trying to understand where this display came

from, and how it could claim to be a "clothesline project" yet bear so little resemblance to other Clotheslines I knew. Here are some of the things I found problematic. First of all, shirt makers contributing to (real) Clotheslines often comment on their desire to use vibrant colors, "loud" colors that "shout" their messages, and are not "muted."¹ By comparison, this little string seemed so subdued in tone, all soft pastels, and there was no explanation of any color symbolism. These shirt makers, it appeared, were abiding by the promoter's promise not to take up too much space or to make their experience too noticeable. I should say that I place no fault whatsoever on the persons from a local battered women's shelter who made t-shirts for this display, but only with the organizers who seem not to have understood the Clothesline very well before undertaking to involve those women in a display whose loudest color was in the corporate logos repeated throughout it. It also disturbed me that there was no one sitting with the VCP—no one to encourage passers-by to really look, no one available to talk to if one was moved, puzzled, frightened, angered or inspired. There were text panels beside the shirt lines, but here the corporate logo was in far larger type than any explanation of the display or information about resources for victims. There was also no invitation to participate. The Clothesline, from what a viewer could see here, was a done thing, static, a thing created in the past, not an ongoing participatory

public art movement, not an international grassroots phenomenon.

As I have said, the t-shirts on display were pale, and showed little variety of color (no reds, greens, purples, whites or blacks, for example), and there was no color key to suggest what different shirts might symbolize. That made a troubling sort of sense when I realized that Verizon's "pet cause" was domestic violence, and as a result they had eliminated rape, child sexual assault, lesbian bashing, and other forms of gender-based violence against women from their "clothesline." I was shocked to realize how many types of violence were being left unaddressed, how many real women's experiences were excluded from a movement I had cherished for its dedication to inclusivity. Our Clothesline was being divided, segregated in order to focus on one corporation's supposed priority.

And the more I paid attention to all the information, the more I came to see this corporation's "commitment" as shaky at best. Despite well-publicized grants—even of tens of thousands of dollars—Verizon has given to shelters and programs around the country, I question how much of a priority women's well-being and the elimination of relationship violence really are to this company in light of the following considerations.

First, if domestic violence is so important to Verizon, why don't all of its employees know about its most "public" initiative, the Hopeline cell phone recycling and distribution

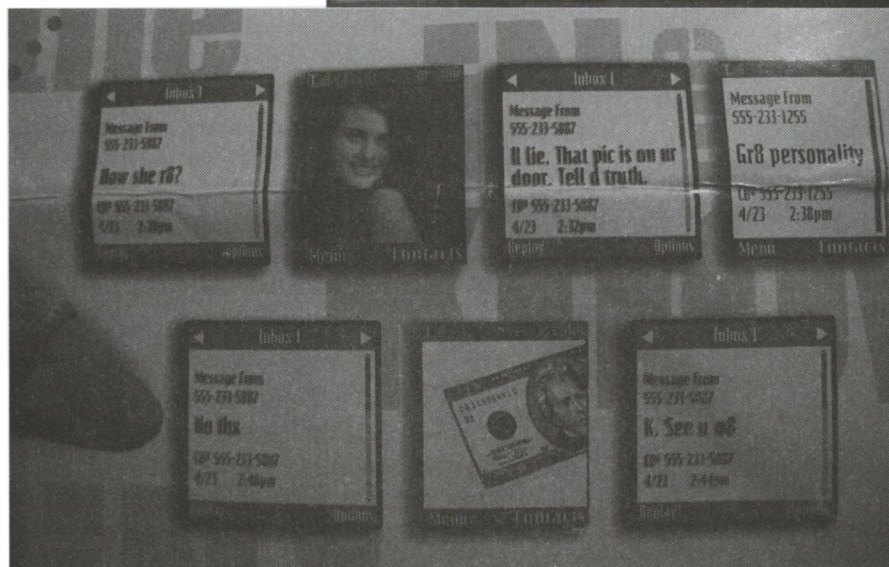
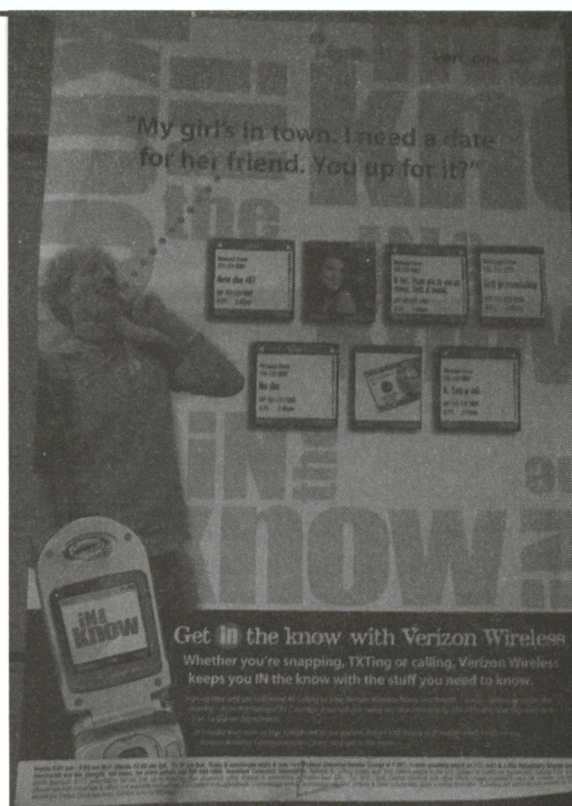
¹Patricia Coral Hipple noted this in her dissertation on the Clothesline—see "Hegemonic Disguise and Resistance to Domination: The Clothesline Project's Response to Male Violence Against Women" (Sociology Diss, Ames, IA: Iowa State Univ, 1998), p. 123.

program? The only action encouraged in the VCP display at the Macon Mall was not lobbying senators for continued and increased protection of battered women, not volunteering at a local shelter, but bringing a cell phone to “the nearest Verizon Wireless location.” In the mall, that location was 15 steps away—the logo looming over the display as you approached from the East.

Yet the first time I approached kiosk staff to ask about bringing in some old phones, they were thoroughly bewildered. No one knew what they would do with a telephone donation if they got one (“Um, I think that’s a web thingy...” said one employee after a long hesitation). The second time I tried, after a shift change, the manager on duty was at least familiar with the program, but when I tried to follow up by asking him about the VCP display, he had no idea what it was or why it was there. This was a display, let’s not forget, that was sponsored by his company, about a subject supposedly very important to that company, and for three days running had been exhibited 15 steps from and in full view of his desk. He had never looked.

Equally bothersome was the heavily branded press kit distributed to those who attended the “press conference” at the display’s “opening.” It provided plenty of information on buying stock in Verizon Communications—as much or more information than about any shelters or other organizations actually working to stop violence against women—and offered “broadcast quality video footage of Verizon Wireless operations”—that is, of their happily productive (and generic) offices, not of the

Verizon poster: Guy says “My girl’s in town, I need a date for her friend. You up for it?” Then in a series of text messages the other guy messages back, “What’s she look like.” The reply is a picture of a model. The answering message is “U lie. That picture is on your door. Tell the truth.” “Gr8 personality” is the reply. “No thanks,” answers the other guy. Picture of a \$20 bill is the next message. “OK, see you at 8.” is the answer.



Clothesline or of any events focused on women’s issues.

Most disturbing, however, and perhaps most representative of the company’s lack of true commitment to women’s well-being, was the advertising campaign Verizon was running on college campuses in the *same region* of Georgia the *same*

week as the Macon VCP display. Posters selling Verizon’s products and services boasted that a man (at least a young, straight white one) is “in the know” (clearly a desirable description) if he knows how to use his telephone to manipulate or avoid women who don’t fit his proto-pornographic fantasies.

No, really. Let's consider the language and images here. From this poster, we can gather that the kind of customer Verizon seeks and values here dates children, or at least infantilizes women and describes them using the possessive ("my girl"), with the connotation of ownership and control. He favors "pin-ups" to decorate his living space (the photo of the smiling brunette with the flowing hair is usually displayed on his door). He seeks to avoid the company of any woman not fitting his pin-up criteria, even if she is a friend of "his girl" or has a "great personality." Because of this, he is willing to offer cash money to someone else if they will make it easier for him to ignore this non-pin-up-worthy woman. (The comment about great personality may be the facetious use of the cliché, but the implied message is that it doesn't matter whether it's true or not—he still wants to avoid her because he doesn't approve of her looks.) When his friend accepts his bribe, as negotiated via Verizon cell phones, and agrees to help occupy the undesired woman, our poster guy has clearly "won."

This poster actively encourages and celebrates Verizon's ability to facilitate the kinds of dismissive attitudes toward women that are at the core of much gender-based abuse. This makes Verizon's commitment to domestic violence prevention questionable at best. It seems that they'll talk about it when it's convenient as a promotional tool, but decent treatment of women ceases to be a priority for Verizon if it doesn't fit the target market.

What the Company Could Do Differently

You can see why I find it hard to believe the claims displayed in text accompanying the VCP that "since 1995, from the executive leadership team down, Verizon Wireless has embraced a philosophy of commitment to domestic violence prevention and awareness in the workplace and in its local communities nationwide." To sell me on "awareness," they should at least ensure that their employees are "aware" of their programs such as the cell phone donation program. Far more importantly, though, if they have any commitment to the prevention of violence against women, they need to come to terms with why such violence happens—with how the very sense of entitlement their male customer model shows in his poster exchange contributes to the climate that fosters abuse.

They need to make a commitment to self-education as well as to ensuring that every—and I do mean every—message that carries the company name is free of sexual inequality, that its advertising lives up to its PR, regardless of projected impact on sales. Otherwise, it is manipulating and disempowering every woman who hears its Hopeline promises, just as the poster guy manipulates and disempowers the woman he seeks to avoid. And my last bit of advice to the company: stay away from claiming any association with the proud grassroots work of the Clothesline Project until you understand that it serves *all* women, not just the ones you want to promote yourselves as championing. Let the Clothesline show her true, full rainbow of colors, not your logo.

What We Can Do

As for the rest of us, let's take back the movement—we can't let the brand bullies win. One of the best ways to fight this kind of corporate piracy is to ensure that the real Clothesline Project stays healthy and strong. We can do this together by working with existing Clotheslines and by starting new ones in new communities, according to the guidelines offered by the national website, www.clotheslineproject.org, and in conversation with other local Clothesline organizers and participants. (Anyone who has organized or staffed a Clothesline will have advice to offer!)

We can also take aim at Verizon's hypocrisy, letting them know that we won't buy their cheap attempts at marketing until we see them show a deeper understanding of the issue of violence against women in its many forms, and the impact of societal norms that support and foster such violence. Write or call Verizon representatives:

- Jim Gerace (Corporate Strategy, Policy), 908-306-7508, James.Gerace@VerizonWireless.com,
- Debra Lewis (Public Policy Communications, HopeLine/Phone Recycling, Community Service), 908-306-7844, Debra.Lewis@VerizonWireless.com.

In whatever way we choose, let's keep the movement strong by making our own commitments to ending all forms of violence against women; let's give of our time, talent, insight, and experience, and teach our children to work for peace, because peace for women means peace for everyone. ♦