

Feminist relishes stir she caused over Esquire protest

By Christine Wicker

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BELLINGHAM, Wash. — She's thrown raw meat at beauty contestants. She's taken off her shirt in public places. She's splashed her own blood over pornographic magazines.

Most recently, the woman whom supporters call "a folk hero of the feminist movement" has spent 22 days in jail for tearing up four copies — \$11.80 worth — of *Esquire* magazine.

But when Nikki Craft's 48th arrest and longest imprisonment ended Friday, it was not of her own accord.

"They kicked me out," Ms. Craft said Saturday. "I'm not rehabilitated. I will be ripping up more *Esquires*."

"Maybe Monday."

Ms. Craft, a women's rights and anti-pornography crusader for 20 years, said she refused to sign statements promising to obey the law and to appear for her trial July 16.

Until Friday, such refusals had allowed her to parlay a third-degree misdemeanor charge into far more attention than she could have hoped for.

But then, Ms. Craft wasn't a normal Whatcom County jail inmate. She was busy from early morning until late at night, placing collect calls to reporters, rallying supporters, arranging demonstrations and threatening lawsuits.

Every time prosecutors at-

tempted a compromise that would release her until her trial, she blocked them.

But when she returned on time from work release Friday, prosecutors seized the opportunity to oust a prisoner whose confinement had begun to take on overtones of *Ransom of Red Chief*. It wasn't worth the trouble.

"As far as we're concerned, she maintained herself and abided by all the laws during that period," prosecutor Greg Grenan told the *Bellingham Herald*. "Based on that, there's very little question she will appear for a trial date."

Ms. Craft hoped her arrest would spark other protests against the June issue of *Esquire*, a leading magazine for men.

By Tuesday, others were beginning to join her cause.

Los Angeles women's groups began their own protest against *Esquire* by urging people to cancel subscriptions and complain to the magazine about the June issue, "The Secret Life of the American Wife."

The cover features a photo of a woman who has been split in half. On one side, she's wearing a lacy bra and apron. On the other side, she's wearing a business suit jacket. The bottom half of her torso bears a diagram that looks like kitchen plumbing.

Inside is an article entitled "Your Wife: An Ownership Manual," a story that features a photo of the homemaker on her knees scrubbing a toilet. Another story that raised feminist ire was one that likened a good wife to a good Boy Scout: loyal, trustworthy and obed-



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ient.

The Los Angeles chapters of the National Organization for Women and The Feminist Majority also called on advertisers to withdraw their ads, and demanded that *Esquire's* editor in chief, Lee Eisenberg, publicly apologize and devote an upcoming issue to a "positive" view of women.

"We don't care what he puts in it," said Los Angeles NOW president Tammy Bruce, "but it damn well better be positive. Our motto is, if *Esquire* thinks this issue is funny, the joke's on them."

Mr. Eisenberg responded Wednesday in a statement: "I would like to say in the strongest terms that it was never the magazine's intention to offend anyone. It is very

regrettable to me and my staff that the issue has been perceived by some as an assault on women."

"Eisenberg is not forgiven," said Ms. Craft, who began her protest career as a Dallas community college student in the 1970s. "They have cheapened their magazine, and we're going to make sure they know it."

Her protests will continue, she said, in Bellingham or elsewhere.

"This magazine is the essence of the oppression of women," she said.

To those who say her choice of a subject was trivial, she responds: "Nothing is trivial. It's the most trivial things that make up the bars of the cage, and we have to pry them off one by one to get out."

But Ms. Craft is not the only protagonist in this drama. Village Books owner Chuck Robinson, an avowed liberal and the man who had Ms. Craft arrested, remains equally firm in his stand on principle.

"She committed an illegal act," he said. "If we allowed someone to do this, there would probably be someone who would come in and destroy about every item in the store."

Flamboyant protests are nothing new for Ms. Craft, who left Dallas more than a decade ago. In Santa Cruz, Calif., she staged mock beauty contests called "Myth California," in which she wore a five-pound dress made out of lunchmeat.

The Bellingham incident began when the magazine was pointed out to Ms. Craft while she was browsing in Mr. Robinson's bookstore last month.

Outraged, she took four copies to

the checkout counter and asked the clerk, "What would you do if someone tore these up?" She proceeded to do just that. Bookstore employees called Mr. Robinson, who told them to have her arrested.

Ms. Craft's supporters rallied around her, picketing the bookstore and attending several of her pre-trial hearings.

"The freedom of women is more important than the freedom of a magazine," said Lucy Colvin, 35, a graduate student at Western Washington University who brought Ms. Craft to Bellingham to speak at a conference on women's eating disorders.

NOW members in Bellingham expressed solidarity with Ms. Craft's goals, if not her methods.

"Our members are likely to say, 'Wow, how about that Nikki,'" said NOW member Turtle Robb. "And then they say, 'But we're not like that.'"

The story got some play in a few West Coast newspapers and on Washington television stations.

A New York City college professor and member of the National Organization of Men Against Sexism volunteered to pay Ms. Craft's \$250 bond. He also threatened to rally supporters for a "Free Nikki" telephone campaign directed at Bellingham officials.

But freeing Ms. Craft was something that local officials long declared themselves more than willing to do.

The prosecuting attorney tried to move her trial up but she objected, asking for more time to prepare her defense. At the same time, she demanded that the county give

her access to the local law library and a copying machine.

Her protests about jail conditions earned her a local radio interview and inspired her supporters to picket the jail.

When she was placed with 14 other women in a cell that she says was designed to hold eight, she complained until the women were moved to a larger cell. The other women were dissatisfied with their new cell because the toilet facilities weren't as good, and Ms. Craft said they began threatening her life.

She finally was placed in solitary confinement at her request.

Perhaps ironically, Mr. Robinson has a reputation as a progressive.

His store does not carry *Playboy*, *Penthouse* or other sexually explicit magazines. And, before Ms. Craft's protest, Mr. Robinson had allowed employee Irene MacPherson to post a card on the magazine rack bearing her review of the *Esquire* issue: "This is sick, sexist garbage."

But he also has long opposed what he considers attempted censorship by local feminists.

In an editorial page article in the Bellingham newspaper, Mr. Robinson chided Ms. Craft and her supporters for failing to exhaust all means of legal protest.

"She had lots of legal options," he said.

Ms. Craft scoffed at Mr. Robinson's criticism. He doesn't know what kind of things happened in the day-to-day strategy of the great protesters, she said.

"And besides," she said, "I'm more in the mode of Abbie Hoffman anyway."