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Liberation, not just equality, is goal of activism, asserts lesbian activist Amber Hollibaugh

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By Jennifer Wholey

Liberation, not equality, should be the goal of social justice, asserted Amber Hollibaugh, an activist for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, in Cornell's Lewis auditorium, March 4.

"Liberation is the question of imagining what's possible, dreaming what's possible, engaging in a dialogue in your life that never ends, about hope. It says that there is never a time when it is impractical to imagine change. There is never a time when it is ridiculous and hopeless to want things to be different. It says you are your own agent of change," said Hollibaugh, who has been described as an ex-sex worker, incest survivor, biracial feminist, high-femme lesbian, working-class organizer, AIDS activist and a full-time queer professional and is the senior strategist for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

"Those are the moments I want to be a part of, that give people the possibility of living a life of desire and living it openly," said Hollibaugh in her talk on the conflicts between erotic desire and political vision.

An activist since the late 1960s, author of "My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home" and co-producer and director of "The Heart of the Matter," a documentary about women's sexuality and HIV risk that was broadcast on PBS, Hollibaugh said that she became political during the first wave of radical left activism during the civil rights movement. "Imagine at a moment of extraordinary racism and injustice to live in a world without prejudice and oppression," said Hollibaugh. "It's an extraordinary thing to hope for when you can see no real example in front of you that suggests that that's any kind of possibility."

Hollibaugh said that in those days, "We wanted things to be different, so we started with ourselves," adding that sexual liberation, for example, should be an intrinsic part of a broad liberation movement.

"Don't you want it all? Don't you want to transform the world?" asked Hollibaugh, urging the audience to strive for the complete recognition and freedom implied by liberation that she believes everyone to be worthy of. Simply seeking equality, although an important step, falls short of what people truly deserve, she said. On the other hand, liberation is a no-holds-barred approach to activism that Hollibaugh asserted is the goal of social justice.

The event was sponsored by the Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay Studies Program with support from HAVEN, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Resource Center, and Cornell's Women's Resource Center.