Always remember, Dante, in the play of happiness, don't use all for yourself only...help the persecuted and the victim, because they are your better friends."

Italian-American anarchist Nicola Sacco, in his last message to his son before his execution in August 1927.

"Lady" has joined the revolution, but you'd never know it just by looking at her. The petite, 26-year-old waitress from Barre has a wide, friendly smile, dyed red hair, sliver studs in her lower lip and a powder-blue sweater with red cherries sewn on the yoke. But this self-described anarchist also lives "off the grid" in a communal house on the side of a mountain, about a mile from the nearest dirt road. And when it comes to achieving the goals of her anarchist collective - fighting fascism, ending global capitalism, abolishing all authoritarian forms of government and creating a free society without class difference - Lady can be as militant as circumstances demand.

"Most of my comrades all call me 'Lady,'" she says, explaining her reluctance to use her real name when being interviewed. "I come from a heightened sense-of-security culture because of my political beliefs and the work I've done."

Her safety concerns are understandable. While working with a group called Cop Watch in her hometown of Columbus, Ohio, Lady used to follow around police officers and videotape acts of police brutality and civil-rights abuses. Once, she says, she was beaten up by three cops and left by the side of the road. And in January 2003, she and some fellow anarchists helped organize a rally in Lewiston, Maine, against the white-supremacist group, World Church of the Creator, and roughed up a few of its members. It's the kind of in-your-face activism that gets results, she says, as well as her picture posted on hate-group websites around the country.

Lady is not an advocate of violence. But neither is she a pacifist when it comes to confronting fascist influences in society, be they Nazi skinheads or representatives of the Bush administration, she says. Like other members of the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective (GMAC), which formed in the fall of 2000 largely in response to the 1999 anti-globalization protests in Seattle, Lady grew up in a working-class household where she developed an acute awareness of class difference and the inherent inequalities of capitalism.

Suspicious of anarchists? Perhaps it's because all you've ever heard about them are the same old clichés - that they're a bunch of bomb-throwing terrorists or anti-technology primitivists. In fact, many of the core values anarchists espouse are no different than those held by more mainstream Vermonters: a fierce libertarianism, a deep distrust of centralized government and a strong belief in equal rights, personal responsibility and direct, participatory democracy.

Paradoxically, while the word "anarchism" evokes more than a century of negative stereo types, its philosophical influence on many of today's social movements - environmentalism, anti-globalization and the peace movement, to name a few - is perhaps greater than it's ever been. "Want to know what anarchism looks like?" Lady asks. "Think Town Meeting Day."
Anarchists can be found in Vermont's labor unions, farmer cooperatives, health-care organizations, even the halls of the Statehouse. The Institute for Social Ecology in Plainfield, for example, was founded on many anarchistic principles, among them the belief that those who are directly affected by a decision should have an equal voice in making that decision.

First, let's be clear about the definition. "Anarchism" is not the same things as "anarchy" - a state of chaos, lawlessness and disorder. Quite the contrary. Anarchism is a libertarian brand of socialism that rejects all forms of hierarchical rule. It asserts that society should be organized through decentralized, community-based bodies where decisions are reached by consensus, not by the majority imposing its will on the minority.

In the parlance of Lady and her peers, the word anarchism refers to "social anarchism," a historical and political movement dating back at least 150 years in the United States. It is not, as leftist writer Murray Bookchin once dubbed it, lifestyle anarchism - that "narcissistic" form of "rebellious chic in which Americans rakishly adorn themselves with the symbols and idioms of personal resistance, all the more to accommodate themselves to the status quo."

Though the lines between social anarchism and lifestyle anarchism occasionally blur - as when popular bands like Rage Against the Machine sing about smashing the system - what Vermont's anarchists are talking about has more to do with politics than punk rock.

In the post-9/11 political climate, where dissent has been equated with sedition, being called an anarchist is like being branded a Communist during the McCarthy era. Peace activists, union organizers and anti-globalization protesters who identify themselves as anarchists are practically inviting the Department of Homeland Security to put them under surveillance. Members of anarchist collectives, including GMAC and its larger affiliate group, the North Eastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists, routinely report having their mail intercepted, their meetings videotaped, and their names red-flagged on national no-fly lists.

"The national media, specifically those in Washington, are doing their damnedest to demonize and word 'anarchism,'" says David (last name withheld), a GMAC member in the Montpelier area. "They've started using the same words for us as they do for al Qaeda, which is not accidental."

A November 23, 2003, article in The New York Times referred to the places where anarchists and other protesters learn civil-disobedience tactics as "training camps." According to the Times, the FBI is now asking local law-enforcement agencies to refer activities of "anarchists and other extremist elements" to its counterterrorism squads.

Not surprisingly, most of the people interviewed for this article - writers, lobbyists, union organizers, teachers - asked that their names not be used or that they not be identified as anarchists. Even the 83-year-old Bookchin, who is internationally renowned for his writings on anarchist theory and who now lives in quiet seclusion in Burlington, doesn't want to draw attention to himself by being called an anarchist.
"I was once warned by a very experienced anarchist who had fought in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the working class in Spain never to use the word 'anarchist' when I propounded my view, and I probably should have taken his advice," Bookchin says. "But anarchism, like a donut, has a big hole into which you can pour anything. Consequently, I may have made a mistake."

Why is the word anarchism like the mark of Cain? In the United States, it has been associated with violence and terrorism, often erroneously, since the days of the Haymarket Riot in 1886 and the assassination of President McKinley in 1901. But as an overt political movement, anarchism has been largely out of the public eye since the 1930s. These days, most Americans don't have a clue what the word means.

Actually, the anarchist movement has deep roots in the Green Mountain State. Between the 1890s and the 1930s, the center of anarchist activity in Vermont was the Barre granite district, which supported an anarchist study circle as early as 1894, according to Dick Hathaway, a professor of liberal studies in history and political science at Vermont College. During the first decade of the 20th century, Barre was one of the country's two leading centers of anarchism - the other being Patterson, New Jersey. That activity originated among Barre's Italian-Americans who, Hathaway notes, "literally carried their anarchist philosophy in knapsacks on their backs as they emigrated to this country." The statue in Barre's Hope Cemetery of stonecarver Elia Corti, a well-respected Italian anarchist who was assassinated during a political rally in 1903, is just one reminder of that city's radical past.

Another anarchist émigré to Vermont was a gifted Italian orator named Luigi Galleani, who became editor of an anarchist newspaper in Barre known as the Chronaca Sovversiva, or Subversive Chronicle. Of the 100 or so Italian-language anarchist publications of that era, Chronaca Sovversiva was one of the most influential, enjoying a worldwide circulation of about 5000. Galleani edited the newspaper until he was swept up in the Red Scare deportations of 1918-19 and was sent back to Italy where, Hathaway says, "he became a wonderful nuisance to Mussolini" until his death in 1931.

Although anarchists didn't disappear entirely from Vermont after World War I, their numbers dwindled considerably as immigration from Italy was sharply curtailed. And with the execution of Boston anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti on trumped-up charges in August 1927, anarchism as a viable political movement all but disappeared from the Green Mountain State. But as an idea, Hathaway says, anarchism persists in Vermont to this day.

Seated at a table in the back of Charlie O's, a smoky, working-class tavern in downtown Montpelier, David, one of GMAC's founding members, is dressed all in black, wearing a goatee and puffing away on a corncob pipe. Though he can talk at length about the history of anarchism in pre-Franco Spain and trace anarchist theories to the writings of Thomas Paine, no one is likely to mistake this construction worker and union organizer for some coffeehouse intellectual. As David explains, the word "anarchism" is largely irrelevant to the goals of his collective.

"Working people aren't too concerned with words. They want to see results," says the 30-year-old organizer, whose father was a hospital orderly and his mother a plumber's secretary. "We're not concerned about whether or not you consider yourself an anarchist. We talk to people about
expanding the power of town meeting. We talk to people about taking power out of the hands of Montpelier and putting it back in their hands. We talk to people about building strong, democratic labor unions, more democratic than they are now. And most people agree.

"Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys practiced a form of direct, participatory democracy. They elected their own officers and organized towns," Dave adds. "What we'd like to see come to fruition is a system where decisions that directly affect the local level are made at the local level."

In many respects, GMAC's goals aren't too different from those of other left-leaning groups in Vermont. The Green Mountain collective supports the living-wage campaign, expanded labor unions, improved access to higher education, more affordable housing and universal health care. David and other GMAC members have lent their support to a number of local and statewide initiatives, such as the Dairy Farmers of Vermont, the Peoples Roundtable for a Fair and Healthy Economy and the Downtown Workers' Union in Montpelier, which has signed up about 100 of the city's 800 or so downtown employees.

David is quick to point out that none of these projects is specifically anarchist-led or anarchist-run. But neither is he concerned that associating these causes with the anarchist label will sabotage their public image. "If we can make phone calls and stuff envelopes for an organization and help them make more money, it doesn't really matter," he says. "We don't send out letters to farmers saying, 'There are anarchists in this organization, so overthrow the state and start a class war.'"

Another popular misconception about anarchists is that they are all anti-technology and anti-progress. "I am not a primitivist and I'm not a Luddite," says Lady. "The majority of anarchists I know are working-class and believe in class struggle. And no working-class person is going to be anti-technology because they won't have a job."

"John" (not his real name) is a 26-year-old anarchist living in central Vermont. Like GMAC's members, John grew up in a working-class home, but he's not affiliated with the Green Mountain collective. He doesn't identify himself publicly as an anarchist to his co-workers, largely out of fear that it will compromise his union-organizing activities. Anarchism, he says, is so steeped in myths and misconceptions that usually it's best to not even mention the word.

"Myself and almost every anarchist I've ever met believes that we're not trying to lead a movement or take over anyone's cause," John says. "The classic anarchist catchphrase is, 'The revolution will be won by the workers themselves.' What we're doing is helping people organize and stand up for themselves. We're not looking to create another political party."

John, who discovered anarchism at age 17 after reading a book by Noam Chomsky, has organized and participated in a number of protests in Philadelphia and Richmond, Virginia, ranging from living-wage campaigns to anti-war demonstrations. He admits to a certain level of militancy, though he's never been a member of the Black Bloc - those militant youths often seen at large demonstrations who dress all in black and conceal their identities, both as a symbol of
solidarity and to protect themselves from police surveillance and criminal prosecution for acts of civil disobedience.

Militancy is a complex issue, John says. Its appropriateness varies depending upon the nature of the protest and the cause for which he's fighting. In a living-wage campaign, being militant to the point of causing property damage makes no sense, he says. But when confronting racist groups, he asserts that violence can be an effective tactic.

"Fascists attract young, alienated, mainly white, working-class youths to their ranks by presenting a symbol of strength. And these kids who are scared or have their backs up against the wall say, 'Hey, there's a crew for me,'" John explains. "So beating the crap out of them, quite frankly, makes a lot of sense because the converts on the fringe will be pushed away."

But John is quick to caution that being militant doesn't necessarily mean resorting to violence. "It's not just about throwing bricks. It's militant to get a bunch of people who are scared of their boss to confront their boss and say, 'Hey, I don't like what you're doing.'" he says. "It's about empowering people so they can stand up and refuse what's going on at work, or with the cops, or in their community."

One morning at Burlington's Radio Bean coffeehouse, Lady and I share a table with some high school students from Bristol who are in town on a field trip. As we discuss the current political climate in the United States, her references to "comrades," the "bourgeoisie" and "class warfare" sound quaintly anachronistic. But the more she talks about the fascist tendencies she sees in the Bush administration - media censorship, stringent socioeconomic controls, political opposition crushed by acts of terror and police repression - the more timely her words become. And even before our interview is over, a teenager with a shaved head and spiked dog collar sitting next to us asks meekly, "How can I learn more about anarchism?"

Still, given the historical baggage and negative stereotypes associated with the word anarchist, one can only wonder why Lady or anyone else still identifies themselves as one. In 2002, for example, an independent film shot in Texas called The Anarchist Cookbook portrayed anarchists as a bunch of thugs, sexual deviants, drug pushers and Animal House-like misfits.

But Lady just rolls her eyes and laughs it off. "I could live the rest of my life and never say I'm an anarchist again because I'm doing things to help people," she says. "It's a movement that continues to grow and make concrete gains. It's here for the long-run."

As if on cue, the young man's teacher comes over, offers Lady his card and asks if she would be willing to come into his classroom and discuss her ideas. Lady may be right. The word anarchism may be dead, but the idea lives on.

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Power to the People; It may be a dirty word, but "anarchism" is alive and well in Vermont