

the
Kappa Alpha Theta
MAGAZINE

WOMEN IN TRANSITION
IN THE SEVENTIES



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She Is Making It Work

by Mary Lynn Myers
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I suppose I've been a subconscious feminist all my life. It never occurred to me that I shouldn't like to play baseball and kick-the-can as much as I enjoyed dolls. In junior high I wanted to be an architect; in senior high, a lawyer. In college I prepared for a career in government and politics and searched diligently for a man who wouldn't subvert my hard work by insisting that "my wife doesn't have to work."

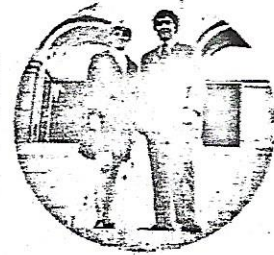
At the same time, I never really questioned (then) why girls who liked baseball were called tomboys, or boys who enjoyed paper dolls were harassed with the term sissy. It didn't occur to me to protest the fact that all the women in the grade school readers were mommies and all the men were doctors, and lawyers, and scientists, and policemen. I was never so blatant as to throw off my "ladylike demeanor" and call Prince Charming for a date. I guess I accepted, somewhat reluctantly, the fact that boys didn't like girls who were too smart, and I did try to hide the fact that I had received an A in English Lit from my boy friend, who had only managed a B.

I have been active in the feminist movement for six years. For most of us, feminism isn't something we were converted to. It's a philosophy that's always been part of us, subconsciously perhaps, but it took some overt act to convert the philosophy into activism.

For me it was pay discrimination. In 1966 I was working for the third summer as a lifeguard and swimming instructor for the city of Sioux Falls, SD. Women in that position were paid \$1.00 an hour to start, and men earned \$1.25 for the same job. That year the State of South Dakota passed an equal pay law, and I became an active feminist. I went to the city attorney, my father's South Dakota Code in hand, and "demanded" equal pay for equal work, as required by the law. Since that day women lifeguards in Sioux Falls have earned the same wage as men.

In 1967 I married (a man who I know would be upset if I suggested giving up my career)

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and moved to Chicago to go to graduate school at Northwestern University. It seemed the natural thing to do to search out the local chapter of the National Organization for Women, Inc., the largest and oldest of the new feminist organizations. When I joined NOW, I committed myself, as does every member, "to take action to bring women into the mainstream of American society now, exercising their full rights and responsibilities in truly equal partnership with men."

The next year I began my government career as a management intern, the first woman hired in that position by my agency in Chicago. Everywhere I looked I found myself the "exception." I was a token, and it angered me that women with considerable talent, with years of higher education, with high levels of motivation, were working in low-skilled and low-paying jobs because of their sex. I searched for an organization which could do something specifically to combat the problems of women in the federal service. I found Federally Employed Women, Inc., established in 1968 in Washington, DC. Within a few months we had a chapter of FEW in Chicago. I served for two years as its president, tackling the problems of job stereotyping, upward mobility, on-the-job training, child care and many more. Today my agency regularly hires women as management interns and there are many more women in high level decision-making jobs in every federal agency in Chicago.

My primary feminist interest has been employment, so I have worked in NOW as employment compliance coordinator, both for

the Chicago chapter and for the national organization. This "volunteer" job, which often required 20 or more hours a week, was directed toward assuring that the laws against sex discrimination—federal, state and local—in employment are rigorously enforced by the compliance agencies responsible, and that women everywhere know that employment discrimination because of sex is illegal and what they should do about it. We established a nation-wide network of employment counseling services, called "Women's Advocate Corps," in each of NOW's over 300 chapters, to reach women with personal "para-legal" assistance in job discrimination cases. At the same time NOW incorporated a tax-deductible arm called the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, to provide legal assistance, educational material and financial aid for feminist projects.

I believe that the new feminist movement is part of the most profound behavioral revolution this country has witnessed. We have seen many successes in the last few years, and it's been exciting to have been part of the movement which achieved them.

After four years in Chicago, first as management intern, then analyst with the federal government, I'm back in South Dakota now. After six years of working in civil rights as a volunteer, I'm now able to earn a living in this field. As executive director of the South Dakota Human Relations Commission, I administer the enforcement of a state law prohibiting discrimination because of race, color, creed, religion, national origin, ancestry or sex in employment, labor unions, housing, public accommodations, property rights, education and public services. (On the same day I started my new job my husband started his—as State Investment Officer.)

You know, our foremothers in Theta, Bettie Locke, Alice Allen, Hannah Fitch and Bettie Tipton were the feminists of their day. They were among the first women admitted to DePauw; Thetas at the University of Vermont were the first women admitted to Phi Beta Kappa; and these were accomplishments they struggled to achieve, not favors granted by enlightened men. Bettie Locke particularly thought women should be on equal footing with men. She would, no doubt, be sorry to see that over a century later we are still struggling toward that end.

P.S. Although it's impossible in a short article to discuss the full impact of feminism on one's life, I should mention that feminism is truly

a way of living. My husband Steve and I share what we call an equalitarian marriage, feeling that there is nothing uniquely male or female about the maintenance of a home and family. Landing these two challenging South Dakota jobs at the same time was a part of our constant effort to implement our philosophy. Though I'll admit that sometimes it's very difficult, when it works, it's great!

To understand feminism one must go beyond the concrete issues like employment and education into the real substance of living—relationships between men and women, attitudes, behavior, roles, image. When we begin to seriously confront these issues, then we will be approaching real "liberation" for both men and women.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION ORGANIZATIONS

Mary Lynn Myers has been active in the National Organization for Women (NOW) since 1968 and was founder of the Chicago chapter of Federally Employed Women (FEW) in 1969, has also served on the national boards of both groups. Betty Underwood (page 10) and Kate Millett (page 19) have worked in NOW; Jill Ruckelshaus (page 19) is on the policy council of the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC).

Additional major national feminist groups are: The Women's Equity Action League (WEAL) and Women United. Other organizations such as National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), Network for Economic Rights (NER) and the Interstate Association of Status of Women Commissions have also had a tremendous impact. Likewise, older women's groups are now beginning to make a significant contribution to the feminist struggle, these including Business and Professional Women (BPW), AAUW, YWCA and various other professional women's groups.— (Listing of women's action groups courtesy *International Altrusan*.)