

In Iowa: Decades later, feminist activists still fighting battles



The Emma Goldman Clinic for Women was founded by a collective of 10 women on Sept. 1, 1973, at 715 N. Dodge St., Iowa City. In 1985, the clinic moved to its current office at 227 N. Dubuque St., Iowa City. (Submitted photo)

Francie Hornstein remembers well the days before abortion was legal in Iowa.

The Oakland, Calif., resident was in Iowa City on July 14, visiting her alma mater for the Iowa City Feminist Reunion, a gathering of women activists from the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

These women founded the Emma Goldman Clinic, the Rape Victim Advocacy Project, the Domestic Violence Intervention Project and the Women's Resource and Action Center, along with many other organizations and initiatives.

They fought and worked to shape women's realities in Iowa City, in the state and in the wider world, and the impact of their struggles are evident today.

Many of them came to activism after real-world experiences. Hornstein got involved with the women's movement in Iowa City after moving into the University of Iowa dorms in 1965.

A woman on her dorm floor, who came from a strictly conservative family, became pregnant. The woman was afraid of what would happen if her family found out and didn't know what to do.

Later, feminist activists on campus would begin arranging monthly shuttle buses to a Planned Parenthood clinic in Des Moines so students could pick up birth control pills. UI Student Health would prescribe the pill only to married women, Hornstein said. On campus, most women had no access to birth control pills to prevent pregnancy and few options if they did get pregnant. Abortion was illegal in Iowa; Roe vs. Wade wouldn't be decided by the U.S. Supreme Court until 1973.

Hornstein had heard about someone in Des Moines who performed abortions illegally, risking arrest. But she also knew the dangers of such underground abortions — women often died, bleeding to death or contracting deadly infections. Hornstein worried that if she connected this woman with the Des Moines provider, the woman wouldn't survive.

“She said, ‘I can’t have this baby,’ and I had this huge crisis of conscious,” Hornstein said. “I had this information, but I was really worried she could die, that it could be horrible.”

She and friends talked with a sympathetic Student Health doctor, who told them the woman could come to her if she experienced any complications. They passed on the information, and the woman ended up having the abortion without complications.

Still, the experience weighed on Hornstein, and she decided to take action.

In 1972 she moved to Los Angeles to work in a women’s health clinic and to learn how to do abortions; she and two others intended to move back to Iowa to help women looking for the procedure.

“But we were hit with the reality that we could go to prison, and that anyone providing us space could go to prison,” she said.

Their dilemma became moot the next year when abortion became legal nationwide. Soon after that, a handful of women and a doctor traveled to Los Angeles and trained with Hornstein and others before returning to Iowa and opening the Emma Goldman Clinic in Iowa City, which was one of the first abortion providers in the state and one of only four across the country operated by women, according to media reports at the time.

Forty-four years later, Hornstein looks at what they fought for and said she can’t believe their victories are still being challenged.

Last week, for example, the American Civil Liberties Union argued in court against Iowa’s Senate File 471, which went into effect briefly earlier this summer before the state Supreme Court intervened. It requires a 72-hour waiting period, as well as an ultrasound and counseling, before a woman can obtain an abortion. And earlier this summer, four Planned Parenthood clinics in Iowa closed after Iowa’s Legislature **shifted family planning funding** away from the organization and others that perform abortions.

“It’s pretty shocking and hard to believe we could go backward,” Hornstein said. “The sexism and misogyny of the people who don’t understand what it means to women to control their own lives continues.”