



AL PAGLIONE/THE RECORD
New Directions editors Phyllis Kriegel, left, and Lynn Wenzel have seen the feminist publication go from a mimeographed first edition in January 1972, top left, to a tab edition later that year, and finally to its more sleek recent form.

IN ENGLEWOOD, A NEWSPAPER CHARTS WOMEN'S COURSE

20 years of feminist firepower

While Ms. magazine celebrates its anniversary with a special issue and appearances by famous founder Gloria Steinem, the four-person staff at New Directions for Women continues to "smell out" what's on women's minds.

By Peggy O'Crowley
Record Staff Writer

The Eighties were a tough time for feminist publications. By the end of the decade, many had gone under, and in the tiny Englewood office of New Directions for Women, editor Phyllis Kriegel and managing editor Lynn Wenzel would look at each other and ask, "How long can we keep this going? And does anybody care?"

The answer was a defiant yes: The newspaper launched a new design, introduced new columnists, even upgraded its paper stock. The new New Directions for Women hit the stands in fall 1991, just as the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas confrontation over sexual harassment sparked a renewed feminism in women that promises to reach its peak during this election season.

The timing was no coincidence, Wenzel insists. That kind of prescience is symbolic of the cutting-edge issues — equal opportunity and pay, pornography, incest, domestic violence, to name a few — the newspaper has presented since its birth on a dining room table in suburban New Jersey 20 years ago.

While its sister publication across the river, Ms. magazine, celebrates its 20th anniversary with a special issue, a slick press kit, and appearances by famous founder Gloria Steinem, the four-person staff at New Directions for Women continues to "smell out" what's on women's minds.

"It's interesting that what's hot is not when we do it. It becomes hot later on, when the mainstream media latches hold of something," says Kriegel, sitting at one of five desks crammed into a small room with bare wooden floors brightened by feminist posters — "Honk if you believe Anita!" exhorts a bumper sticker. "We did sexual harassment back in 1976. We ran a picture of Carol Moseley Braun (senatorial candidate from Illinois) before anyone knew she'd run."

Wenzel says the issues percolate upwards from 65,000 readers, in this country and abroad, who represent a range of interests, backgrounds, and ages. "Women call us and tell us, 'Did you know this is happening in our city?'" she says.

While the bimonthly newspaper continues to cover politics, it will be moving on to new areas in upcoming issues: environmental racism, women's philanthropy, updated analyses of date rape and pornography.

"Women seem to be getting their 15 minutes. They [the mainstream press] will write about women in politics for another three months and then it will disappear. We don't get into that kind of feeding frenzy," Kriegel says.

But if the editors see New Directions for Women as an alternative to the mainstream press, they also see it as a goad, a catalyst, to make the press more receptive and responsible when reporting about women. "We're an unabashedly feminist advocate and we push the mainstream press. We want to deconstruct the dailies," Kriegel says, laughing.

Much of news coverage "trivializes" feminism, she says. "The [New York] Times is our *bete noir*. For instance, they did a story on Catherine McKinnon, [a feminist legal scholar] who is a brilliant woman, but she's only one part of a massive movement and The Times made it look like she's representative of it. Major papers did stories about efforts to reinvent and reconstruct women's culture before patriarchy and it was done in a snotty, supercilious manner."

Feminists were being called "bra-burners" back in the early Seventies when Paula Kassell of Dover and a few other women decided to start a feminist newspaper that would serve women in New Jersey — the first statewide feminist publication in the United States.

"We had organized a statewide conference at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison in 1971," recalls Kassell, 74, who appears as senior editor and founder on the paper's masthead. "We had some money left — I think it was \$280 — and we decided to start a paper. Someone said, 'Here, Paula, take the money and start a feminist newspaper,'" she says, laughing.

The first edition of New Directions for Women in New Jersey, named after the conference, consisted

of 14 pages of mimeographed paper. Those who received one of the 1,000 copies read about New Jersey legislative news, a new federal child care bill, (eventually vetoed by President Richard Nixon) and some humorous stories. Subscriptions were \$3 a year (it's now \$12); there was no advertising.

The next issue was an eight-page tabloid (the first that it has today) and the editors trucked 53,000 copies to the state Education Association convention in Atlantic City. There they met with booksellers, who provided the paper's first advertising.

Publishers remain the major advertisers; from the beginning, the newspaper eschewed ads from tobacco and liquor companies. Cosmetics or fragrance companies must be environmentally sound and their products free of animal testing.

"I think we have kept to our purpose more consistently than Ms. They kind of went off the track, covering fashions and running cosmetics ads," says Kassell. "I think they did the right thing to go without advertising."

"Ms. has a different take, and I think there's room for both of us. I like to think we're more hard-hitting and investigative, because we think of ourselves as a newspaper, not a magazine," says Kriegel.

During the early years, the paper was laid out on Kassell's dining room table. "My children were no longer living here, so we used their bedrooms as offices. There were women in and out of here all day. My husband [the late Gerson Friedman] was known and loved by feminists all over New Jersey because he delivered the papers," says Kassell, a longtime feminist who wrote a column on equal employment, and in the mid-Eighties, was instrumental in convincing The New York Times to adopt the honorific Ms. "My whole persona was bound up in that newspaper; it's an accomplishment that will live beyond myself."

In 1975, New Directions for Women went national, and two years later, ill health forced Kassell

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to cede daily supervision to Vivian Scheinmann. Because many who worked on *New Directions* lived in Bergen County, the paper moved to Englewood.

While it gained in circulation, publication was strictly a labor of love — no editors were paid until 1983, and the 30 to 40 writers, photographers, and artists who contribute to its pages started receiving money in 1990. In the Eighties, with the conservatism of the Reagan and Bush administrations, and the return of the cyclical "death of feminism" stories that made headlines in the press, femi-

nist newspapers and magazines floundered. At decade's end, Ms. went through a series of owners and temporarily ceased publication. *New Directions For Women* lost 20 percent of its circulation, says Kriegel, who took over in 1983 when Scheinmann left to establish Pandora Book Peddlers, a feminist bookstore in North Haledon.

Both publications came bounding back when a series of events started to galvanize women: among them, the Supreme Court's Webster decision in 1989 that allowed states to restrict abortion rights, and the case that ended in last month's Casey decision up-

holding most of Pennsylvania's restrictive law; Anita Hill's testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee in October 1991; and the publication of journalist Susan Faludi's book "Backlash: The War Against American Women," which chronicled a societal backlash against women's gains; and Steinem's "Revolution From Within: A Book of Self Esteem," both of which made *The New York Times* bestseller list.

Subscriptions are up to 20,000 at *New Directions For Women*, and a direct-mail campaign is in the works. Setting up regional inserts and a West Coast editor are new projects. Ms. has returned

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Paula Kassell

One of *New Directions*'s founders

with an advertising-free format and a circulation that just topped 200,000.

While Wenzel and Kriegel remain skeptical of media hoopla about women, they do think something is going on. "I have friends and family members who for 20 years thought I was crazy and ob-

sessive about feminism. Now they say, 'You know, you guys were right!'" says Kriegel, 63, an Englewood resident for 40 years who is moving to Greenwich Village "to fulfill a dream I've had since I was 19."

"My father never read *New Directions* for years," says Wenzel,

48, of Maywood, like Kriegel a mother of two grown children. "The other day he called me to tell me about a speech a woman was giving at the Democratic National Convention."

True to its name, the editors said, the newspaper will reflect new directions in feminism in the Nineties and beyond. Recognizing a diversity of backgrounds, there will be more stories by and about African-American and Hispanic women. Recognizing diversity in feminist thinking, stories will treat both sides of issues like pornography. Young feminists — a new group called *The Third Wave* is forming throughout the country — will have a voice.

"I see us as being more important than ever," Kriegel says.