

A pioneer of the women's self-help movement, Downer joined Los Angeles NOW in 1969. With a reproductive history that included six children, two miscarriages, an illegal abortion and a legal abortion that required her to claim she would commit suicide without it, Downer was a natural for NOW's abortion committee. Lana Phelan, committee coordinator, became her mentor. Although hospital abortions had become legal in California, Downer and Lorraine Rothman understudied in an illegal abortion clinic, where they observed a method that Rothman simplified. The two women also created a procedure called menstrual extraction, which could be used to regulate menstruation, relieve cramps, or when a woman missed her period, not knowing whether she was pregnant. Convinced that women could not be liberated without hands-on knowledge of their bodies, Downer's group began the practice of self-examination. On April 7, 1971, they held a meeting in Venice, CA, at Every Woman's Bookstore, where Downer inserted a speculum into her vagina and invited other women to observe her cervix. Fascinated, the women agreed to meet again to do self-exams and to discuss health issues—and thus a women's medical self-help clinic was born. Downer and Rothman took off across the country spreading the self-help idea and starting clinics as they went. In 1972, Downer and Colleen Wilson were arrested for practicing medicine without a license. Downer went on trial for inserting plain yogurt into a woman's vagina. The publicity from the trial made women's selfhelp a national issue and Downer was acquitted. In 1973, Downer's group incorporated as The Feminist Women's Health Center and referred women for legal hospital abortions. Later she and her colleagues traveled to other countries giving lectures and demonstrating how self-help clinics work. Downer earned a law degree from Whittier Law School and practices civil law in Los Angeles.