

Anne Forer Pyne, a Feminist Who Opened Eyes, Dies at 72



Anne Forer Pyne in 1975. The women’s liberation movement “was never about a handful of women whose names got remembered,” she once wrote.

Credit...Helen Kritzler

By Stacy Cowley

- March 30, 2018

Anne Forer Pyne, an early feminist activist and writer whose use of the phrase “consciousness raising” helped make it a foundational principle of the women’s rights movement, died on March 21 in Tucson. She was 72.

Her death, in hospice care, was caused by kidney failure, her brother, Danny Forer, said.

Ms. Pyne, a self-described left-wing hippie, was a young kindergarten teacher in the late 1960s when she began attending meetings of [New York Radical Women](#), a small group

that met in cramped Manhattan apartments to discuss how to fight the oppression of women.

Before overturning entrenched power dynamics and cultural norms, however, they knew they first had to identify and define them. Ms. Pyne, by her account, was uncertain about what, exactly, women needed to be liberated from. So she asked.

“One night at a meeting I said: ‘Would everyone please give me an example from their own life on how they experienced oppression as a woman?’ I need to hear it to raise my own consciousness.’ ”

Ms. Pyne’s simple question, quoted by the author Susan Brownmiller in her 1999 book, “In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution,” ignited the group. As women shared their firsthand accounts of slights and injustices they had endured — at work, at home and in the bedroom — they found patterns, and solidarity.

Experiences that they assumed had been theirs alone turned out to be collective, and swapping stories became one of the foundational tools of the Second Wave feminist movement. By examining their own experiences in a largely patriarchal world, the women laid bare everyday indignities, like being forced to do [most of the housework](#), as well as cultural myths and falsehoods about female sexuality.

The discussions — building on the idea of “consciousness raising” — led to a number of important feminist texts, including Anne Koedt’s “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” (1970) and Shulamith Firestone’s “The Dialectic of Sex” (1970).

Kathie Sarachild, another member of the group, picked up on Ms. Pyne’s phrase and [popularized the concept](#) of consciousness raising as an activist tactic. Women across the country [began forming groups](#) in urban apartments and suburban living rooms to analyze the systemic challenges they faced and to offer one another support.

Alix Kates Shulman, an influential feminist writer, later wrote, “What made the discussions so powerful was the sense we had that a great floodlight had been turned onto the world, lighting up *all* our experience; it was as though all the murky and scary shadows we had been living with all our lives were suddenly wiped away.”

Almost accidentally, Ms. Pyne had inspired a breakthrough, Ms. Sarachild said in an interview: the realization that women, not male scientific authorities or political leaders, were the true experts on their own lives.

“It was a massive movement, and it came from asking questions that led to a deeper way of seeing,” Ms. Sarachild said.

Anne Forer was born in Manhattan on April 4, 1945, and raised in Queens by parents who identified as Communists, according to her brother. Their father, Leon Forer, was a schoolteacher; their mother, the former Marion Kessler, was a nurse. Politics and civil-rights activism were regular dinner-table topics, Mr. Forer said.

Ms. Pyne spent two years at Antioch College in Ohio before returning to New York, where she earned a bachelor's degree from the City College of New York. She worked briefly as a teacher before realizing that writing was her passion. When her boyfriend at the time, William Pyne, offered to support them both on the \$96 a week he earned as a Wall Street messenger, she quit teaching to focus on creative projects. The couple lived together for nearly two decades before marrying.

Under the pen name Anne Wilensky, Ms. Pyne self-published several novels and collections of vignettes based on her life and experiences in the feminist movement, which she insisted on calling the women's liberation movement.

"Liberation is a word we should not get into the habit of avoiding just because it is so powerful and maybe intimidating," she wrote in "Feminist Revolution," a 1978 anthology of essays. "Liberation is what it is all about. And every inclusion of the word liberation is a step forward in consciousness." (The essay was unsigned, but several other contributors said it was written by Ms. Pyne.)

Ms. Pyne had a gift for talking plainly about topics not often discussed, a friend, Helen Kritzler, said.

"She didn't speak from this professorial or intellectual place," Ms. Kritzler said in an interview. "She had this little girl's voice, and she would talk in a simple way, like a girl, and out of that mouth came these pronouncements that were the essence of truth."

Ms. Pyne's rhetorical daring was on display in 1969 in [a public gathering](#) of women in Greenwich Village, where she and others spoke openly about the abortions they had undergone at a time when they were illegal.

Twenty years later, at an anniversary event, Ms. Pyne [spoke of the complex emotions](#) surrounding her choice to have an abortion. She did not regret having done so, she said, because she had felt unprepared for childbirth at the time. But she also carried sadness, she said, about having never had a child. She said she hoped the women's liberation movement would help future generations of women feel less conflicted in their decisions about parenting.

The groups Ms. Pyne participated in fell apart in the early 1970s, and she drifted away from the movement. She and her husband moved to Tucson in 1991. He died in 2011. Her brother is her only immediate survivor.

In recent years Ms. Pyne was the spearhead of an updated version of the feminist forums she attended in the 1960s: an email discussion group that some early activists used to keep in touch.

The women's liberation movement "was never about a handful of women whose names got remembered," Ms. Pyne once wrote. It was sustained and shaped, she said, by "a sea of women who floated in and out of meetings, or even were just around at the time."