

Goodbye to a feminist friend

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SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 22ND, 2014 AT 12:02AM

Even well into her 60s, Merrilee Dolan refused to think of herself as old. She was “old” with quotation marks. That’s how she wrote it in one of her earliest emails to me, six years ago. “Old,” with some wear and tear to the chassis, a little snow on the roof, a little slowness in the stride. But not old otherwise.

Wise, certainly.

Funny, definitely.

And very, very outspoken.

There’s another word I’d use to describe Dolan: Feminist. Because she was certainly one of the first and best of those in Albuquerque, a pioneer of the women’s movement and affirmative action on the cusp of the 1970s, back when it was radical for a woman to wear a pantsuit to the office, back when a woman in that office was typically relegated to typing or filing or answering phones.



Merrilee Dolan, left, in 1971 with Catherine Albright, then president of the Albuquerque chapter of the National Organization for Women. Dolan was seen as an energetic, local pioneer of NOW. (Albuquerque Journal File Photo)

“I’d been seething over things I’d experienced because of my sex,” Dolan wrote of those early days when she was a young woman in her 20s. “Job discrimination, limited career choices, a date rape and pressure to get married. I’d gone to Juárez for an abortion, illegal in the United States. I’d been scolded by a Catholic doctor when I asked for birth control pills, and I’d sat through a lecture by sexist lawyer F. Lee Bailey mocking rape victims. So in 1967, I joined NOW.”

That’s the National Organization for Women, and she didn’t just join the groundbreaking, glass-ceiling-cracking group – she became a member of its national board of directors, headed the organization’s task force on women in poverty and invigorated the wobbly Albuquerque NOW chapter, convincing wary members that protesting might not be ladylike but it sure as heck was womanlike.

“Our local efforts were considered pretty radical by some milder feminists around the country,” she wrote. “We loved every minute of it.”

In 2008, I was fortunate to meet Dolan in person. I had asked her to coffee, interested to hear her perspective as a longtime feminist on politics and women’s issues – two of her most favorite subjects.

(See my column on our chat, [“Activist Has Lived Life Always Speaking Her Mind,”](#) Oct. 10, 2008)

Dolan was, as ever, ebullient and irreverent, speaking and laughing louder than anybody else in that crowded Nob Hill Starbucks, her hands adding exclamation points to her words, as if they needed any, her smile wide and radiating.

She would have taken great glee in eviscerating this year’s Time magazine word banishment poll, which ran Nov. 12. Among annoying nominees like “yaaasssss” and “obvi” was “feminist,” an inclusion that enraged many who believed the magazine was being dismissive of the feminist movement and the work women such as Dolan did in the fight for equality.

Alas, I couldn’t ask Dolan. She died earlier this month at age 73.

Longtime friend and fellow NOW member Jennifer White found her, passed away with a peaceful look, sitting in a living room chair Nov. 5 in the Ridgecrest home she shared with her beloved cats.

She had been in relatively good health, White said, save for the arthritis in her back and ankles that had forced her to give up flamenco dancing. A recent scare over a thyroid issue seemed to be under control with medication.

White said she knew something was wrong when Dolan hadn’t returned her calls Nov. 4, the night of the midterm elections.

“I knew she’d want to bitch and moan about the results,” White said. “It wasn’t like her to stay quiet.”



Dolan loved flamenco dancing until arthritis in her back and ankles forced her to hang up her dancing shoes. She died Nov. 5 at age 73. (Albuquerque Journal File Photo)
It was never like her to stay quiet.

Dolan, White said, had no family in Albuquerque. So last week three of her friends – White, Mary Chao and Diane Tipton – gathered over tea and cookies to write an obituary to run in the Journal and to remember their outspoken friend.

“We reminisced,” White said. “It was a lot of laughter, a lot of ‘Oh, God, do you remember when blah blah,’ a few tears because your friend is gone.”

Some people live out loud. Dolan lived on full volume.

Besides her work with NOW, Dolan served as an investigator and project director with the New Mexico Human Rights Commission and as an investigator with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

She fought for affirmative action, abortion rights, the Equal Rights Amendment and the freeing of Wen Ho Lee, a fired Los Alamos National Laboratory scientist who was jailed for nine months in a classified information case but later won an apology from a federal judge over his treatment by the government.

She fought against poverty, police brutality and a violent “art” movie that portrayed a woman being raped and killed.

She wrote, illustrated and published “Favorite Flowers of the Cumbres and Toltec: A Railroad Sketchbook.” She loved rescuing cats, international culture and dancing up a storm, flamenco style.

“Beyond all that, she was just really a fun person with a good sense of humor, but also she was compassionate and loved all kinds of people,” White said. “And cats.”

I didn’t know Dolan as well as her friends did, but it seemed to me that she never lost her boldness and her truth and she always spoke her mind.

That never gets old.