



CLEMENT BRITT/TIMES-DISPATCH

**Zelda K. Nordlinger, a founding member of the Richmond chapter of the National Organization for Women, talked in a 2006 interview about her role in the women's movement.**

# Zelda K. Nordlinger, feminist activist, dies

## Richmonder inspired by 1960s book fought for women's, abortion rights

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Times-Dispatch Staff Writers

Zelda Kingoff Nordlinger, one of Richmond's most long-serving and ardent feminist voices, died Tuesday of complications from cancer. She was 76.

In her last days, her family said, she cast a primary vote for Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton. She also sought her daughters' help in compiling a list of notable women who influenced her.

"She was fighting right up to the end," said a daughter, Joanne Nordlinger. "She died surrounded by family, confident of her love and knowing that family was the number one priority in her life."

Ms. Nordlinger was a schoolteacher and mother of four when she read "The Feminine Mystique" by Betty Friedan. The book, published in 1963 and credited with helping to launch the women's movement in the United States, changed her life.

"I felt like she put her finger on the reason why I was so frustrated and angry," Ms. Nordlinger said in a 1998 Richmond Times-Dispatch interview. Steered away in her youth from a fascination with the sciences, she received an early education at a Washington finishing school that

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**Women's-rights activist Zeldia K. Nordlinger is shown at her desk in 1974, the year she received the Richmond Women's Equality Award. In the early 1970s, she regularly spoke to social, civic and business groups.**

## Activist

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served to camouflage her heart.

"She knew etiquette and she knew Richmond and she knew how to use her voice," said Joanne Nordlinger, who recalled her mother's late-night composition on her typewriter of combative editorials and her hot breakfasts and packed lunches for her family the next morning.

In 1968, Ms. Nordlinger posted a meeting notice at the Richmond YWCA to see whether other women felt as she did about women's rights. A handful of women responded to her flier. They formed Women's Rights of Richmond, which later became the Richmond chapter of the National Organization for Women.

Ms. Nordlinger served as state NOW coordinator during the early to mid-1970s.

She recalled that NOW members attracted controversy and were perceived as curiosities from the beginning.

"Most of the clubs and organizations treated us like a circus side-show," she said. "They thought we were freaks."

One of the group's early successes was a quiet sit-in in 1970 that integrated the all-male soup bar at Thalhimers department store, one of city's last public sanctuaries for men.

The group fought the Richmond

Times-Dispatch's practice of separating employment ads into women's jobs and men's jobs. The newspaper eventually desegregated the ads but remained a target of Ms. Nordlinger's wrath, her family said.

Ms. Nordlinger and her colleagues successfully lobbied the General Assembly to make rape trials less intimidating for victims, to establish a task force to sit through rape trials with victims and to establish a hotline for rape victims.

Brought up in an era where abortions were illegal in Virginia except when the mother's life was at risk, she had fought for abortion rights, which she believed were closely tied to women's rights.

"I was very active in what we called the Underground," she said. It was a loose-knit group determined to help women get abortions by finding a way for them to travel to Washington, where the procedure was legal. "We were so afraid we would be arrested, but we helped a lot of people."

Ms. Nordlinger's zeal about that issue was forged one night when she was called to an area hospital where a young woman lay bleeding to death from a self-induced abortion.

"I looked into her eyes and she said to me, 'Please, don't let my parents know,'" Ms. Nordlinger recalled. "Then she died. She was 15. What keeps me going is remembering that girl."

She said that the morning in 1973 when she learned the U.S. Supreme Court had legalized abortion through the Roe v. Wade case was "one of the

brightest moments of my life."

An inveterate note-taker and reader of newspapers, Ms. Nordlinger compiled some 700 spiral notebooks of quotations, excerpts and thoughts. Lying on her death bed, with her daughters at her side, she made up a list of feminists and women who had influenced her.

"We got to 75," said daughter Sharon "Romy" Nordlinger. "She taught us to never be afraid of speaking out, not just for women's rights but for freedom of speech."

Among the letters she wrote on her word processor was one last year referring to Richmond as still a "city of socially sealed-off enclaves."

"So, do we truly want to revitalize our downtown? I think not," she concluded in the letter published April 5, 2007, in the weekly newspaper Brick.

Ms. Nordlinger, a Greenville, S.C., native, moved to Richmond with her family in 1947 and graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School in 1950. She graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1995.

She was the widow of Martin Stanford Nordlinger.

In addition to Joanne Nordlinger and Sharon Nordlinger, survivors include another daughter, Debra Margaret Markel of Powhatan; a son, Samuel Andrew Markel II of Richmond; and seven grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held Saturday at 11 a.m. at First Unitarian Universalist Church, 1000 Blanton Ave.