

# CATHERINE S. EAST DIES AT 80

By **Richard Pearson**

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Catherine S. East, 80, a retired federal worker who long had been active in women's movements and who was instrumental in the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW), died of congestive heart failure Aug. 17 at a life-care community facility in Ithaca, N.Y.

Ms. East, a former Arlington resident, had lived in Ithaca since January. She moved to the Washington area in 1939 and worked for the Civil Service Commission from then until 1963. She rose from clerk to chief of the career services division and, finally, was executive secretary of the federal employment committee of the President's Commission on the Status of Women.

From 1963 to 1975, she worked for the Labor Department as executive secretary of the interdepartmental committee on the status of women. From 1975 to 1977, she served as plans and policies coordinator for the secretariat for the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year and contributed chapters to its report.

She held senior staff posts with every presidential advisory commission on women from 1962 to 1977. Since about 1980, she had lectured and done consulting work.

During the 1980 presidential campaign, she was women's issues coordinator for independent candidate John B. Anderson (Ill.). She also had served as vice chairwoman of the Virginia Women's Political Caucus and on the board of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund. She was a member of First Unitarian Church of Arlington.

In 1966, Ms. East was largely responsible for persuading writer Betty Friedan to found NOW. After Ms. East persuaded Friedan to take the lead in the movement, they recruited others and set a Washington organizing date for October 1966. Ms. East was not permitted to attend NOW's first two meetings -- her supervisors at the Labor Department did not approve of the organization.

Ms. East did not officially join a "women's organization" until 1971, when legendary feminist Alice Paul sent her a membership card for the National Women's Party.

If Ms. East did not become a household name, it was because she preferred working in the background. A Washington Post reporter in 1983 characterized her as "an example of the anonymous government staffer who compiles statistics, analyzes legislative needs and prepares the agenda for public spokesmen."

She told the reporter that she simply "liked doing the research, writing the papers and having influence on what was done." She added, "I never wanted publicity."

Friedan has been quoted as saying Ms. East was the "valiant, incorruptible woman who cajoled me into the act of starting NOW" and was the "midwife to the birth of the women's movement."

In the 1960s, Ms. East helped organize three national conferences for the state commissions on the status of women. Over the years, she spoke and demonstrated for the Equal Rights Amendment before several state legislatures. She also lectured in Australia, New Zealand and Britain, where she testified before a House of Lords committee on employment and education discrimination issues.

In 1994, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, N.Y. Other organizations that honored her included the National Women's Political Caucus, Women's Equity Action League and Virginia NOW.

Ms. East was a history graduate of Marshall University in her native West Virginia and attended George Washington University law school.

Her marriage to Charles East ended in divorce.

Survivors include two daughters, M. Victoria East of Seattle and Elizabeth R. East of Ithaca; a brother, Charles D. Shipe of Great Falls; and a granddaughter.