

Older Women's Advocate Dies at 71 : Tish Sommers Was Co-Founder of 15,000-Member Group

BY LYNN SMITH
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Tish Sommers, president and co-founder of the national Older Women's League, died Friday at her Oakland home. She was 71 and had been battling cancer for six years.

Considered one of the foremost women's activists of the last 20 years, Ms. Sommers was strongly committed to older women's rights and their economic security.

Rep. Pat Schroeder (D-Colo.), co-chair of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, in a statement after Ms. Sommers' death, said:

"She was tireless in her efforts, and her impact on legislation was significant."

At her death, Ms. Sommers had seen the league, which she created four years ago with her friend and associate Laurie Shields, grow from a grass-roots movement for older women's rights to a Washington-based organization with 15,000 members and 102 chapters nationwide. Using her slogan, "Don't Agonize--Organize," she helped create federal legislation setting up a network of job training and counseling centers for "displaced homemakers"--career housewives whose lives collapsed in middle-age with divorce or the death of a husband.

Ms. Sommers, divorced and the mother of a son, William, who survives her, believed her most significant accomplishment was turning such women into advocates in their own behalf, she said in a Times interview last year.

League projects aimed to end inequities for older women at work, in pension plans, Social Security, insurance policies and federal budget cuts.

“From my standpoint as a younger ‘older woman,’ she offered a role model of aging that is unsurpassed,” Linden Berry, 41, a league staff member, said. “She taught me and thousands of younger women not to fear aging, but to use the experience of age to help ourselves and others.”

Visitor to Nazi Germany

Born in Cambria and raised in Los Angeles, Ms. Sommers was a dancer who became a career activist after a 1933 visit to Germany revealed to her the “degradation” of the Jewish people under the Nazi regime. She volunteered for social and civil rights causes in the 1950s in the South. In the ‘60s, she turned to feminism and wrote “The Not So Helpless Female,” a manual, she said, “for wave makers.”

She was a National Organization of Women board member and spearheaded such programs as the Jobs for Older Women Action Project.

Ms. Sommers was appointed by former Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr. to the California Commission on Aging. Former President Jimmy Carter appointed her to the National Advisory Committee for the White House Conference on Aging in 1981.

League Legacy

The league kept her alive the past few years, she wrote, because “I wanted the work I had done on older women’s issues to continue after I was gone.” Berry said Ms. Sommers had bequeathed \$500,000 from an inheritance to a league endowment.

Her illness also inspired many to face their own deaths openly and honestly, said Fernando Torres-Gil, staff director of the House Select Committee on Aging. One of her last projects was a league mailer on planning ahead for death and dying. In it, she wrote, “Death, I am learning through my own experience, need not be frightening. After all, we are all born terminal cases, because we will all die, one time or another.”

In lieu of flowers, donations may be sent to the Tish Sommers Endowment Fund, 3800 Harrison St., Oakland, 94611.