

Karen DeCrow Dies at 76; Feminist Lawyer and Author Led NOW



Karen DeCrow in 1977 at the National Organization for Women's 10th annual conference. Her causes were national but also local. Credit...United Press International

By [William Yardley](#), June 6, 2014

Karen DeCrow, who was president of the National Organization for Women during the 1970s, a turbulent period in which she helped lead campaigns for

passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and against sex discrimination in education and sports, died on Friday at her home in Jamesville, N.Y., a suburb of Syracuse. She was 76.

The cause was melanoma, said her longtime friend Rowena Malamud, who is president of the Greater Syracuse chapter of NOW. Ms. DeCrow was the group's current vice president.

Ms. DeCrow was a writer, a lawyer and a tireless campaigner for women's rights. Her causes were national but also local. In the early 1970s, she represented a 7-year-old girl who wanted to play Little League baseball but was being denied.

"Over my dead body will girls ever play Little League baseball," a coach told her at the time. "If one of them ever struck out a boy, he would be psychologically scarred for life."

The girl played, but Ms. DeCrow was not done with sports. As president of NOW from 1974 to 1977, she fought off pressure from the National Collegiate Athletic Association to limit the reach of Title IX, the federal law passed in 1972 that bans sex discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal money. The law, which was strengthened in 1975 to ensure equal access to sports, has been widely credited with revolutionizing women's athletics.

"I just hope all that playing and practicing won't keep women out of the library, studying, learning, getting ready to take advantage of Title VII, the really

important federal law, the one that prohibits job discrimination,” Ms. DeCrow told The New York Times in 1997.

Not all of her campaigns were successful. The Equal Rights Amendment, which would make discrimination against women unconstitutional, has yet to pass, but not for lack of effort by Ms. DeCrow. During the 1970s and ’80s, she crisscrossed the United States in support of it and had scores of debates with Phyllis Schlafly, one of its most prominent opponents.

Ms. DeCrow was born Karen Lipschultz on Dec. 18, 1937, in Chicago, the oldest of two daughters of a businessman and a former ballet dancer who stopped working outside the home after she married. Ms. DeCrow attended Chicago public schools. As a teenager, she sent short stories to top magazines, hoping to be published. She graduated from Northwestern University in 1959 with a degree in journalism.

She struggled to find appealing work after college, finally accepting a job as fashion editor at Golf Digest, though she had little interest in fashion or golf. She went on to work for other magazines and for publishing houses.

In 1967, after a brief first marriage, she was living in Syracuse with her second husband, Roger DeCrow, a computer scientist, and working in a small publishing house when she and some of her female colleagues realized that they were being paid less than their male counterparts. She decided to join the

nascent group NOW and then formed a chapter in Syracuse and became president of it.

“I wasn’t a feminist,” she told The Times in 1975. “I just wanted more money.”

By 1968, she was serving on the board of the national group.

As president she served without pay, the last NOW president to do so. “I joined NOW on an issue of pay,” she said. “Of course, now I don’t get any pay at all.”

Ms. DeCrow ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Syracuse in 1969 while attending the Syracuse University School of Law in her early 30s. She graduated in 1972, the only woman in her class, she told interviewers.

In 1988 Ms. DeCrow was a co-founder of World Women Watch, dedicated to combating sex discrimination worldwide. In 2009 she was inducted into the [National Women’s Hall of Fame](#).

Both of her marriages ended in divorce. She is survived by a sister, Claudia Lipschultz.

For several years, Ms. DeCrow wrote for The Syracuse Post-Standard and its website. She published several books, including two in the early 1970s, “The Young Woman’s Guide to Liberation” and “Sexist Justice — How Legal Sexism Affects You.”

In 2008, she told The Syracuse Post-Standard that she was cautiously pleased with the progress women had made.

“I am lucky enough to have been involved in a movement that really moved,”
she said. “But then, are we done? No, we’re not done.”