

Risking a Career to Transform a Workplace

By **Judy Mann** May 5, 1999

The trouble, as so often happens, began with a small event: a conversation in the cafeteria at WRC's television station one day in 1970.

Mary Catherine Kilday and Alison Owings barely knew each other. Kilday was in sales, Owings was an associate producer. Kilday was perfectly groomed, Owings was given to India chic.

Kilday mentioned that the 50th anniversary of women's suffrage was coming up and that it would be good to look at how women were faring at WRC. Owings agreed. It was a moment that ultimately would revolutionize broadcasting.

Women at WRC had good reason to be concerned. Management had recognized National Secretary's Day that spring by sending pink roses to all the women employed at the station. Many of the professional women refused theirs.

Kilday was thinking of a companywide meeting or a survey. "We had such ladylike ways," recalls Owings. "We were good girls, and they didn't understand we just wanted job opportunities. We had relatively good jobs. We were fighting for women who didn't." Women began organizing around the issue of sex discrimination, which showed up in the high numbers of women in lower-paying jobs and in a lack of opportunities for promotion for women throughout the company.

Kilday, a person of great personal magnetism, became the leader of an effort that included more than half of the women employed at WRC. They met with management and found hostile stonewalling. "The situation kept getting more and more inflamed," says Owings. "What they never understood is we would have settled for common courtesy and decency and fairness, and they seemed to think we wanted everything."

At one point, management promoted the late Cassie Mackin, then a local reporter, to the network. "Cassie was infuriated," says Owings. "She said, 'They are using me.'" The women hired Gladys Kessler to represent them, and they filed formal complaints of race and sex discrimination with the Federal Communications Commission, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission and the Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance. Mackin, with network stardom in her grasp, signed the complaints.

It was the first time that charges were filed with all three agencies against a broadcasting facility and the first time the Office of Federal Contract Compliance had been involved: WRC was then owned by RCA, a government contractor. The complaints were filed March 2, 1971, and members of the National Organization for Women promptly alerted the media. "I was trembling," recalls Owings. "We knew we had done something nice girls don't do, but we felt it had to be done. The station was aghast. They felt betrayed, and we wanted to say, 'Well, you wouldn't listen to us.' Throughout all of this, Mary Catherine was really our solid leader." She provided most of the financial support for the legal actions.

Around this time, NOW mounted challenges to the license renewals of WRC and WABC in New York, using the women's complaints as evidence of sex discrimination. The stations secured delays and started hiring enough women to change their statistics. The FCC refused to hear the challenges to the licenses, but by then, the women had won the war. Women were on air, and they started to have important roles throughout the company. On Jan. 30, 1973, the EEOC upheld charges that WRC practiced race and sex discrimination in employment.

It was the first time the EEOC had upheld such charges against a major radio and television broadcaster. Kessler, now a federal district judge, says Kilday was "the earliest to have the fullest understanding of how women were kept out of significant positions. She understood politically that it was essential she organize women there and that filing simply for herself wouldn't do what she wanted. She was a very wise woman, and she understood early on that this was going to be a long battle with very substantial institutional and national interests, and she herself wasn't going to be around to benefit from anything accomplished.

"In hindsight, I see more clearly how correct she was about the link between hiring and programming. You now see programs on family and children's issues you would not have seen 20 or 30 years ago. That's because you have women employed throughout the hierarchy of television."

Women were scared of losing their jobs, their influence and promotions, which Kessler says turned out to be realistic. "Once you became known as a feminist at the station . . . you did not have the same opportunities to advance as you did before. There was a real price to be paid by the women who had the courage to put their names to those charges. . . .

"Mary Catherine was a person of enormous grit," says Kessler, who became her lifelong friend. "Even though she clearly saw discrimination all around her, that never affected her verve for life. . . . That was part of what attracted people to her."

Kilday decided to become a lawyer and went to Georgetown University Law School at night while working full time as a producer for WRC. In the midst of this, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy. She went on to become a lawyer at the FCC, ending her career in its Bureau of Enforcement. She battled recurrences of cancer for 27 years, until she died Feb. 24. "She was just one of the strongest people I knew," says Kessler.

"She was my hero," says Owings, now a writer in California. "She was a pretty good friend to people, besides being very brave." Kilday was married for 28 years to George W. Malzone.

Kilday was one of a handful of women who risked their careers to make the media look more like America. These women knew they were sacrificing their futures by sticking out their necks. They did it for the women who would come behind them, and who probably do not even know their names.