

# ***Overlooked No More: Dolores Alexander, Feminist Journalist and Activist***

She was a reporter, executive director of the National Organization for Women and owner of the restaurant Mother Courage, which became a hub for women.



Dolores Alexander in an undated photo. She was, a colleague said, “a stalwart in the women’s movement from the beginning of the second wave.”Credit...via Jill Ward

By [Nina Siegal](#)

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*This article is part of Overlooked, a series of obituaries about remarkable people whose deaths, beginning in 1851, went unreported in The Times.*

Dolores Alexander had a few distinct careers throughout her life.

She worked for The New York Times, Newsday and Time magazine. She was executive director of the National Organization for Women, working alongside its president and co-founder, [Betty Friedan](#). And she was a founder of the organization Women Against Pornography.

But she was perhaps best known for opening one of the first feminist restaurants in the United States, Mother Courage, with Jill Ward, her girlfriend at the time. The restaurant, in Manhattan’s meatpacking district, became a hub in the 1970s for women’s liberation groups who would gather in its dining room after feminist protest marches and legislative victories — or even, on an average day, just to have a meal.

“It was important at a time when women, feminists, were being attacked, that we had a place where we could get together,” Lucy Komisar, a freelance journalist, said in an interview. “Guys would go to a pub or a men’s club and hang out, but women didn’t have anything like that. This was a women’s club. It was important because it was our place.”

What linked all of Alexander’s efforts was her devotion to promoting women’s rights and feminism.

“She was a stalwart in the women’s movement from the beginning of the second wave,” Ward said in an interview. “It meant so much to her that she just geared her life toward that, doing as much as she could, whatever it was.”

Dolores DeCarlo was born on Aug. 10, 1931, in Newark, to Dominick and Sally (Koraleski) DeCarlo. Her parents both came from immigrant families, her mother’s from Poland and her father’s from Italy.

Dolores, along with her brother, Richard, her parents and some of her other relatives, lived with her paternal grandparents in a two-story wood frame house in a depressed working-class neighborhood. “It was a very crowded house,” Alexander said in an interview conducted in 2004 and 2005 with the Sophia Smith Oral History Archive at Smith College. “But I remember Sunday mornings because that was when Mary” — her grandmother — “would make the spaghetti. There was an enamel table, and she’d roll out the dough.”

Both her parents worked at Koppers Coke, a plant in Kearny, N.J., that produced fuel to heat homes. Her mother later worked for a paper cup manufacturing plant.

Dolores attended Roman Catholic schools in New Jersey and continued living at home after high school, working as an office clerk with the Equitable insurance company.

She described her father as “authoritarian” and highly traditional. “He really wanted me to stay at home, have kids and live next door,” she said.

Image



Alexander in 1981 at a news conference held by the group Women Against Pornography, of which she was a founder and national coordinator. Credit...Neal Boezni/The New York Times

But she had a different plan for herself, and she yearned to go to college. She saved enough money for tuition and enrolled at New York University. There she met Aaron Alexander, who worked in public relations and was studying for his master’s degree to become a teacher. He encouraged Dolores to switch to the City College of New York, which was more affordable. They married in 1950 (her father, upset when he found out that Aaron was Jewish, refused to pay for the wedding) and later moved to an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan; they divorced after about five years.

In her senior year, Dolores Alexander became a reporting intern for The New York Times. She asked to join the staff as what was then called a “copy boy,” but, she later recalled, she was told by the city editor that “it would cause a revolution in the newsroom if he hired a girl for the job.” In 1961, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in language and literature and was hired as a reporter at The Newark Evening News. But she found that women writers there weren’t given much support.

“Often the assignments that we got were female-type assignments, to cover parades or, you know, feature-type stuff,” she said.

Three years later, she moved to Newsday, on Long Island, where she was one of three women on staff working as reporters. At first, she said, she was “assigned a lot of stuff like covering local meetings and things like that. It was boring, and I hated it.”

“She asked to be transferred to the Style section, where she got to write profiles, which she loved.

In 1966, Alexander came across a news release announcing the establishment of NOW. She called Friedan, author of the landmark feminist book “The Feminine Mystique,” and joined the small, mostly volunteer team, leaving Newsday in 1969 to become the group’s first executive director.

Tensions between her and Friedan were often high because, by Alexander’s account, Friedan was domineering. One subject about which they disagreed was the visibility of lesbians; feminist organizations were often dismissed based on a stigmatization of lesbianism — “People would say, ‘You’re a dyke. You’re a lesbian. They’re all lesbians,’” Ward said — and Friedan and others tried to distance NOW from that image.

“It was OK with her if women were lesbians,” Alexander said. “She just didn’t want them to talk about it.” Friedan, she said, “felt that this would hurt the women’s movement. And there was some validity to that.”

Alexander was fired from NOW in 1970, as part of what she described as “a lesbian purge” that took place when Friedan felt she was being backed into a corner. “Somehow I became her scapegoat,” she said. “I suddenly became a lesbian who was working with other lesbians in a conspiracy to take over NOW” — although “I was not a lesbian, and there was no such conspiracy.”

Muriel Fox, one of the founders of NOW, and former national chair of the organization, refuted Alexander’s claims.

“She was fired,” she said in an interview, “strictly because the president, Betty Friedan, could not get along with her executive director.”

In her oral history, Alexander said she started “sexually experimenting” in 1968 and fell in love with Ward in 1970. One night that summer, while the couple were living in

Bridgehampton, N.Y., Ward was driving home on the Long Island Expressway at 4 a.m. and couldn't find a place to eat.

"I was really hungry," Ward said. "I thought, could I go for a bowl of spaghetti and meatballs." When she finally arrived home, she said: "I told Dolores, 'I have a great idea for a business: Let's open a feminist restaurant.'"

They rented what Alexander called a "filthy, dirty" ramshackle diner and gut-renovated it. They called it Mother Courage, in honor of the female protagonist of Bertolt Brecht's play of the same name, and opened the doors in May 1972. The menu was basic, with dishes like Greek salad, veal parmigiana and, as envisioned, spaghetti and meatballs.

The food was not the key to the restaurant's success, however; it was the women it drew.

Patrons included the authors [Audre Lorde](#) and [Kate Millett](#), the cultural critic [Jill Johnston](#), the singer-songwriter Maxine Feldman, the psychotherapist Phyllis Chesler and the author and activist Susan Brownmiller. The NBC News anchor Linda Ellerbee would also stop by, simply to dine after work, knowing it was a safe place where she wouldn't get hassled, Ward said.

Alexander became the public face of the restaurant. "She treated it as a salon," Ward said. "I was more nuts and bolts, making sure that the dinner orders were getting out. She would be more like a host, sitting down to schmooze with people."

But after five years, Alexander started to "ease her way of the restaurant" by taking a job at Time magazine, Ward said, adding that she too "was getting burned out," and that "we both started thinking, 'how many years can we do this?'"

Mother Courage closed in 1977, and Alexander and Ward ended their relationship.

In the 1980s, Alexander became one of the founders of, and national coordinators for, the organization Women Against Pornography, working with Brownmiller and Dorchen Leidholdt. She traveled the United States, going to college campuses with Linda Lovelace and Harry Reems, who played the lead roles in the 1972 film "Deep Throat," and who had heated debates onstage about the impact of pornography on women and society. When Lovelace released "Ordeal" (1980), her memoir about the behind-the-scenes abuse that took place during the making of that film, Alexander provided support, as did Gloria Steinem.

Alexander died on May 13, 2008, in Palm Harbor, Fla., of pulmonary obstruction and congenital heart disease. She was 76. Her [papers](#) from her time at NOW are held at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University, and her other [correspondence, writings](#) and documents are held at Smith College.