

Activist Clara Fraser Dead At 74-- 'Life Spent Contemplating Your Own Navel . . . Helps No One.'

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Seattle Times Staff Reporter

In being fired in 1975 for speaking out against sex-and-ideology discrimination at Seattle City Light, then being rehired seven years later, Clara Goodman Fraser improved life for many of the city's working women, poor people and minorities.

Her headline-grabbing actions of the mid-1970s and early 1980s made Clara Fraser a familiar name. From then on her work in Seattle's Radical Women and Freedom Socialist Party, both of which she helped found, became high-profile.

So did Ms. Fraser herself, a dramatic, husky-voiced former laborer who loved chocolates, cigarettes and mystery novels.

But for more than a quarter-century before, she had agitated for women, people of color, union workers, gays and prisoners.

Divorced herself, she helped write the state's first divorce-reform bill and organized the state's first abortion-rights rally.

She also campaigned for university-funded child care at the University of Washington and worked to get women into electrical and engineering careers.

Ms. Fraser died of emphysema Tuesday at her home in Seattle's Mount Baker neighborhood. She was 74.

"In the City Light walkout, I was the clerk in the personnel office," said Marilyn Dircher Patton.

"Clara was very active getting people into jobs they hadn't had before. That was her real work for the people of the city. . . . She brought other females into jobs that had never been held by females."

While many praised her, others saw Ms. Fraser in a different light.

"She was an obstacle rather than an asset," said the late Gordon Vickery in a 1996 interview. He was the superintendent at Seattle City Light when Ms. Fraser led an 11-day wildcat walkout in 1974 just a year after she joined the utility.

Ms. Fraser was fired from her position as educational coordinator in 1975 as part of what Vickery called a budget reduction. But she successfully sued, saying she was a victim of sexual and political discrimination.

Ms. Fraser knew the challenges to women and working-class people first-hand: She had been a waitress, sales clerk, bus cleaner, camp counselor, electrician, cab driver, typographical worker, secretary and education coordinator.

She was born and reared in East Los Angeles in a Jewish immigrant family. Her Russian mother was a garment worker and business agent for a union. Her Latvian father was an avowed anarchist and a staunch member of the Teamsters.

"Clara taught and trained me on how to think and how to question both my own beliefs and what was going on in the world, and how to look at three or four sides of things, rather than as they are presented in the media in black or white," said Anne Slater, an organizer of Seattle Radical Women.

Ms. Fraser earned a bachelor's degree from UCLA in 1944, worked as a screenwriter, then joined the Socialist Workers Party. In Chicago she took part in a union-organizing drive at a department store where she wrote advertising copy. In 1946 she moved to Seattle.

She worked on a Boeing assembly line and campaigned for more union involvement and better jobs for women and minorities.

In 1965 she helped lead the Seattle branch of the Socialist Workers Party in a split from the national organization, and formed the Freedom Socialist Party. With Gloria Martin and others, she founded Radical Women in 1967.

For two decades she also wrote a column in the Freedom Socialist newsletter; the columns and speeches are collected in her soon-to-be-published book, "Revolution, She Wrote."

She told The Seattle Times in 1988 that her responsibility was to teach young activists not to sell out on their ideals.

"Life spent contemplating your own navel is socially fatal," she said. "It helps no one."

"Clara left a legacy to keep carrying on," said Slater. "You know that saying: 'Don't mourn. Organize.' "

Survivors include sons Marc Krasnowsky of Lincoln, Neb., and Jon Fraser of Arlington, Mass.; her sister, Flory Adler of Long Beach, Calif.; and two grandchildren.

Remembrances may go to Red Letter Press for the Clara Fraser Memorial Publications Fund, Bush Asia Building, 409 Maynard Ave. S., No. 201, Seattle WA 98104.