

RUTH SURGAL, 66

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Ruth Surgal could have stayed safe.

Instead, amid the social turmoil of the 1960s, the Chicago social worker, wife and mother risked joining an underground network that gave pregnant women the option of having a safe abortion.

Because the procedure was illegal in Illinois at the time, network members took precautions against being caught. They used coded words, and they performed abortions in motel rooms.

The network came informally to be known as "Jane." It was a cover used for members to identify themselves to potential patients over the telephone without being detected.

By the time the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark 1973 decision in Roe vs. Wade legalized abortion nationwide, the Abortion Counseling Service within the Chicago Women's Liberation Union--as the network formally was called--had facilitated or performed as many as 11,000 abortions, according to the union.

"She was willing to take risks to her own life and her own comfort," said Heather Booth, founder of the Abortion Counseling Service, which Mrs. Surgal began co-directing in 1969. "She took risks and acted with extraordinary courage and caring."

Mrs. Surgal, 66, a social service worker turned potter, and a leader among feminists, died Sunday, Aug. 29, of a cerebral aneurysm in her Hyde Park home, said her daughter Jennifer.

Mrs. Surgal was born in Chicago. She received a bachelor's degree in social studies from the University of Chicago in 1960 and got a master's degree from the university's School of Social Service Administration in 1962.

From the early '60s to the late '70s, Mrs. Surgal worked for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, taking care of children and elderly people. But she was disillusioned with the agency's bureaucracy and turned her attention to being a potter in the late '70s, her daughter said.

She never had applied herself to art, yet she became good enough at pottery to teach ceramics at the Lill Street Studio. She retired as a potter several years ago, when arthritis afflicted her, her daughter said.

Mrs. Surgal was introduced in the late '60s to the Abortion Counseling Service through her work with the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. Her daughter described the decision to join the counseling service as an "organic outgrowth" of her previous work.

"For her, it came from the belief that women should have the right to choose," her daughter said. "She felt very strongly that women should not be afraid of their bodies and that they should have control over them."

Booth started the network in 1965, after helping a friend get an abortion by referring her to a doctor she knew. By 1969, when Mrs. Surgal took over, the doctor had died and there were few doctors qualified to perform abortions, Booth said.

The women in the network decided that they should train themselves as best as they could to perform the procedure safely. Nevertheless, as she wrote in a memoir of that period in her life, she decided to be the "Big Jane" who would schedule abortions, arrange locations and assign abortion counselors, because she lacked confidence to do the procedure herself.

Other survivors include her husband, Joel; another daughter, Rebecca; a son, Joshua; her sister, Benita Greenfield; and a grandchild.

A service will be held at 10:30 a.m. Sunday in KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation, 5039 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago.