

FEMINIST ICON



BILL
HANDLEMAN



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ASBURY PARK

At City Hall the other day, they held a hearing in honor of Lucinda Cisler. Around a long table in a large conference room, a dozen serious-looking people gathered to discuss what to do about Ms. Cisler, who sat next to her public-interest counsel and took great exception to many of the things that were being said.

There were occasional outbursts, and signs of exasperation from both sides.

On the surface, safety issues clashed with privacy issues.

Ms. Cisler lives on the 10th floor of the Phillips Seaview Tower, on First Avenue, a block from the boardwalk. Her tiny studio apartment is undeniably cluttered. Books are stacked up to the ceiling. There isn't much room to maneuver under everyday circumstances, much less emergency circumstances.

City officials, understandably skittish after the fire at Munroe Towers in August, see a potential hazard here. And Ms. Cisler smokes, they point out.

Meanwhile, Ms. Cisler insists she was not properly notified of their concerns. She also says she has been moving more and more of her belongings to a storage site in downtown Asbury Park, a place called Treasure Island.

Happily, the hearing ended peacefully. Restraint and dignity prevailed. The city officials present seemed to grasp

Lucinda Cisler of Asbury Park, seen here at the city's public library, worked as an architect but made a name for herself through her "fringe" writings on abortion decades ago. (PHOTO: MIKE McLAUGHLIN, SPECIAL TO THE PRESS)

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the problem. It was agreed that they would try to work something out. They would meet again on Dec. 10. No one wanted to put this 70-year-old woman out on the street.

But beneath the surface, under the harsh fluorescent light in the conference room, it was clear that two wildly different worlds had collided.

Homemaker of tomorrow

Cindy Cisler was born into a complicated life.

Her parents met at the University of Arkansas before the Depression.

Her mother was born in Oklahoma, still Indian Territory in 1905. She and her 10 brothers and sisters were all born in the same bed. Her ancestors came over on the Mayflower. One of them, "a strong young man called John Howland," fell overboard during a terrible storm but survived, according to a historical account. Her mother had great uncles who fought in the Civil War.

Her father was a pioneer in the early days of radio. In the 1920s he worked at WLS, a 50,000-watt station once known for the National Barn Dance, the program that made Gene Autry famous.

"The WLS National Barn Dance started in 1928 when announcer Steve Cisler . . . (was) broadcasting from the Sherman Hotel in Chicago," Autry said in an interview before he died. "The

first shows consisted of a bunch of guys with fiddles. They put practically anybody on the air."

Cisler went on to own several smaller stations all over the country. At one point he worked at a station in Dubuque, Iowa, with a sportscaster named Ronald Reagan. In 1945, he was on the USS Missouri to record the Japanese surrender.

Despite his successes, Cisler had problems, according to his daughter. "He had a reach that exceeded his grasp," she explains.

Her mother left him after 40 years of marriage. This made a lasting impression on her daughter. "If I got married to Jesus," she says, "I'd file separately."

Because of her father's work, Cindy Cisler moved around a lot as a kid, from Hot Springs, Ark., to Louisville, Ky., to San Mateo, Calif.

Kris Kristofferson was a year ahead of her at San Mateo High School. He lived in her neighborhood. He was a football player, she recalls, "a BMOG."

Her senior year, she won the award as Betty Crocker Homemaker of Tomorrow, which she still finds amusing today. She also was voted "Most Likely to Succeed." As the class valedictorian, she earned a \$1,700 renewable scholarship to Vassar, the largest scholarship given to any student at the high school in 1955, according to a story in the San Mateo Times.

She majored in math at Vassar, where Jane Fonda was in her class. Fonda dropped out. Cisler says she never held "Barbarella" against her old classmate.

From Homemaker of Tomorrow



Lucinda Cisler, seen here outside the Asbury Park Public Library, is embroiled in a new dispute, one resulting from her love of books. City officials are concerned about the mountains of volumes she keeps in her apartment.

(PHOTO: MIKE McLAUGHLIN, SPECIAL TO THE PRESS)

row to Vassar to Yale and Penn, where she pursued her dream of becoming an architect, this was her path, even at a time when people were constantly telling her that "women can't be architects."

For women who wanted a career in those days, the choices were teacher, nurse or secretary. "That's what women could aspire to," says Cisler.

So there she was, going from a prestigious women's college to an all-male graduate school to study architecture, an exclusive field, and suddenly people were telling her she should start wearing tighter sweaters.

Manning the ramparts

Google Lucinda Cisler, or Cindy Cisler, and you will come up with hundreds of matches. But none of them will pertain to her work in architecture. There will be no mention of the things she designed, the foot bridge in Mount Holly for example, or the hospital wing in New Rochelle, N.Y.

Rather, you will find countless references to her widely quoted work as an activist during a time of great social upheaval. In the late '60s, early '70s, at the height of the so-called women's movement,

Cindy Cisler chose to champion a cause that still stirs high passion today: abortion.

"I call it the buttered billiard ball of politics," she says. "It requires some thinking. It's troubling. It's unpleasant." It was never her intention to get involved, she says. She didn't necessarily see herself as a feminist, whatever that meant. She had no idea her scholarly essays would eventually become required reading in some college classrooms, or that she would be asked to speak at large rallies and conventions.

One day she was studying architecture at Yale, next day she had her picture in Time magazine, identified as the leader of a demonstration. It happened so fast. She picked up a copy of Betty Friedan's book, "The Feminine Mystique," and next thing she knew, she was out in the streets, manning the ramparts.

"It was like a tide was coming," she says, looking back.

In 1970, Random House published an anthology of feminist writings, "Sisterhood Is Powerful." Cisler's contribution, "Unfinished Business: Birth Control and Women's Liberation," was the longest piece in the book.

"Without the full capacity to limit her own reproduction," she wrote, "a woman's other freedoms are tantalizing mockeries that cannot be exercised."

Planned Parenthood was doing nothing, she argued. Contraception was not enough, she argued. She had bigger plans for the sisterhood. She wanted justice for women, if you could imagine such a thing in 1970.

"I was called a radical 'fringie' by Betty Friedan," Cisler says, laughing now. "She was frothing at the mouth."

So were many others.

But things would change. The tide would turn. And although abortion remains "the buttered billiard ball of politics," Cindy Cisler was once an important voice in a national dialogue that resulted in change.

As she puts it now, in retrospect, "I made it possible for a lot of people to have sex without fretting."

A tight budget

For 27 years, Cindy Cisler had an apartment in Manhattan, two bedrooms, two baths, in a rent-stabilized building on the Upper West Side. She lived there with her 5,000 books. For 11 of those years, she also lived there with her boyfriend. She met him at a demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

In 1999, long after the boyfriend was gone, they turned her water off. She moved out. "I found my books out on the street," she says.

By then, she had been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder. She was on Effexor, a relatively new drug used to treat major depressive disorders. "If only it had been invented five years before it was," she says.

She believes her depression began in 1953. As she remembers it, "one day I was walking down the street and all of a sudden I was crying." In 1953, you weren't allowed to be depressed.

They didn't know what to make of depression in 1953.

Seven years ago, she left the bulk of her worldly belongings in storage in the Bronx and moved to the Phillips Seaview Tower. She began accumulating new things, mostly books. Soon her tiny apartment was overwhelmed with stuff. So she took out more storage space at Treasure Island, down the street.

Every month she pays \$319 to the storage people in the Bronx, \$114 to Treasure Island, and \$162 in rent. Her social security check is for \$674.

You might say she lives on a tight budget.

Her father had the same problem, collecting stuff, never throwing anything away. Her monthly storage bill is her "albatross," she explains. What can she do? She's "a pack rat," and "a bibliomaniac," always has been. She is who she is, strong opinions and all.

"Hillary Clinton bothers me," she says. "Monday morning quarterbacking on Saturday night, compromising even before anybody asked you to."

That's what some people wanted to do during the fight to repeal the abortion law 40 years ago. They were willing to settle for less, even before they'd heard what the other side had to say. Not Cindy Cisler.

Now, 40 years later, this same woman sits in a room under a harsh fluorescent light while a dozen strangers try to figure out what to do with her. She takes great exception to some of the things they are saying.

"If I didn't have a sense of humor or irony," she would say later, "I probably would have jumped off something very tall by now."

She laughs. Knowing what she knows, having seen what she has seen, she's entitled to a good laugh every now and then.

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