

Molly Yard, Advocate for Liberal Causes, Dies at 93

By [Margalit Fox](#) Sept. 22, 2005

Molly Yard, for more than half a century an outspoken advocate for liberal causes, who came to national prominence as president of the National Organization for Women in the late 1980's, died yesterday at a nursing home in Pittsburgh. She was 93 and had resided most recently in Arlington, Va., and Washington.

Ms. Yard's son James Garrett confirmed her death.

Active since the 1930's in student and civil rights movements, Ms. Yard served as NOW's president from 1987 until 1991. She was previously the organization's political director.

During her tenure, NOW championed issues including abortion, gay and lesbian rights and the election of women to public office. In 1987, in one of its most vigorous campaigns, it opposed the nomination to the Supreme Court of Judge Robert H. Bork, whom Ms. Yard publicly condemned as "a Neanderthal." She also called for the impeachment of President Ronald Reagan over the Iran-contra affair.

Ms. Yard spent so much time pounding unforgiving marble in various corridors of power that she developed permanent nerve damage in her feet, The Washington Post reported in 1987.

Mary Alexander Yard was born in Shanghai on July 6, 1912, and raised in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, where her parents were Methodist missionaries. At her birth, one of her father's male friends presented him with a beautiful brass bowl. It was meant as a consolation prize. Ms. Yard was the family's third daughter.

Growing up in China, Ms. Yard later said, helped set her on her course as a social activist. She saw many people die of cholera. She also heard screams whose source she could not immediately identify.

"I asked my father what was going on, and he said it was a young girl whose feet are bound," Ms. Yard told The Post in 1987. "They used to unbind them at night in order for the blood to circulate."

The Yards lived in China until Ms. Yard was about 13, when her father angered church superiors by proposing that their missions in China be turned over to the Chinese. The family moved to the United States, where Mr. Yard became the director of religious activities for Northwestern University -- until he angered superiors there with his work as a civil rights and labor organizer. Through much of the Depression, Ms. Yard's mother, who ran a mail-order business selling imported Chinese goods, was the family's sole support.

Ms. Yard became politically active as a student at Swarthmore. After discovering that the sorority to which she belonged would not admit Jews, she campaigned successfully to abolish all sororities on campus. She graduated in 1933, with a bachelor's degree in political science.

In 1938, Ms. Yard married a Swarthmore classmate, Sylvester Garrett, keeping her maiden name. When the couple tried to open a joint checking account, Ms. Yard would later recall, they were told they could not do so under two different surnames. If only Ms. Yard had been Mr. Garrett's mistress, the bank told her, it would have been no problem at all.

Mr. Garrett, a noted labor arbitrator who taught at Stanford and elsewhere, died in 1996. Besides her son, of McDonald, Pa., Ms. Yard is survived by another son, John Garrett, of Fairport, N.Y., and five grandchildren. A daughter, Joan Garrett-Goodyear, died in 1992.

After college, Ms. Yard began a career as a social worker but soon realized that politics was a better outlet for her unrelenting energy. As an officer of the American Student Union, a left-wing youth organization, Ms. Yard struck up a long friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt, whom she credited as a deep influence. Ms. Yard was later a board member of Americans for Democratic Action.

During her husband's years at Stanford, Ms. Yard immersed herself in Democratic politics in California, supporting Representative Helen Gahagan Douglas in her Senate race against Richard M. Nixon in 1950. After her family moved to Pittsburgh a few years later, Ms. Yard worked in the civil rights movement and was a local organizer for the March on Washington in 1963. She entered electoral politics as a candidate only once, running unsuccessfully for the Pennsylvania legislature in 1964.

Ms. Yard joined NOW in the early 1970's and for the next decade worked on its campaign, ultimately unsuccessful, to have the equal rights amendment ratified. In 1987, Eleanor Smeal, Ms. Yard's mentor and NOW's departing president, suggested she run for the position. In her mid-70's, Ms. Yard demurred at first.

"I thought if I were 10 years younger, I would love to do it," she told People magazine in 1987. "Then I remembered Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony never stopped, even in their 80's."

Ms. Yard's reputation as a forceful negotiator stood her in such good stead that she did not have to be physically present to get results. In 1987, Patricia Blau Reuss, who was the legislative director for the Women's Equity Action League at the time, told The Washington Post what it was like to lobby members of Congress with Ms. Yard as a bargaining chip:

"We would say, 'Look, you either deal with me or you have to answer to Molly,'" Ms. Reuss said. "They always relent."