

Richard Graham, Equal Rights Leader, Dies at 86

By [Margalit Fox](#) Oct. 8, 2007

Richard A. Graham, an original member of the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission who was moved to help found the National Organization for Women by what he saw as the commission's intransigence on sex-discrimination issues, died on Sept. 24 at his home in Royal Oak, Md. He was 86.

Mr. Graham died after suffering a stroke several days earlier, his daughter Nan Graham said.

At the time a Republican, Mr. Graham was one of the inaugural group of five commissioners appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1965. Born out of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the commission was created to address issues of discrimination in the workplace.

As Mr. Graham would later say in interviews, he quickly came to feel that while the commission was willing to tackle issues of race discrimination, it concerned itself far less with those of sex discrimination, despite the inclusion in the Civil Rights Act of Title VII, which specifically prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion or sex.

Among the issues on which Mr. Graham worked in 1965 was an effort to abolish sex-based employment advertisements — the “Help Wanted, Male” and “Help Wanted, Female” notices that were a familiar presence in newspapers of the day. The commission as a whole, however, declined to impose such a ban. (In 1968, the E.E.O.C. ruled that sex-segregated job advertising was illegal in most cases.)

NOW was founded in 1966 by more than two dozen people, including Mr. Graham, who was its first vice president.

In news accounts of the founding Mr. Graham was said to have quietly told several of the organization's founders, among them Betty Friedan, that to truly advance the cause of gender equality, American women would need a political lobby on a par with the N.A.A.C.P. That year, Mr. Graham, who was not reappointed to another term with the employment commission, became the first director of the National Teacher Corps, a program created to bring schoolteachers to depressed areas of the country.

Richard Alton Graham was born on Nov. 6, 1920, in Chicago, and reared in Lima, Ohio, and Milwaukee. He earned a bachelor's degree in engineering from Cornell in 1942, and during World War II served with the Army Air Forces in Iran.



After the war, Mr. Graham joined his father in developing and manufacturing a variable-speed drive transmission for electric motors, which was used, the younger Mr. Graham later said, “in everything from food processing to printing to mechanical hearts.”

In 1961, Richard Graham entered public service, becoming a deputy to R. Sargent Shriver, the first director of the Peace Corps. From 1963 to 1965, Mr. Graham was the Peace Corps’ director in Tunisia. A 1963 article in *The New York Times* about the Tunisia program noted Mr. Graham’s concern that his volunteers’ living conditions not be too soft: he moved them out of modern apartments into less opulent local quarters among the people they were serving.

Mr. Graham earned a master’s degree in education from Catholic University in 1970, followed by a Ph.D. in philosophy from what was then the Union Graduate School. (It is now the Union Institute and University.)

In the mid-1970s, he directed the Center for Moral Education, which had been founded at the Harvard Graduate School of Education by the distinguished psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. From 1975 to 1976, Mr. Graham was president of Goddard College, in Plainfield, Vt., where he helped found the Goddard-Cambridge Center for Social Change, which included a program in women’s studies.

From the mid-1980s until his death, Mr. Graham was an adviser to the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, an organization based in Washington that promotes cross-cultural understanding.

Besides his daughter, Nan, of Manhattan, Mr. Graham is survived by his wife, Nancy Aring Graham, whom he married in 1949; another daughter, Peggy Sue Graham (known as Busy) of Royal Oak; three sons, Charles (known as Hoey), of Moscow, Idaho; Dick, of Laguna Beach, Calif.; and John, of Potomac, Md.; a brother, Robert, of Simms, Tex.; a sister, Sue Graham Mingus, the widow of the jazz bassist Charles Mingus, of Manhattan; 13 grandchildren; and 2 great-grandchildren.

Mr. Graham, who was a Democrat from the late 1960s on, was sometimes publicly critical of NOW in recent years, faulting what he saw as its emphasis on abortion rights and equality for lesbians at the expense of more general issues like child care and health care.

But in 1991, reflecting on the improved status of American women since the 1960s, Mr. Graham told *Newsday*, “There is pleasure in having been part of the change.”