The Philadelphia Inquirer
family/home/fashion

section K

Sunday, July 4, 1982

They gave up a way of life for the ERA

Many women who believed passionately in women's rights left homes and families to fight for the ratification of the ERA. The mission failed, but at least three of those women found the experience enriched their lives.

By Carol Horner
Inquirer Staff Writer

The proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) died Wednesday after a decade-long struggle for its ratification ended three states short of the required 38. One year ago, the National Organization for Women (NOW), launching a last-ditch effort to pass the amendment, began urging its members to change their life to work for the ERA.

Thousands volunteered their nights and weekends. Many spent vacations working for the amendment in unratified states. Some women gave up their jobs, some gave up their homes, some moved away from their families in order to work for the ERA. Some worked for a little pay, some for no pay at all. This is the story of three women who changed their lives for the ERA.

•

"Philadelphia looks wonderful!"

It was only 30th Street Station at 1 a.m., but it was closer to home than Lillian Ciarrochi had been for months, and to her it was beautiful.

She was hefting her luggage through the train station, headed for a taxi. Ciarrochi had arrived on the last train from Washington with NOW President Eleanor Smeal and two other NOW workers. They had spent the day in Washington talking post-ERA political strategy. The next day there would be a demonstration at the Civic Center, where the Democratic National Party Conference was meeting. The following week there would be another demonstration in Washington.

But tonight Lillian Ciarrochi would sleep in her own bed in her own apartment on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. She would see again her own paintings and prints. She would shuffle around on her own emerald green rug and settle down for an interview on her own blue, green and yellow sofa.

Eleven months ago, Ciarrochi, who is in her late 40s, left these familiar things behind to move to Florida to work for the ERA. She gave up her almost $30,000-a-year job as an accountant at Scott Paper Co. to take a job working for NOW for about half that much. She gave up her spacious one-bedroom apartment, subletting it for a few nights a week, to live in a bare studio apartment in Tallahassee.

Why? Why make a decision that even now she remembers as "very, very painful?" Why do something that would cause her to forfeit her pension rights and that would threaten her future financial security?

"Actually, the strongest motivation was my mother's life," she said.

Ciarrochi, a stocky woman with short brown hair, was speaking softly but intensely. Her mother, she said, was an Italian immigrant who came to this country to consummate a prearranged marriage.

"She came on sort of a cattle boat with 500 other young women. All were being pulled away from their families. ... She became instantly pregnant."

There were 13 children in all, four of whom died soon after birth. Lillian is the eighth living child.

"She was one of the most brilliant women. She always rued the fact she never had the opportunity to get an education ...

"I felt very sad for her. She lived through her children. She felt great joy through her children's lives, but I felt she should have that same joy through fulfilling some of her own needs."

A decade ago, Lillian Ciarrochi joined the Philadelphia chapter of NOW, a group she would become president of eight years later. When she joined, she was living with her mother in Ardmore; her father had died in the mid-1960s. Ciarrochi said she told her mother she was joining NOW and explained that the organization's purpose was to work for equality for women.

"Even though she didn't speak much English, she understood perfectly well what I was saying. She started to cry and embraced me and said, 'I think that's important, and do whatever you can to make women's lives better.'"

Ciarrochi's mother died June 17, 1980. She says her final decision to "change her life" for the ERA was made last year on the one-year anniversary of her mother's death.

"I really wanted to do it as a memorial to my mother," she said.

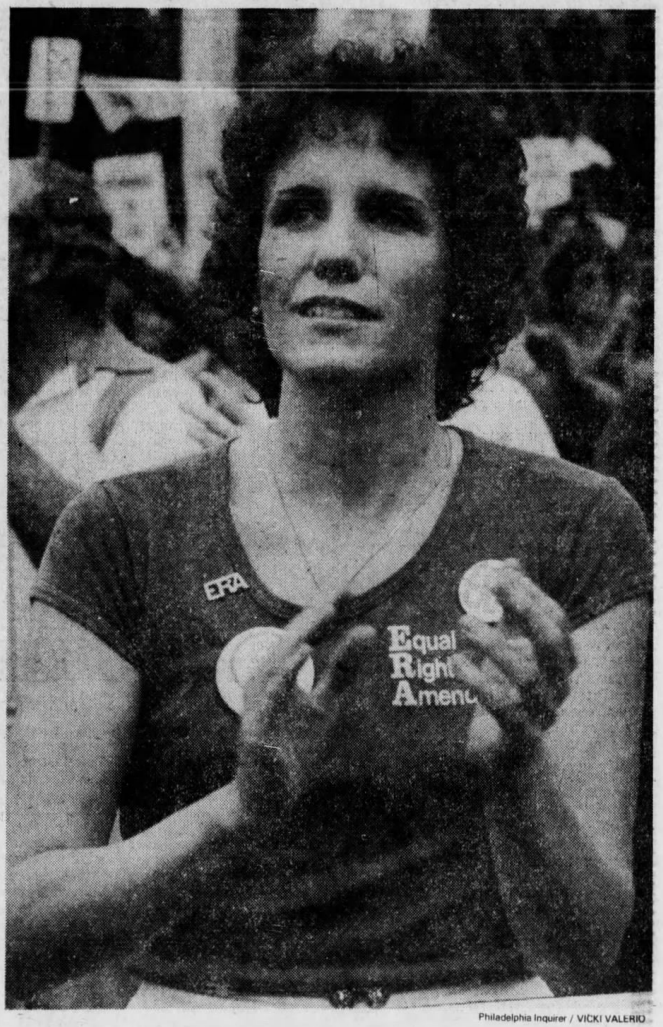
Now, Lillian Ciarrochi has behind her almost a year of seven-day work-

(See ERA on 8-K)

Philadelphia Inquirer / VICKI VALERIO

Special to The Inquirer / FRANK MEMDICINO

Lillian Ciarrochi, right center, Liz Nicholson, far right, and Cindy Judd Hill, below, took time out and changed their lifestyles to work for the ERA.



Philadelphia Inquirer / VICKI VALERIO

3 women who left their homes to work for the ERA

ERA, from 1-K

weeks and 15-hour work days, doing public relations and business management, lobbying and organizing rallies, and doing a little bit of everything to try to pass the ERA in Florida.

But on June 21, the Florida Senate rejected the amendment by a vote of 22 to 16, and that, along with its defeat the next day in the Illinois House, killed its chances for nationwide ratification.

"I feel very sad and angry. I feel as though 22 members of the Florida Senate showed extreme cowardice ...," Ciarrochi said after the Florida defeat.

Ciarrochi's vocal intensity mounts when she talks about her determination to beat anti-ERA legislators in the next election and when she talks about what she thinks she accomplished over the last year.

"I feel we have reached the hearts and minds of hundreds of thousands of people in the state [of Florida] who will carry their anger into the voting booths in November," she said.

As for herself, Ciarrochi feels less anxious than she did when she was making the decision to go to Florida.

"I'm a trained accountant, but I also feel now if I chose to enter the public relations field, I would be qualified to do that," she said. "Not many people get a chance at mid-life to choose a completely new career."

She said she has the option of continuing to work for NOW for awhile, in Florida or in Washington, but she misses Philadelphia and probably will look for a job here.

But no matter where she goes or what she does, changing her life has changed Lillian Ciarrochi.

"I will like myself the rest of my life for having made the decision I made," she said. She sees herself as more self-assured now, and stronger.

"I might even consider running for political office sometime later...."

•

Philadelphia Inquirer / VICKI VALERIO

Lillian Ciarrochi worked for the ERA because of her mother

Liz Nicholson had maneuvered herself into a fine spot for a smart young woman-on-the-move. A 1979 degree from Harvard in hand, she had landed a job as a management trainee in a Chicago bank.

For three years she had learned banking. Then came NOW's call and she jumped the tracks. Since January, the 26-year-old Midwesterner has worked for $13,000 a year, about two-thirds of what she was making before, organizing pro-ERA volunteers in Illinois.

"It means you don't eat out as often, don't buy the same kind of clothes," she said. It also meant that she acquired a roommate to help pay the rent.

Nicholson, a slender woman with short curly hair and a businesslike manner, was being interviewed in the ERA Countdown office in Chicago. It was several weeks before the ERA would once again be defeated in Springfield, and the effort to ratify it would be declared over.

For now, Nicholson was spewing out vote counts and political analyses like a veteran banker dispensing loan information. It was not easy to get her to talk about herself instead of the Illinois legislature. But she did, with some quiet anger.

"My college degree is worth on the average to me what an eighth-grade education is to a man." She was talking about her motivation for working in the ERA campaign.

Also, "I think one of my most basic reasons for feeling the ERA is so important is that older women face some of the worst discrimination of all."

Nicholson cited her own mother, who graduated from Bryn Mawr College, worked in a large advertising agency, "then did what she was supposed to do — raised me." Nicholson said her mother also did all the volunteer work expected of a bank executive's wife, which is what she was.

Now her 54-year-old mother is divorced and working for about $10,000 a year as a receptionist and office manager in Indianapolis. "It was classic downward mobility," Nicholson said. "She instilled the values of independence and competition in me and she certainly has them herself, yet she has never been rewarded for them. That affects you in your pocketbook and your head."

The effort to ratify the ERA in the Illinois legislature is over, but Nicholson plans to keep working for NOW, supporting feminist candidates in the fall state election.

Then she'll find a way to make a career in politics — lobbying, working in campaigns, some day running for office herself.

A political career had been a possibility even before she "changed her life," Nicholson said, but now it is a certainty.

Ciarrochi shakes hands with activist Bella Abzug at an ERA rally in front of the Civic Center

"This campaign made it very clear to me we have no alternative to being involved in the political system. ... When we actually have half the political power in this country, we'll be able to make our agenda a priority."

•

Cindy Judd Hill missed seeing her 15-year-old son off to his first prom last spring. She missed it because she was in Chicago working for the ERA, and her son was at home with his father in Thornburgh, an affluent suburb of Pittsburgh.

She is not pleased about missing the prom — "That's the part I miss ... those familial relationships." But she does not regret taking a leave of absence from her teaching job, and from her family, to work for the ERA.

Hill, 56, has taught music for 27 years in the Chartiers Valley School District near Pittsburgh.

"It gradually grew in my mind I could take a sabbatical, and if I didn't take it and if the ERA failed, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

She did take a leave, hoping for half pay under the sabbatical policy, but the school district contends she is not eligible for a paid sabbatical. The matter is being arbitrated for Hill through her teachers' union, but as of now, she has put in five unpaid months as an unpaid volunteer in the ERA Countdown office in Chicago.

"It has cost me $12,000 in salary to come here," she said over breakfast in a Chicago restaurant a few weeks ago.

This is not the first time that Hill has fought with her school district. In fact, it was a fight with her district over a leave that turned her into a feminist in the first place.

Back in 1966 Hill asked for and was granted a half-pay sabbatical to study for a master's degree. She got the degree. But Hill also got pregnant and gave birth to her fourth child, the son who is now 15. Her school district contended she had sought that leave under false pretenses, and the district refused the half pay. Under district policy at that time, a teacher had to inform the district of her pregnancy within the first four months, and then take a year's maternity leave without pay.

"The sabbatical was taken to get a master's degree, which I did. Whether I had a baby during that time or ... a battle with pneumonia is irrelevant."

Hill and her husband, a civil engineer, sued for the half pay that time, and won. In the process, Hill started on the road to becoming the staunch feminist she is today — one who is so anxious not to forget any of her pro-ERA arguments that she brings written notes to breakfast with a reporter.

"The language is so pervasively sexist. ... The people in power in Madison Avenue who make images in our heads, the people who make laws over my life, the people who make editorial policy in the news media, the Federal Reserve Board, the doctors and attorneys are all male, and that's where the power is in this culture," she said.

She hardly pauses for breath. She has learned all of this, and politics too — especially politics, working in Illinois for the ERA.

"I've explored a slice of political life I'd never have had the opportunity to explore otherwise. And you know, it's an opportunity to be a part of history."

Her husband supported her decision to go to Chicago to work for the ERA.

"He's a very pragmatic engineer. He said if he would oppose me, he'd have a very unhappy woman."

Hill predicted how she would feel if the amendment died — as it was later to do.

"I will be so angry. I will either cry or scream in outrage. If I scream in outrage the shame is not upon me, the shame is upon the male power structure that has made me struggle for something rightfully mine.

"I will return to my teaching, but I can never turn back from my commitment to a better life for all women."