The group

Consciousness-raising taught a lesson that remains a powerful bond

By Abigail Foerstner
Tribune photos by Anne Cusack

Over the years, they've gathered at rallies or legislative sessions, homes and offices, for birthdays or beach days. They have forged successful careers, married, started families and worked for social change.

"We talk about our lives, eat, brainstorm and hatch political movements," says Barbara Engel, a social policy consultant on women's issues, of this particular group of friends.

They met in the heady days of the late '70s, when women's issues were getting a lot of attention in political circles. Friendships formed through their involvements—some worked to steer bills concerning women through the legislature; others helped launch a political organization, Cook County Democratic Women, in 1984.

Among them are lawyers, lobbyists, administrators and communicators. As a group, they embody the spirit of consciousness-raising, a term that has gone out of fashion. But in the late '60s and early '70s, when the second women's movement caught fire, it was heady stuff indeed.

"One of the things that came out of the women's movement and consciousness-raising for me is that the personal *is* political," says Engel, who first participated in consciousness-raising as a college student more than 20 years ago. "This group personifies that."

Others like her, who joined the women's movement in the 1960s, began to meet regularly in small groups of friends for soul-searching discussions that linked their personal experiences to society's script for women in general. The process became known as consciousness-raising, or CR. Its critics viewed it as coffee klatch gossip laced with the rhetoric of women's liberation.

But CR groups were neither coffee klatches nor group therapy. They transcended both as women shared common concerns—from lack of credit to lack of career opportunities—with the express purpose of raising awareness that such problems could have political solutions.

Few CR groups have survived the frenetic pace of the '80s' dual-career families and working single parents.

But in the particular group that Engel fondly calls "our gang," the symbiosis of camaraderie and social mission continues. This group reflects the evolution of consciousness-raising from the activism of the '60s and '70s to the networking '80s.

The key difference in the '80s is power. These women have it and use it to command the support of politicians to the unfinished business of the women's movement. They draw from their friendship a sense of strength that together they can accomplish anything.

"This is like 'Bonanza,'" says Susan Locke, WTTW executive producer for national program development and one of the eight friends at the core of the group. "Anybody who fights with one of us will have to fight with the rest."

Susan Locke (front row, from left); Marilyn Katz ; Barbara Engel (second row, from left), with Daniel, 4 months; Jan Schakowsky; Tina Tchen; Julie Hamos (rear, from left); Barbara Shaw; and Kappy Laing.

Others in the group are: Julie Hamos, an attorney with her own public policy firm and deputy director of Mayor Richard Daley's successful mayoral campaign earlier this year; Kappy Laing, Chicago Transit Authority intergovernmental affairs officer and a lobbyist for the late Mayor Harold Washington; Marilyn Katz, owner of MK Communications and press aide for Washington's successful 1983 and 1987 campaigns; Jan Schakowsky, executive director of the Illinois State Council for Senior Citizens Organizations and co-founder of the National Consumers Foundation; Barbara Shaw, housing coordinator for the Center for Neighborhood Technology in Chicago; and Chicago attorney Tina Tchen, former vice president of the Illinois Chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW).

Confronting this group of high-powered professionals, it's difficult to recall the powerlessness of the times that ignited Betty Friedan's 1963 book "The Feminine Mystique." The book fired the first salvo challenging social norms that defined femininity in terms of roles within the home.

'There was always this tension between talking about women's lives and getting things done. It was a delicate balance but the best groups created a marriage of the two.'

—Barbara Engel

Living room meetings

In the heyday of CR, many groups met in suburban living rooms drawing on just that strain of discontent.

But the women's movement and consciousness-raising itself owe much of their early momentum to the New Left. There, the male-dominated leadership of organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) sought radical social change while assigning women to the most traditional roles.

"I was a little sorority girl at Northwestern University totally compelled by the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement to join SDS," says Katz. She worked for housing, employment and welfare reform as a community organizer in Uptown, during an era when poor families crowded into one-room flats carved from once-spacious homes and apartments.

"It was the women who were the hardcore organizers for SDS," Katz recalls. "They were bold in coming up with community programs. But it was the men in SDS who had the titles." By contrast, she met women in Uptown who often were poor and busy raising children but worked to achieve a political voice for their neighborhood through their own grassroots organizations. Katz and several of these women began meeting in 1966, launching one of the earliest CR groups. Though she remained in SDS, she helped found Chicago's Women's Liberation Union in 1969 with others who believed women needed their own political organizations.

Engel, also disgruntled with roles assigned women in SDS, joined another early CR group at the University of Chicago. "My memory of SDS is that it was our job to make the coffee," she says. "Certainly it was clear that women's issues weren't important. A number of us began getting together and talking about our secondary role in SDS. It was the beginning of the personal-as-political, the beginning of CR," says Engel.

But by the early 1970s, CR was attracting a diversity of women. Hamos decided becoming a lawyer was the best way to effect social change and connected with a CR group when she entered George Washington Law School, Washington, D.C, in 1972. Shaw was a counselor at a community mental health center in Alton, Ill., where she joined a group that was instrumental in opening a shelter for battered women in the community. The group functioned with a CR agenda but never adopted the name. Tchen began organizing CR groups in the late 1970s while working in Springfield and serving as president of the Springfield chapter of NOW.

A sense of commonality

Though separated in time and place, all these groups shared a common emphasis on political action. For other groups, personal redirection was the focus.

"Some individuals, it was understood, would use the insights gained in CR solely in their personal lives without becoming active in the women's movement," notes Anita Schreve in her new book, "Women Together, Women

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Alone" (Viking, $19.95). "It was hoped that the collective experience of CR would radicalize many of the women and encourage them to become agents for change."

CR sounds about as radical as recycling these days. Even in its heyday, many women who participated in the process were middle-class homemakers confronting taboo topics such as rape and domestic assault for the first time. Often, the atmosphere of nonjudgmental concern, mutual respect and confidentiality engendered by the CR groups was reward enough for its members.

"In the CR groups, there was always this tension between talking about women's lives and getting things done," Engel says. "It was a delicate balance but the best groups created a marriage of the two. It was a matter of putting your time where your needs were."

But she and her friends who participated in CR note that a key insight it offered was the importance of forging close relationships with other women. "It was a total reorientation, even for women who came out of other movements," says Katz. "I spent my teen years looking for men to be my salvation and protection and then rejecting them, because they were inadequate armor to get me through. CR gave me an affinity and a commonality with other women."

That sense of commonality became an emotional pinion of the women's movement outside of CR as well for women like Locke, Laing and Schakowsky, who became active supporters of the movement but never participated in consciousness-raising. CR itself, however, became a model for other kinds of support groups, such as one for rape counselors in which Locke participated.

"Women who don't have close friendships with other women are missing out tremendously," says Laing. "This group has opened my eyes to the structure and fabric of a special kind of friendship. You can't talk for 15 minutes on any subject without a political dialogue starting. It's kind of the air we breathe."

Pulling together

The group pulls together to do whatever work needs to be done. This year that included successfully lobbying for the enactment of state legislation to provide additional money to build more low- and moderate-income housing and rallying for abortion rights in Washington, D.C., and Chicago. It also included throwing a baby shower for Engel while she was housebound during part of her pregnancy with her second child.

"We don't have formal meetings, secret handshakes or dues," says Locke. "In the last few years, the additional job and family responsibilities have meant we don't get together as often. But we have those kinds of friendships where it's as though you had just walked out of the room the next time you see each other."

Photo by Anne Cusack

Group members include, front row (from left) Susan Locke and Marilyn Katz with her children, Halley Chambers, 3, and Grady Chambers, 18 months; middle row Barbara Engel (left) with children Aaron, 3, and Daniel, 4 months; Jan Schakowsky and Tina Tchen; back row (from left) Julie Hamos, Barbara Shaw and Kappy Laing.

Despite demanding careers, the group members aren't above stuffing envelopes for one of their causes.

"When we were starting Cook County Democratic Women, we had this huge mailing list and none of it was ZIP code sorted," says Katz. "We had the postal privilege of sorting them and sending them out cheap. So we would bring food and drink and anecdotes and we would crawl around the floor sorting things.

"People would take different ZIP codes and I'd be with Julie for a while and talk and Kappy for a while and talk. We started to giggle about it, saying this was the contemporary version of the quilting bee or corn husking."

Each has different stories of what the group has meant to her personally and professionally. Engel laughs about how Hamos convinced her to buy lipstick—which she never had worn before—as they lobbied in Springfield for legislation that revamped the state's outmoded rape statute in 1983.

Schakowsky recalls that group members squirreled away her cloth bag stenciled with the words "Senior Power" when she ran for the Cook County Board in 1986.

"They told me to get a leather briefcase," recalls Schakowsky. She didn't win that election. But she already has announced her candidacy on the Democratic ticket for state representative in the 4th district, which straddles Chicago, Evanston and Wilmette.

The women have turned to each other for moral support and help through divorce, job changes, births and child-rearing.

"They're there to do the babysitting, the psychological counseling, even the shopping," says Katz.

"I'm going through a divorce and this group has been very good through that. I look for support from them through any major life changes," says Tchen.

These days toddlers mill through the get-togethers. Katz, Tchen and Engel all have preschoolers. These consummate '80s women delayed having children into their '30s and now juggle careers and motherhood.

"Cora kiddingly said one time that she had eight mothers," Shaw says of her 16-year-old daughter.

Rallying around an issue

The group began to gel in the late '70s in Springfield, where Hamos worked as a lobbyist for Illinois legal aides representing the poor. One issue brought them together: the need for tougher laws protecting women from domestic violence.

"Julie Hamos is probably the most inspirational woman in my life," says Shaw. As the domestic violence issue gathered force, "we instantly discovered each other. She taught me to become more political and public-policy oriented, to translate philosophies and attitudes into social change."

Shaw moved from Alton to Springfield to direct a shelter for battered women there. She and Hamos were among the co-founders of the Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence, an organization Hamos continues to represent through her lobbying and public policy firm, Julie Hamos and Associates.

When Tchen and her husband moved to Springfield in 1978, Tchen touched base with Hamos, a high school chum from Cleveland, and Tchen joined NOW in the effort to push for state ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.

At the time, Engel was director of women's services for the Loop YWCA, devising and implementing intervention programs to help women escape abuse. The struggle to criminalize acts of domestic violence in Illinois brought her into contact with Hamos and Shaw as the two worked to gather support for such a state law. In 1982, when the Domestic Violence Act was implemented, Hamos, Engel and Tchen co-authored the bill that revamped the Illinois rape statute so that it now covers all types of sexual assault and abuse.

Locke met others in the group through her work as a counselor for Rape Victim Advocates in Chicago. Locke helped WTTW as the station filmed a documentary on the organization. Later, she would start her career in TV by working part-time for the station while earning a graduate degree in clinical social work.

Laing befriended Hamos and Shaw through her former job as a lobbyist for then Mayor Harold Washington, a high visibility position by any measure. "I knew I could survive because there was this group, this network offering support and friendship," Laing says.

Hamos, who had moved to Chicago in 1981 to join the state's attorney's office under Daley as his advisor on women's issues, continued to lobby in Springfield as part of her job. Shaw and Tchen moved to Chicago as well, Shaw to begin a new career in the housing field and Tchen to attend law school, becoming vice president of the Illinois chapter of NOW while still in school.

Katz, a leader in progressive politics in Chicago, and Schakowsky became part of the group during the formation of Cook County Democratic Women in 1984.

An evolving consciousness

Hamos says working together on issues they all felt were so important became a "visionary force" bonding them together. They all considered themselves feminists but punctured the stereotype of "women's libbers" as women with disdain for makeup and men.

"Feminism has mellowed out like a lot of other -isms since the so-called bra-burning days," says the recently married Hamos, a dynamo who exudes warmth and an executive air.

Shaw, who was a young, divorced mother when she met Hamos, remarried in '87. After years of pouring herself into political activism, Shaw says, "It's nice to settle down and have a more balanced life.

"I carried a real sense of urgency. I was really hard on myself and now I'm really enjoying the mellowness of family."

While CR and feminism brought her "incredible pride in being a woman," it also resulted in many women viewing family as a form of bondage, Engel notes: "With our desire to do things differently and our youth, we really didn't do justice to the importance of mothering. The choice of staying home with children is again a respectable one. The problem now is that not many women can afford to stay home."

The women have turned to each other for moral support and help through divorce, job changes births and child-rearing.

Engel, who has a 3-year-old as well as a newborn, says candidly that she can stay home because her husband is a doctor and because she is able to work from home as a consultant.

Her comments reflect the evolving consciousness about women's roles as the '90s approach. But these issues are in the mainstream now, not the kind of thing anyone needs a CR group to handle.

NOW no longer sponsors CR groups and views the CR process in the broader terms of public education, says Laura Kaufman, program director for the Chicago chapter of NOW.

Members of CR groups who once met in homes have graduated to the boards of various social and political organizations, Hamos says.

Such examples suggest that CR was simply a victim of its own success. It provided a sheltering cocoon in which many women found the support to launch new careers and new lives that left them with little time to assess the places where they have since arrived.

This group takes that time no matter what.

"Life is about working on yourself and these relationships are such food for that," Shaw says. "It's consciousness-raising as it was originally meant to be. We giggle and have a lot of fun. But we're committed to the long haul of strategizing the future."