

NANCY M. BURTON REMEMBERS by Mary-Ann Lupa

At our ERA Reunion held at the University of Illinois, I interviewed Nancy Burton on June 17, 2019. She described 10 years of personal stamina to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in Illinois and to acquire equality for women in all aspects of life.

Born in Chicago, her activism began at Wright Junior College when she approached the campus administration requesting that the bulletin boards reflect equal gender representation. Male imagery dominated the halls of Wright College until Nancy arrived.

In June of 1973, Nancy attended the first Midwest NOW (National Organization for Women) Regional conference in Rockford Illinois. She arrived with the Chicago NOW chapter as an “at large member of NOW”. Most of her work in Chicago NOW was concentrated on passage of the ERA in her native state. She remembered HJ Res 38 in the House and SJ Res 6 in the IL Senate specifically.

Among her archives, we learned that Burton refuted Phyllis Schlafly’s scare tactics in an Editorial in the Chicago Tribune that was published on April 26, 1975. She reminded Phyllis and us and that the Illinois’ constitution contained an Equal Rights clause, Article 1, Section 18, but the US Constitution did not have a provision to provide equality to women.

As national NOW and the local NOW chapters recognized the need to elect ERA supporters to the state legislatures, Nancy travelled to Oak Park to help establish District 21 Citizens for ERA to elect Earleen Collins, a Democrat. Burton’s Midwest Academy organizing skills were effective in electing the ERA candidate in the Chicago suburb. There, she crafted an Essay contest on “Why we Need the ERA?” selecting two suburban winners. On October 4, 1975, they read their essays on the reasons we need gender equality at a Park District Rally of District 21 Citizens for ERA.

On Father’s Day in June of 1977, she remembered picketing the homes of anti-ERA legislators in Chicago. On Mother’s Day for Equality, a list of 20 Illinois NOW chapters was sent to all Illinois legislators to show the broad state support for the ERA.

Nancy was an administrative secretary for a molding company in the city when she volunteered to run for Chicago NOW Treasurer. With Agnes Gioconda as President she served from 1976-1977.

Plans for a National ERA mobilization in Springfield began in February of 1976. Burton took an active role in the organizing of the National Rally for Equal Rights. In April two rally offices opened in Chicago and Springfield with paid staff. Nancy reported weekly to National NOW and state volunteers on the progress of the Illinois District work and national rally organizing. “No vote” Illinois legislators were targeted as Rally responsibilities unfolded locally and nationally.

Everyone learned that Betty Friedan had committed to work her birthplace in Peoria, Illinois before the Rally. All mobilization details were distributed after Nancy wrote and mimeographed the “Rally for Equal Rights Newsletter” on yellow paper starting in April. She detailed the Rally organization, reporting on budget, insurance, public relations, recruitment throughout the state

and out of state, banners, transportation, housing, marshaling and parade mapping and coordination. Her communication also provided information on Illinois District lobbying efforts.

Nancy was assigned to Rally Build up with Mary Anne Sedey. Burton effectively wrote in Newsletter #3: "The people of this country need to see us at work for them in Illinois and we need to see them beside us. Phyllis (Schlafly) would like to isolate us from each other. She is trying to give us her label, "carpetbagger". But the US constitution is a national concern.

She recalls facilitating as a Marshall when 8 buses left Chicago for Springfield on May 16, 1976. A media headline the next day read, "30 states participate in the National Rally for Equal Rights." An estimated 10,000 to 12,000 people rallied in Springfield, Illinois for the ratification of the constitutional amendment.

Next year in a 1977 International Women's Year Committee session Nancy managed the microphones at the regional meeting in Normal, IL. She cleverly acquired Burger King crown hats for all her floor leaders so they could be recognized with mikes. There were 106 resolutions presented.

When Mary Jean Collins was elected Chicago NOW President in 1978, Nancy ran and was elected VP Finance Secretary. Together they took on the role of chapter historians summarizing the chapter's accomplishments in writing, calling it "A Decade of Feminism, Chicago NOW Highlights of the 1970s". The VP was also the top salesperson that year for a major fundraiser when Betty Friedan appeared at the Chicago Yacht Club.

In 1980 Mary Jean became co-director of the Illinois ERA campaign, as the effort for ERA passage was re-energized. Again Nancy marched for the ERA in Grant Park and Gill Park, in 1980 and 1981. Mary Jean continued as Chicago NOW chapter President, while Nancy was elected Chicago NOW Secretary.

Aunt Nancy also encouraged her niece, Marie Ponzio, a machine operator in Oregon to acquire a BS in engineering to eventually become a Process Engineer in Manufacturing in the Pacific Northwest. "I inherited the notion and confidence that women can be empowered to move forward with an education from my aunt Nancy Burton. Her voice is always in the back of my head."

Many of Nancy's well-documented photos and archival papers can be found at the UIC Richard J. Daley Library in Chicago.