

Peg Yorkin, Who Helped Bring the Abortion Pill to the U.S., Dies at 96

A Hollywood producer's wife who was emboldened by second-wave feminism, she was a founder of the Feminist Majority and worked to get female candidates elected.



Peg Yorkin at a political event in 1973 with her husband at the time, the television producer Bud Yorkin. She would later work to get more women to run for office. Credit...Fairchild Archive/WWD, via Penske Media, via Getty Images
By [Penelope Green](#) Published June 30, 2023 Updated July 4, 2023

Peg Yorkin, a feminist activist and philanthropist who as a founder of the Feminist Majority, a national women's rights organization, campaigned to bring mifepristone, the abortion pill, to the United States and to increase the number of women in political office, died on Sunday at her home in Malibu, Calif. She was 96.

The cause was renal failure, said her daughter, Nicole Yorkin.

The Feminist Majority was founded in 1987 by Ms. Yorkin, Katherine Spillar, [Toni Carabillo](#), Judith Meuli and Eleanor Smeal, a former president of the National Organization for Women. They took the organization's name from polling indicating that more than 50 percent of women in the United States identified as feminists.

The organization's first push was to increase the number of women running for office; at the time, only 5 percent of the members of Congress were female. To galvanize women, Ms. Yorkin produced a multistate tour through 21 cities that she designed like a political convention; at the end of each event, there was what Ms. Smeal characterized in a phone

interview as an “altar call,” with some women pledging to run for office and others pledging to support them.

Within five years, the number of women in Congress doubled ([it is now 28 percent](#)). Ms. Yorkin was so dogged in her efforts and so generous with her financial support, Ms. Smeal said, that Barbara Mikulski, the longtime Democratic senator from Maryland, once described her as a one-woman political action committee.

Ms. Yorkin and her colleagues next turned to mifepristone, which the French government in 1998 had approved for use in family planning centers to induce abortions in the early stages of pregnancy. (Claude Évin, the French health minister, declared the drug “the moral property of women.”) But it would take 12 years for its use to be approved in the United States.

Ms. Yorkin, Ms. Smeal and others gathered support from scientists and politicians, and in 1990 they traveled to Europe to urge the French company that had the patent for mifepristone to seek Food and Drug Administration approval — while, at the same time, anti-abortion activists were fighting to keep it out. The next year, Ms. Yorkin gave \$10 million to her organization to supercharge its efforts. It was believed to be the largest gift to date to a women’s rights group.

Women have to “put our money where our anger is,” [Ms. Yorkin told The Los Angeles Times in 1991](#), adding that, “it is time to stop begging men for our rights” and to “turn our rage into direct action.”



From left, Ms. Yorkin, her Feminist Majority colleagues Eleanor Smeal and Katherine Spillar, and the actress Camryn Manheim at the Global Women’s Rights Awards in Beverly Hills, Calif., in 2018. Credit...Presley Ann/Getty Images

For decades, Ms. Yorkin had been a “Hollywood wife” known for her charitable work. She was married to [Bud Yorkin](#), the television producer who with Norman Lear created

“All in the Family,” the pioneering sitcom centered on a working-class bigot named Archie Bunker that upended television in 1971, and its celebrated spinoffs “Maude” and “The Jeffersons,” as well as other hit shows like “Sanford and Son.”

In 1973, The New York Times [called Ms. Yorkin the “queen of Hollywood society,”](#) noting her work as president of [SHARE Inc.](#) (the initials stand for Share Happily and Reap Endlessly), a Beverly Hills charity that benefits children with disabilities. She often described herself as a typical ’50s housewife — a product of her time who, like many women, was emboldened by second-wave feminism.

She threw herself into the women’s movement in the 1970s, pushing for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment among other efforts. After she left SHARE, she went on to run the Los Angeles Shakespeare Festival and then the L.A. Public Theater, producing work by playwrights like [A.R. Gurney](#) and John Guare. But it was only after her divorce from Mr. Yorkin in 1986, when Ms. Yorkin was 60, that she was able to fully focus on the work that would bring her national attention.

“It wasn’t until a 30-year marriage had gone bust and I reaped the benefits of the California community-property laws that I was able to do something concrete about feminism,” [she said in an interview for her entry](#) in the 1999 book “Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia.”

Ms. Spillar, who is now executive director of the Feminist Majority, remembered Ms. Yorkin saying that in the days before the landmark Roe v. Wade ruling, she helped women find doctors in Mexico who could provide abortions. She said, Ms. Spillar recalled: “I want us to think big and I want us to do more and I want us to hurry up. I’m not going to live forever and I want this done in my lifetime.”

Peggy Diem was born on April 16, 1927, in New York City. (She loathed her given name and went by Margaret in high school and then by Peg.) Her mother, Dora (Lavine) Diem, was a homemaker who had wanted to be an actress. Her father, Frank, was a still photographer who worked for D.W. Griffith and other filmmakers.

Frank, an alcoholic, left the family when Peg was 11; Dora struggled financially and moved in with her mother in Yonkers, N.Y., with whom Peg shared a bed. It was, she would later recall, a traumatic childhood.

Peg was extremely bright and skipped a few grades at Roosevelt High School before being admitted to Barnard College at 16 on a scholarship. But, pressured by her mother, she left after two years to pursue an acting career she did not want. A brief marriage to Newt Arnold, a film director, ended in divorce when he told her he was having an affair, but it brought her to Los Angeles and away from her mother. She married Mr. Yorkin, whom she had met in an agent’s office, in 1954.

“If I’d been a man I would have been extremely successful in business,” she told The Los Angeles Times in 1991. “I could have been Bud Yorkin if I were a man.”

Still, she found her own way. To help finance her theater productions in the late 1970s and early '80s, she ran a bingo game every year on the night of the Academy Awards ceremony. "The gamblers don't care about the Academy Awards," her son recalled her saying, though she used saltier language. A bronze plaque on the door of her office read: "Peg Yorkin Is Beyond Therapy. Do Not Disturb."

In 2001, she gave another \$5 million to her organization to help it acquire Ms. magazine, which was founded by Gloria Steinem and others in 1971 and had been struggling for some time. "We were not a media company, but we were determined not to lose a feminist press, and Gloria asked us for help," Ms. Smeal said. "And Peg said: 'We don't have a choice. If Gloria says we gotta do it, we gotta do it.'"

In addition to her daughter, Ms. Yorkin is survived by a son, David, and four grandchildren.

Since the F.D.A. approved mifepristone in 2000, more than five million women have used it to end their pregnancies; it now accounts for [more than 50 percent](#) of all abortions. But after the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022, ending a woman's guaranteed right to abortion, anti-abortion activists began to focus on access to mifepristone. In April, a judge in Texas suspended the F.D.A.'s decades-old approval of the drug, a ruling that has the potential to take it off the market nationwide. The Supreme Court has halted the ruling for now.

Looking back at the 12-year effort to bring mifepristone to the United States, Ms. Smeal recalled Ms. Yorkin's insistence that the Feminist Majority stay the course. "She said it had to be done and it would save lives and we could not get discouraged," she said, adding, "You can't be summer soldiers in feminism."