

EQUALITY OF RIGHTS UNDER THE LAW SHALL NOT BE DENIED OR ABRIDGED
BY THE UNITED STATES OR BY ANY STATE ON ACCOUNT OF SEX

A quixotic campaign for the ERA

By Renee Creange

Staff Writer

To even the staunchest supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment, the assignment might at first sound like a job for the old "Mission: Impossible" crew, with a tape-recorded message that might go something like this:

"Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to spend two weeks campaigning door-to-door for the ERA in Utah, a state in which 70 percent of the population and 90 percent of the legislators belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — the Mormon church. Most Mormons oppose the ERA."

But to one local ERA supporter, campaigning in Utah seemed like the perfect chance to demonstrate her loyalty.

"I have been pro-ERA for many years," says Doris Baran Hirsch of Closter, a member of the Northern New Jersey Chapter of the National Organization for Women for the past eight years. "But I don't like to feel helpless in a situation. I want to work for the ERA."

On Aug. 21, Hirsch will fly to Salt Lake City, where she will join 17 other women from around the country to participate in the Utah Missionary Project, an educational effort conceived by NOW at its national conference in San Antonio, Tex., last October.

The women will spend the last two weeks of summer in Mormon territory, educating people about what many consider the last, best hope for



Staff photo by Ken Kerbs

Closter's Doris Hirsch, member of the Utah Missionary Project; monument in the Great Salt Lake valley to Mormon founder

Brigham Young, who in 1847 told his followers, "This is the place"; top, banner carried at 1977 ERA march in Washington, D.C.

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Missionaries in Mormon country

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equality in our lifetime — a proposed constitutional amendment that could self-destruct if three more states fail to ratify it by June 30, 1982.

Even if the ERA survives the deadline, however, it is unlikely that Utah will be one of the three states responsible. Hirsch and other local feminists say that winning ratification in Utah would take more than legwork by the best-trained ERA advocates — probably a divine vision like the one that led Joseph Smith to establish the Mormon church in 1830.

Still, they regard the journey to Utah as a necessary one, in the tradition of political activists like Susan B. Anthony and Martin Luther King Jr., who campaigned for their respective causes in areas where support was minimal. Anthony traveled to the Midwest for the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote, while King marched into Selma, Ala., to protest racism during the civil rights movement in the Sixties.

750 households in 12 days

One New Jersey resident who has already made the pilgrimage to Utah agrees. "We knew Utah wasn't going to be ratified," says Joyce Tortorice of Irvington. Tortorice was among the first batch of ERA supporters to participate in the missionary project, which was launched last May and is expected to end in September. Together with eight other ERA advocates, Tortorice canvassed more than 750 households in 12 days.

"The project is a media campaign," she continued. "Mormons consider the ERA a moral issue: 'Men should be men and women women.' Basically, we told them that it wasn't a moral issue — that the restrooms wouldn't be integrated, which was their biggest objection to the amendment."

The Mormon church opposes the ERA, said Tortorice, because the church believes it endangers time-honored moral values by challenging laws that now safeguard the family. Specifically, Tortorice said, the Mormons oppose the ERA because they say it would:

- Make it more difficult for wives and mothers to remain at home by removing legal requirements that make a husband

responsible for the support of his wife and children.

- Place an added tax burden on single-income families because it would require Social Security benefits for homemakers comparable to those now afforded their husbands.

- Make military service compulsory for women.

NOW members dispute these contentions. They say the ERA does not threaten the family, that the chief wage-earner would still be responsible for support, although the economic value of homemakers would be recognized.

Benefits for homemakers

With regard to Social Security benefits, NOW officials contend that the ERA will not increase taxes for single-income families. Instead, they say, it will provide a sound constitutional basis for correcting inequities in the present system. The present system, they say, does not interpret marriage as an economic partnership but rather as one between a wage earner and a dependent. Thus, homemakers receive benefits that are based on their husband's income and, in most cases, receive only 50 percent of the benefits afforded their husbands. A homemaker's work is not considered economically equivalent to that of her husband, NOW officials say. Women are often forced to exist on less money than retired men of the same age, they add.

Responding to claims that the ERA will legalize the conscription of women, NOW officials say that the Congress has always had the power to draft women under its general war powers and probably would do so anyway in the event of an emergency, with or without ratification of the ERA. Restrooms, NOW officials add, will not be sexually integrated. But the ERA would help women fight against denial of restrooms and locker rooms in industrial plants.

NOW members also accuse Mormon church leaders of misleading Mormons about what the ERA says and what it will do if enacted.

"The ERA will only enforce federal and state laws that are on the books now," says Tortorice, who has been coordinator of the ERA task force for NOW's Essex County Chapter since 1980. "It will not affect any private or personal issue.

There are 800 anti-sex discrimination laws on the books that aren't enforced now. If we went state by state to clarify each, it would take 400 years to get them enforced."

Quit job to join campaign

It is for this reason — to dispel myths surrounding the ERA — that women such as Hirsch and Tortorice are going to Utah, a state whose own constitution has contained an equal rights clause since 1896. Hirsch, a free-lance film editor, has been married for 26 years and has two grown sons. Tortorice, a former employee of Westinghouse, is unmarried and unemployed, having quit her job last February to devote an entire year to campaigning for the ERA.

The project in which they are participating bears an ironic, and perhaps intentional, resemblance to the Mormon Church's own missionary project.

Mormon males between the ages of 15 and 21 are expected to leave home to spend two years preaching the Mormon philosophy and seeking converts in communities throughout the United States and abroad. They travel in pairs, pay their own expenses, and live austerely — forsaking alcohol, cigarettes, and dating. Although not obligated by Church doctrine, young Mormon women may spend 18 months doing the same.

Conversely, most participants in the Utah Missionary Project have been women. Like Mormon missionaries, they have footed most, if not all, of the cost. Upon arriving in Utah, each missionary attends a two-day training session before taking to the streets clad in conservative business attire and equipped with the same sales techniques used by Mormons who go door-to-door selling their faith. During their daily eight hours of canvassing, they neither smoke nor drink alcoholic beverages.

'I smiled for two weeks'

They also remain polite in the face of opposition. "I smiled for two weeks," says Tortorice, who kept her composure despite being called "one of Satan's angels" by a Mormon woman. The woman later closed the front door on her two children when they agreed to sign petitions in support of the ERA. To reenter

the house, the children had to ring the doorbell and wait.

Tortorice was not, however, unacquainted with the hostility that the mention of the ERA can arouse. She first witnessed Mormon opposition last October at a pro-ERA speech given by Adele McCollum, a Mormon and a professor of religion and philosophy at Montclair State College. Eight women from the Short Hills Ward of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints allegedly heckled McCollum throughout her address. One woman had been McCollum's closest friend, Tortorice says.

The incident aroused Tortorice's curiosity about the extent of Mormon involvement in anti-ERA activities. "I felt that if the church could send out that many women and if they could be that hostile, there was more to be investigated," Tortorice has since learned that the wealthiest wards of the Mormon church are in Nevada, Arizona, Florida, Missouri, and Illinois — the five states that have not yet ratified the ERA, a fact she says is more than mere coincidence.

Indeed, the charge that the Mormons are lending financial support to anti-ERA activities was the impetus for starting the Utah Missionary project. The project is thought to have come about in part at the suggestion of Sonia Johnson, a fifth-generation Mormon and the daughter of a former Utah seminary leader. Johnson, along with four other Mormon women, was responsible for forming an organization called Mormons for ERA, which exposed the anti-ERA activities of the Mormon Church's Virginia Citizens Coalition in 1979.

Preaching false doctrine

The coalition, charged Johnson, used church buildings and solicited contributions for political purposes, while its leaders prepared political material and signed anti-ERA petitions. The result of the charges was that the coalition was forced to register as a lobbyist because of the money it was spending for political purposes, and Johnson was excommunicated for preaching false doctrine, undermining the authority of church leaders, and hurting the church's missionary project.

"I told] ERA proponents," she wrote in an article that appeared in *The Record* in January 1980, "that they should not hesitate to lobby the church, since it has

ERA battlegrounds

With less than a year remaining in the campaign for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, only 35 of the 38 states needed for ratification of a congressional amendment have voted in favor of the ERA. No state has acted since Indiana approved it on Jan. 12, 1977.

According to a survey conducted by United Press International, ERA supporters face an uphill battle in each of the 15 unratified states, particularly since only Virginia, which has elections in November, is expected to consider the ERA in the final year. Among those 15, however, the key battlegrounds for ratification are Illinois, North Carolina, Florida, and Oklaho-

ma. Eleanor Smeal, president of NOW, adds Missouri to this list, while ERA opponents include South Carolina.

Following is the complete text of the Equal Rights Amendment:

Section 1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Section 3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.

itself chosen to be a political body and as such must expect to be lobbied. . . . I told them in effect, 'Write and tell church leaders that you do not like what they are doing in ERA politics, and if missionaries come to your door you will say you are not interested in a church that is fighting your civil rights.'

"In other words, tell church leaders that if they will listen to you, you will listen to them," she continued. "This, to my mind, is political lobbying, pure and simple."

So far, the project that NOW created because of Johnson's suggestion has been curiously successful. Responses received by the first batch of ERA missionaries indicate a growing grass-roots movement for the ERA in Utah and among Mormons. Tortorice and her group collected 485 petitions, each of which con-

tained at least nine signatures, urging President Reagan to reverse his position on the ERA. They also convinced 85 Mormons to sign post cards asking Spencer W. Kimball to reconsider church opposition to the amendment.

"Thirty percent of the Mormons we asked signed post cards or petitions," said Tortorice. "Ninety percent of everyone signed something."

But for Tortorice, meeting Mormon women who were pro-ERA was more encouraging than any statistic. She remembers the response of an elderly Mormon woman in particular. "She commented that she thought it was great that I had the strength to work for equality not just in Utah but in all the states," she says. "I could have walked 10 miles after that. When you hit a house like that, you can walk all day."

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