

Defying Labels: Richmond NOW's Multi-Generational Dynamism

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
History at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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July 2010

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr. Emilie Raymond and Dr. John Kneebone for taking the time to comment on previous drafts of this thesis. Dr. Kneebone in particular, has read multiple drafts, making many helpful suggestions as well as raising the pertinent questions and issues that needed to be properly addressed. Also, I would like to thank Teresa Cole and our three kids, Caden (4), Elliot (2), and Hollis (4 months). They put up with my long hours in the archives and provided the support needed to finish out this project.

**Table of Contents**

Abstract	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter One: From Grand Narrative to Localized Complexity: The Historiography of NOW	7
Chapter Two: Building a Movement: Pragmatism, Experimentation, and Individuality, 1969-1974	16
Chapter Three: A New Cohort and Organizational Evolution: Changed Tactics for a Narrowed Agenda, 1974-1977	39
Chapter Four: The Cohorts at the End of a Movement, 1977-1982	60
Conclusion: The Multiple Facets of Richmond's Local Movement	66
Bibliography	75

## **Abstract**

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In the late 1960s a group of women became interested in forming a chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in Richmond. These women, led by Zelda Nordlinger and Holt Carlton, followed a pragmatic, big-tent approach to women's activism. This ideological and tactical openness defies traditional historical labels as these women fluidly moved through organizations and tactics in order to gain a stronger local following. Richmond's NOW chapter, while staying attuned to the national organization's platform, remained relatively autonomous and parochial in its tactics and pursuits. Further, Richmond NOW showed a marked change around 1974 with an influx of newer women into the organization. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) struggle provided the local movement with new prominence. With the interjection of new blood the chapter saw a shift in its tactics and policy. The newer cohort of women maintained a belief in a pragmatic, big-tent approach; however, they interpreted it differently. The chapter became more procedural and organizationally based. It also narrowed its focus and tactics, seeing the first generation's free-wheeling style as a hindrance to organizational success. The different political experiences of these two cohorts led to different visions of Richmond's NOW chapter.

## Introduction

In March 1971 an exasperated Zelda Nordlinger wrote a note to the National Organization for Women's (NOW) National Treasurer decrying the apathy that permeated the Richmond women's movement. "Many of us are just apathetic," she declared, adding, "It was my hope that by forming a chapter of NOW we would become more viable."<sup>1</sup> Nordlinger, Holt Carlton and others had formed the Women's Rights Organization of Richmond (W.R.O.R.) in the hopes that it would be a precursor to formal membership with NOW, which required ten dues-paying members for incorporation of a local branch. Nordlinger's pessimism was well warranted as the W.R.O.R. was able to gain only five or six dues-paying members through 1972. The movement that she had hoped to create had not emerged after three years of feminist activism. Only one year later, however, the women's movement in Richmond would see a steep ascent in interest thanks to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). In 1973 a thousand women marched on the Virginia Capitol and by the end of the 1970s Richmond's NOW chapter would reach its peak membership at around ninety.<sup>2</sup> Higher visibility, a greater national and local consciousness, and the demand for women's rights led to increased activism in Richmond as it did across the country.

To see NOW most accurately requires detailed studies of the sundry local perspectives. The superficial similarities that the Richmond chapter shared with the feminist movement writ large hide more than they reveal. By using the analytical tools

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<sup>1</sup> Zelda Nordlinger to Gene Boyer, 13 March 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Bezbatchesko, "Virginia and the Equal Rights Amendment," (MA. Thesis: Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008), 70.

adopted by the second historiographical wave this thesis will fully reveal the Richmond chapter's complexity. In particular there are three aspects of the new historiography that this paper will focus on in its analysis of Richmond NOW. First, this paper proposes that the Richmond movement was pragmatic, rather than ideological, and adopted what in this case can be called a "big tent" approach to women's equality; the big tent being defined as a movement open to many different ideologies, tactics, and individuals.

This approach was adopted by Richmond NOW for two reasons; first was the disparity of interests among the two founding leaders and between the initial members, and second was the belief that this approach represented the best way to attract a large membership as well as to gain notice and acceptance amongst Richmond society. In Richmond, the focal point of the movement's message was liberal in content with an emphasis on economics and politics. From this basis the group then branched outward moving towards radicalism in one direction, by using methods like street theater or confronting issues like rape and abortion, and towards conservative institutions in the other direction, by tackling theology, church hierarchy, and corporate culture. This openness to new issues, tactics, and people defined a movement that was constantly trying to make a niche for itself in an unwelcoming, if not hostile, environment.

Secondly, this paper focuses on local conditions and the resulting balance, or blend, that the chapter made of liberal and radical politics. As Holt Carlton liked to emphasize, Richmond was the "capital of the Confederacy." Its conservative tradition was well entrenched when the women's liberation movement began. Yet, Richmond's movement did not try to ingratiate itself into the local culture. Indeed, it often offered radical tactics or rhetoric to confront the problems that women faced. It would be a

mistake to completely reject the liberal paradigm that NOW as an entity represents, for clearly, Richmond's movement falls into this liberal tradition, with its belief in fighting within the political system for legal equality. As others have noted, however, it is simplistic to analyze NOW and the larger movement through this lens alone.<sup>3</sup> Instead one needs to look at the individual local movement's philosophies, advocacy, and internal dialogue and governance structures.

Terms such as radical and liberal have become rather opaque in the historiography and the general literature of the women's movement. Depending on the study, these terms can reference tactics, ideologies, programs, or any combination of the aforementioned. One of the main premises of this study is that at the local level these terms are inherently too narrow. Rather than black and white, local women and local movements produce gray. As such, this study, like Stephanie Gilmore's study of Memphis, will discuss liberal and radical in their broadest sense in order to show how misleading and vacuous these concepts can be when used to label the women's movement. Looking from the bottom up one finds that the women involved in the movement rarely statically fit under the rubric of liberal or radical but instead fluidly cross boundaries, whether it was advocating for the ERA and changed gender norms or filling petitions while also acting in street theater.

Further, Richmond's movement shows that the local versus national organizational relationship is often misinterpreted. Nordlinger and Carlton founded and

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<sup>3</sup> See Jo Reger, "Organizational Dynamics and Construction of Multiple Feminist Identities in the National Organization for Women," *Gender and Society* 16, no. 5 (Oct., 2002): 710-727; Anne Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Stephanie Gilmore, "The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminist Activism in Memphis, 19717-1982: Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 15 No. 1 (Spring 2003): 94-117.

built up an organization through NOW as a vehicle to further their goals rather than as an opportunity to work for NOW. When NOW did not work to their advantage these women used other organizations, like the National Woman's Caucus or the Women's Lobby of Virginia, or worked individually to accomplish their goals. This suggests that NOW's local branches were autonomous not only in implementing national organizational policy at the local level but that the local movements themselves were autonomous and that the division between liberal and radical is not as clear cut as previously suggested. It is not the individual organization's autonomy that is important to study but rather the collective identity of the women that make up the organization. The historian must focus on the makeup of the women in an organization, and how they interacted with the broader movement to see how an organization defined itself locally as well as how it worked to achieve the goals of the women's movement.

Thirdly, this paper will analyze the generational shift that occurred in the middle of the 1970s. Nancy Whittier was the first to use this analytical tool in the historiography of the women's movement in her essay on the movement in Columbus, Ohio.<sup>4</sup> Whittier argued that there were three main periods to the women's movement, its emergence in the late 1960s, its peak in the mid 1970s, and its decline in the 1980s. From there she states that:

Building on political generations theory, I have coined the term "micro-cohort" to describe small-scale variations among participants in the women's movement at different times between 1969 and 1984. Micro-cohorts are groups of participants with distinct formative experiences and collective identities that emerge at and shape distinct phases of the women's movement. Each micro-cohort entered the women's movement at a specific point in its history, engaged in different social movement activities, had a characteristic

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<sup>4</sup> Nancy Whittier, "Turning It Over: Personnel Change in the Columbus, Ohio, Women's Movement, 1969-1984," in *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 180-198.



political culture, and modified feminist collective identity. Micro-cohorts differed from one another because they were politicized at different times.<sup>5</sup>

The definition of pragmatism and the relationship between liberal and radical in Richmond's NOW chapter changed as a micro-cohort shift occurred around 1973-74. The first cohort, led by Zelda Nordlinger and Holt Carlton, were baptized by fire, working in a city that was at best indifferent, but more likely antagonistic, to their claims. This hostility led these few activists to work in a free-form environment that was not dependent on institutional governing structures. As a result these women focused on publicity, experimentation, and debate. The second cohort, strongly influenced by Jean Hellmuth, came around during what Whittier recognized as the peak of the movement. The ERA and other issues pushed the women's movement to the forefront of the nation's consciousness. As a result, the movement grew and came to have different expectations.

Within this changed climate the Richmond NOW chapter changed as well. Encompassing a greater number of women it became more institutionalized, incorporated more part-time activists, and worked within greater ideological constraints. As the first cohort became less active the second cohort redefined Richmond NOW's goals and identities while maintaining its pragmatic approach and its willingness to blend the liberal with the radical.

To conclude this introduction, a brief survey of the paper's organization and research is necessary. First, this thesis is organized chronologically. Chapter one surveys NOW's historiographical literature. Chapters two, three and four analyze the two cohorts. Chapter two focuses on the first cohort, which was most active in the years 1969-1974. Chapter three looks at how the second cohort redefined Richmond NOW in

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<sup>5</sup> Whittier, 181.

the years 1973-1977. Finally, chapter four analyzes how the two cohorts withdrew or receded from the movement, particularly from 1977-1982. The paper concludes by analyzing where a study of Richmond NOW fits into the historiographical arguments.

Secondly, a brief survey of the sources is necessary. This paper began as a shorter paper on the strategies of Zelda Nordlinger and Holt Carlton, the two pioneers of Richmond NOW's first micro-cohort. These women left behind a vast archival record of not only all their actions but a large portion of their letter writing. As a result, the many contributions that they made to the local movement are amply documented in three archival libraries, the Earl Gregg Swem library at William and Mary, James Branch Cabell Library at Virginia Commonwealth University, and the Library of Virginia..

In looking at NOW's second micro-cohort, however, the archival record was much thinner. Many of these women did not leave behind their records, exceptions being Juanita White and Jean Hellmuth. Instead information came from two places. First, NOW newsletters, letters traded with Nordlinger and Carlton, and newspaper articles provided the best archival evidence for this generation, rather than their own written word. And secondly, much information came from interviews with a handful of women who were active in the women's movement. These interviews did much to clarify how the two micro-cohorts viewed themselves and each other as well as to see the different ways that they defined success and pragmatism.

## **Chapter One: From Grand Narrative to Localized Complexity: The Historiography of NOW**

Until the last decade, the history of NOW was largely written in the context of the greater women's movement. As a result, little research had been done on individual chapters or, for that matter, the organization itself. These larger histories have played a decisive role, however, in creating a perception of NOW that is worth investigating. The historical consensus on NOW has it as a liberal organization that moved to the left over time and came to represent something of an umbrella organization ideologically. Originally created by women that identified with the Old Left, it emphasized improving the political and economic status of women before a change in leadership and a second wave of membership drove NOW to the left in tactics and platform in the early 1970s. This move and the resulting radicals' acceptance of a liberal organization resulted in a movement with factions that worked together pragmatically on similar interests while overlooking each other's differences. The degree of respect or credit given to NOW, in many cases, varies with the historians' ideological biases but all see the forging of a basic agreement between the liberal and radical wings, who worked together to achieve common, if not identical, ends.<sup>6</sup>

These histories, many written by women who were part of the movement, place NOW within a larger narrative of the women's rights movement. This top-down approach treats the organization as a monolithic entity. Leaders, like Betty Freidan, or major issues, like the Equal Rights Amendment battle, receive the emphasis. As a result,

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<sup>6</sup> For writers that are not sympathetic to liberal feminism see Alice Echols, "'Nothing Distant About It': Women's Liberation and Sixties Radicalism," in *Shaky Ground: The 60s and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); Ellen Willis, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," *Social Test: The 60's Without Apology*, no. 9/10 (Spring-Summer 1984) 91-118.

these histories are often overly simplified. For instance, Olive Banks argues that liberal and radical feminists both demanded the right to an abortion but, “there were, however, divisions on tactics, with NOW preferring the more traditional method of lobbying and the radical feminists more direct action, such as picketing, demonstrations and civil disobedience.”<sup>7</sup> Claims like this are tenable only as generalizations about national organizations for as soon as local branches are analyzed the behaviors become less dichotomous and the lines more blurred.

These analyses, therefore, play down diversity within the organization. In Flora Davis’ *Moving the Mountain* one can see this mentality at work when she states in her only discussion on local chapters: “Many of NOW’s achievements in its early years were due to the efforts of its local chapters. New recruits joining almost any NOW chapter were immediately invited to sign up for a task force and go to work in some area that interested them.”<sup>8</sup> This important statement is never fleshed out in detail. It implies that NOW was an instrument that local women used on their own terms, in order to focus on issues important to them. Instead, as evidenced by *Moving the Mountain*, NOW’s historical narrative of national battles over the ERA, abortion, or equal employment, drowns out any pluralism within the various organizations. The larger narrative has space only for a nod to localities.

If the first historiographical wave treated NOW as a national organization, subsequent historians began to look at NOW as a decentralized grassroots organization beginning as early as 1975 with Jo Freeman’s *The Politics of Women’s Liberation*.

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<sup>7</sup> Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Martin Robertson & Company Ltd., 1981) 236.

<sup>8</sup> Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women’s Movement in America Since 1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991) 58.

Freeman saw NOW's tension as structural rather than ideological. In her analysis, the tension between liberal and radical did not cause NOW's internal strains and limitations, which actually came from the tension between local chapters and national headquarters. Freeman noted that, "local chapters have sprung up almost incidentally, usually through the efforts of local people, not national organizers. They continue to function very autonomously from one another."<sup>9</sup> Using Freeman's work as a foundation, other authors have begun to study the influence of the organization's grassroots on its national policy, the influence national policy then had on grassroots chapters, and how different chapters crafted different constructions of feminist identity.<sup>10</sup> In these works the complexity and decentralization of NOW become its defining characteristics. These historians focus on the differences in social class, ideology, environment, and circumstances that created a bottom-up structure that gave real power in the organization to local activists.

Suzanne Staggenborg, following Freeman but coming to a similar conclusion as the first generation of historians, argues that Chicago's NOW chapter focused on a narrow set of strategies and tactics due to its highly centralized and formalized structure. In contrast, the more radical Chicago Women's Liberation Union (C.W.L.U.) was more ephemeral but its lack of structure allowed it to experiment and, therefore, push the women's movement in more innovative ways. Staggenborg goes on to argue that while one could conclude that a movement must face these trade offs in organization one could

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<sup>9</sup> Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and its Relation to the Policy Process* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1975) 87-88.

<sup>10</sup> Maryann Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Suzanne Staggenborg, "Stability and Innovation in the Women's Movement: A Comparison of Two Movement Organizations," *Social Problems* 36, no. 1 (Feb., 1989) 75-92.; Jo Reger, "Organizational Dynamics and Construction of Multiple Feminist Identities in the National Organization for Women," *Gender and Society* 16, no. 5 (Oct., 2002): 710-727.

theoretically see “an alternative organizational structure that combines the strengths of each.”<sup>11</sup>

If Staggenborg’s argument still sticks to a liberal/radical divide, Jo Reger studies two NOW chapters, Cleveland and New York, and shows how their governance structures affected their ability to bridge class or ideological divides. In Cleveland, feminism defined by social class split the chapter because it lacked an apparatus to settle differences between middle class women from west Cleveland and working class women in east Cleveland, while in New York ideological differences between politically oriented feminists and cultural feminists did not subvert the group because of structural elements within the organization that provided outlets for both ideologies.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it was not differences between women but the organizational structure that determined the chapters’ ability to cohere.

Maryann Barakso’s book *Governing NOW* follows Reger in emphasizing governance. Throughout Barakso contends that NOW’s actions were shaped and constrained by its governance structure, which she defined as its guiding principles and the decision-making apparatus based on those principles. These principles resulted in a decentralized organization that slowly diffused decision-making, first setting up regional offices and creating four vice president positions and then adding state offices and giving them a percentage of dues when regionalization had proved to be too centralized for the membership. Barakso focuses on the central organization but follows other recent studies in dissecting the sociological factors that influenced NOW’s history. This approach allows Barakso to see that the organization did not begin in moderation. “In fact,” she

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<sup>11</sup> Staggenborg, 89.

<sup>12</sup> Reger, 710-727.

writes, “one reason Friedan felt so reluctant initially to organize a women’s organization was that she did not see the NAACP model -- the one frequently suggested to her -- as radical enough for the purpose.”<sup>13</sup>

These historians, following Freeman’s lead, saw that NOW’s creation and maintenance of local governing structures mattered to the goals and outcomes of local activism. Other historians, however, have looked to local chapters, or regions, to dispel the myth of the liberal/radical divide, as well as to show the diversity of issues that occupied the women’s movement. Jane Sherron de Hart and Donald Matthews use North Carolina as a test-case to analyze the failure of the ERA. In *Sex, Gender, and The Politics of ERA: A State and the Nation*, they argue that the pro-ERA movement was never able to gain the upper hand tactically or organizationally. They sensed a naivete that came because the women, “had actually assumed that ERA was a legal issue requiring only logical explanation by experts.”<sup>14</sup> The breakthrough of their work, however, was to show how North Carolina’s discourse was distinct from other states and to then pull apart that discourse by analyzing the pro- and anti-ERA sides. By showing that the battle was not just political but also cultural they were able to show how the ERA battle affected North Carolina, and its women’s movement. As they note, “In symbolizing this principle [equality], the amendment mobilized women as no other issue since suffrage; and it’s in the forging of a collective experience that its significance lies.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Maryann Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Matthews and Jane Sherron de Hart, *Sex, Gender, and The Politics of ERA: A State and the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 65.

<sup>15</sup> Matthews, 124.

Jane Sherron de Hart explicitly made clear the virtues of local studies in a 1997 essay when she noted that, “This more inclusive focus also challenges customary interpretations that ignore contemporary feminism’s southern roots and the distinctive contribution of the South’s black women.”<sup>16</sup> Noting the “difference that differences make” she argued for local studies, particularly of the south.

Stephanie Gilmore took on this task in an article on Memphis’ NOW chapter. In the article she explored what the terms radical and liberal meant on a local level, concluding that the historiography had over dichotomized their relationship. Noting that “scholars have acknowledged that liberal feminists and radical feminists borrowed structures, styles, tactics, and ideologies from one another, but they have continued to talk about the two branches as distinct, and their studies neglect the impact that location has played in feminist organizational structures, issues, and tactics,” she preceded to show how Memphis NOW engaged in both liberal (ERA) and radical (rape/domestic abuse) agendas that derived from local concerns.<sup>17</sup> Gilmore argues that it is only by understanding location that one can understand tactics, ideology, and their resulting complexities. Her conclusion was that “If their strategies, tactics, goals, and methods are examined, most feminists could be defined as both liberal and radical.”<sup>18</sup>

Gilmore has also shown the importance that local chapters had in defining NOW and the larger women’s movement, as well as the autonomy they had in achieving their goals. Local activists did not just, as Walt Whitman said, contain multitudes; they were

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<sup>16</sup> Jane Sherron de Hart, “Second Wave Feminism(s) and the South: The Difference That Differences Make,” In *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 292.

<sup>17</sup> Stephanie Gilmore, “The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminist Activism in Memphis, 1971-1982: Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide,” *National Women’s Studies Association Journal*, 15 No. 1 (Spring 2003): 95.

<sup>18</sup> Gilmore, 96.



often more radical, or conservative, than the national organization. In order to understand how NOW grappled with issues like lesbianism Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski contend that one must look to the local chapters. The authors argue that, “top-down approaches to social movements and their organizations do not allow for an adequate historical understanding of a group's collective identity. Instead, we must turn to what people did "on the ground" to understand how groups implement inclusively and build common cause.”<sup>19</sup> What Betty Friedan called a “lavender menace,” was much more acceptable on the local level, as is evidenced by the 1971 Resolution on Lesbianism at the NOW National Conference, a grassroots-led resolution declaring lesbian rights women’s rights. The authors argue that, “members had to resolve for themselves who was in and who was out of NOW and the women's movement.”<sup>20</sup> In some chapters this meant acceptance and in others, such as Memphis, it caused conflict. Regardless it is within the confines of local organizations that one finds issues and identities being worked out. The real work of defining what the women’s movement was, and what it was not, occurred in local task forces: “As chapters blossomed they also created task forces that reflected the needs of the local membership . . . They provided feminists with a way to tackle the many issues that women faced . . . Through them, women dedicated themselves to particular issues as part of a larger organization and movement seeking feminist change.”<sup>21</sup>

Finally this group of historians has shown how widely encompassing the women’s movement was. Anne Valk, in a work that does not explicitly touch on NOW but analyzes the broader women’s movement in the District of Columbia, argues that

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<sup>19</sup> Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski, “A Part and Apart: Lesbian and Straight Feminist Activists Negotiate Identity in a Second-Wave Organization,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 16 No. 1 (January 2007): 113.

<sup>20</sup> Gilmore and Kaminski, 110.

<sup>21</sup> Gilmore and Kaminski, 102.

“although feminists used such categories [liberal and radical] to describe their approaches, their grassroots activities revealed frequent variations, compromises, and adaptations, suggesting that liberal and radical feminism often overlapped and transmuted to adapt to specific demands.”<sup>22</sup> Further the movement “should be understood within the context of the parallel, occasionally overlapping, and often contentious movements that arose at the same time.”<sup>23</sup> Valk’s look at Washington argues that local movements overlap and influence each other. Further, she shows how these movements were ruled by pragmatism and not by ideology. The women of Washington united around issues, like welfare and abortion, which brought them together despite varying ideological backgrounds. Organizations blurred, blended, and broke up as the issues changed and women went in different directions. The women’s movement, therefore, did not stand alone but instead became incorporated into sundry other movements in an ever-adjusting set of social circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, there has been a third group of historians who have attacked the white, middle-class perspective through which most of second-wave feminism, especially in regard to NOW, has been viewed. Becky Thompson has called for a different paradigm of multiracial feminism. She argues against the conventional wisdom that “women of color feminists emerged in reaction to (and therefore later than) white feminism,” calling instead for history that includes their actions from the beginning of the movement.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Anne Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Valk, 4.

<sup>24</sup> For article that focuses on N.O.W.’s poverty platform see, Marisa Chappell, “Rethinking Women’s Politics in the 1970s: The League of Women Voters and the National Organization for Women Confront Poverty,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 13 No 4 (Winter 2002): 154-179.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson argues that women of color had been involved on three fronts in the 1970s; working with white-dominated groups, working in mixed-gender organizations, and developing their own

Others, like Jane Hannam, have tried to broaden the narrative arguing that “white middle-class western women” had too parochial a lens.<sup>26</sup> These approaches began to give a voice to constituencies that had not previously been heard and began to show how they influenced the second wave of feminism.

In sum the historiography of NOW and the larger women’s movement has moved toward micro-studies as well as groups, such as African-American women that had previously been neglected. These newer trends are less interested in the macro movement and instead focus on what impact the movement, or NOW, had on localities and at the grassroots. As a result the more recent historians have shown how widely local movements diverged in tactics, ideology, and emphasis. Rather than a monolithic movement, NOW has been proven to be a dynamic movement; fitting a variety of labels, incorporating a diverse membership, and engaged in an array of issues.

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autonomous organizations. Becky Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” *Feminist Studies*, 28, no. 2 (Summer 2002) 336-360.

<sup>26</sup> “Too often the priorities of white, middle-class Western women, in particular, the achievement of the vote and equal rights, are used as a lens through which to view feminism as a whole.” Jane Hannam, *Feminism* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2007) 2-3.

**Chapter Two: Building a Movement: Pragmatism, Experimentation, and Individuality, 1969-1974**

On October 12, 1971, Zelda Nordlinger, a co-founder of Richmond's chapter of the National Organization for Women and a leader in its broader women's liberation movement, spoke to the Fort Lee Officers Wives Club at Camp Pickett. She had been invited by Mrs. T.E. Ross, the program chairman for the club, much to the dismay of many of the members. Voicing their displeasure that a feminist had been invited to speak, some of the ladies of Fort Lee picketed outside the meeting hall while Nordlinger gave her presentation. The speech did little to dampen the hostility in the air. Nordlinger called for the end of domesticity while also disparaging the military; "Are we to sit idly by while our men in uniform plot and plan destruction while we weave pot-holders for the annual fund-raising event?" Extending her logic she added, "the system [capitalism] must depend on the free labor of women in the home . . . Our society encourages the woman to sublimate herself in her husband's success."<sup>27</sup>

As expected, these ideas did not go over well with military wives. Ruth Shuey, a journalist writing in the *Hopewell (Va.) News*, hyperbolically declared, "Women's Liberation was set back ten years Tuesday, when Zelda K. Nordlinger of the National Organization for Women tangled with officers' wives at Fort Lee." It was not equal rights that the wives rejected but Nordlinger's "effort to denounce all satisfied women and the 'legal prostitution' of many married women."<sup>28</sup> Nordlinger knew her rhetoric was controversial and strident but her goal was to raise the consciousness of these

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<sup>27</sup> Zelda Nordlinger, Speech to the First Officer's Wives Club, 12 October 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Shuey, "Who is to liberate whom?," *The Hopewell (Va.) News*, 14 October 1971, N/A.

women; a goal she just may have reached. Six days after the event program chairman Ross acknowledged Nordlinger's coup de main remarking in a brief thank you letter that, "You woke many a stagnant mind and brought on a new surge of awareness to us."<sup>29</sup>

In what can only be described as a speech diametrically opposed to Nordlinger's, Holt Carlton, the other co-founder of Richmond's NOW chapter, gave a speech a month later to the Focus Club. Her speech was accommodating in tone and message. Carlton went out of her way to defuse confrontational language stating, "If you'll go back through history (not herstory but history)," while also voicing an inclusive message, "This is a two-sex revolution. It's a liberation for both men and women." Instead of militancy one hears a plea for equality: "A really nice person will listen with ears and heart. It's a wonderful feeling when somebody is listening to you ---- [sic] especially somebody you admire and respect."<sup>30</sup>

Nordlinger and Carlton were the co-founders of Richmond's NOW chapter and leaders in the general women's liberation movement in Richmond in the 1970s, both in letter writing and in activism. Yet, they based their advocacy for women's equality on differing philosophies and emphases.

Richmond, Virginia, was as unwelcoming a place as any for the women's rights movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In a statement that she made on Richmond NOW's tenth anniversary, Nordlinger declared, "Being a feminist in Richmond can be compared to being an evangelist missionary in a house of ill-repute . . . it's been damned

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<sup>29</sup> T.E. Ross to Zelda Nordlinger, 18 October 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>30</sup> Holt Carlton, Speech to The Focus Club, 17 November 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

hard.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Virginia had never ratified the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, and the ERA looked politically unfeasible as well.<sup>32</sup> The city’s two daily newspapers, the *Times-Dispatch* and *News Leader*, were reliably conservative. And its southern conservative culture embraced the patriarchal view of woman as the ‘southern belle’. Richmond, therefore, was not ideal for starting a women’s rights movement as reflected in the struggle to create a reliable organization. On August 26, 1970, Nordlinger, Carlton, and Jane Chittom founded the Women’s Rights Organization of Richmond. This organization was created as a precursor to an official charter with NOW.<sup>33</sup> Seven months after the initial founding, Nordlinger wrote to NOW’s National Treasurer: “Many of us are just apathetic. It was my hope that by forming a chapter of NOW we would become more viable.”<sup>34</sup> Support was tepid and Nordlinger found that women’s initial interest did not translate into activism.<sup>35</sup> Two years after its founding, the Women’s Rights Organization of Richmond was still not ready or “interested” in forming a N.O.W. chapter.<sup>36</sup>

The inability to gain membership is something that the women in Richmond NOW, and the broader Richmond movement in general, would face throughout the 1970s. As late as 1975 Eleanor Lawrence would lament that, “this was painful to realize,

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<sup>31</sup> Zelda Nordlinger, “Statement on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Richmond Chapter of the National Organization for Women,” 28 April 1983, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>32</sup> While Nordlinger and Margaret Williams in particular tried to lobby for the E.R.A. the General Assembly never passed the amendment.

<sup>33</sup> NOW bylaws required ten dues paying members in order to gain an official charter. Around 1971 to 1972 Women’s Rights had 5 to 6 active members and roughly 25 inactive members. Richmond N.O.W. eventually reached a peak of around 90 members in the late 1970s.

<sup>34</sup> Zelda Nordlinger to Gene Boyer, 13 March 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>35</sup> In a letter to regional coordinator Sylvia Roberts Nordlinger refers to these women as “deadwood.” They were women on their list that needed to be weeded out in order to identify how many women were truly members. Zelda Nordlinger to Sylvia Roberts, 8 April 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>36</sup> Zelda Nordlinger to Gene Boyer, 13 March 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

not a single woman was interested in N.O.W. . . . Somehow, we have an unsavory reputation as though we were not quite “nice” women one would like to associate with.”<sup>37</sup> This small number, however, also allowed the women involved in the Women’s Rights Organization to experiment and take on a variety of issues. As Holt Carlton wrote to an inquiring college student, “Richmond, as everybody knows, is quite traditional and conservative – and so, those members of Women’s Liberation Movement are brave pioneers.”<sup>38</sup> The wide-ranging self-autonomy that resulted from these small numbers shows through from the beginning. In 1970, the Women’s Rights in Richmond Organization engaged in tactics and issues as diverse as testifying before the General Assembly on abortion, desegregating an all-men’s soup bar, picketing the *Times-Dispatch* for its discriminatory want-ads, and speaking before religious groups, psychological consultants, and personnel administrators. It also continued to try and build an effective organization through consciousness-raising and weekly meetings.

The big tent approach that resulted from this autonomy was based at its core on liberal values. The fact that these women wanted to join NOW showed that these activists espoused economic and political goals that were not shared by radical feminists or conservative women. They wanted to work through the system, lobbying political institutions for change. This was the foundation from which the organization based their actions. Philosophically, Nordlinger and Carlton believed in equality of the sexes, not separation. In testimony before the Virginia Commission on the Status of Women Nordlinger provided fifteen political demands that, would “bring fifty-three per cent of

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<sup>37</sup> Eleanor Lawrence to Zelda Nordlinger, March 1975 – June 1976, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>38</sup> Holt Carlton to Nancy Feldman, 30 December 1970, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

the population of this country, namely women, into equal participation as free citizens in our democratic government.”<sup>39</sup> These demands included equality in education, economics, marriage, and contraception, the core platform of liberals and specifically NOW. Holt Carlton saw the ERA not as a “program which would weaken the unique qualities of men or women,” but instead as one “to strengthen their mutual capacities.”<sup>40</sup> In this view women were not to take on traits of men but be allowed to fully evolve as women once society’s discriminatory laws were null and void.

Promoting a liberal agenda meant pushing for economic and political rights. Economically NOW focused on litigating through the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (E.E.O.C.). Ending discrimination in newspaper want ads had been the issue that brought together NOW’s founders. In Richmond they attacked this issue with vigor. By June 1974 Nordlinger herself had filed twenty-six discrimination suits.<sup>41</sup> Richmond NOW acted primarily as the mediator in these cases. Nordlinger and Carlton encouraged fellow members to actively pursue incidents of discrimination. These would then be sent to Carlton, who would relay them to the Atlanta E.E.O.C., where they had an ally who would process their cases, thereby bypassing the Washington, D.C., branch that was less friendly to women’s claims.<sup>42</sup> In some instances Nordlinger and Carlton were themselves involved as plaintiffs. These cases included, Holt Carlton v. Aunt Sarah’s Pancake House (1974), Holt Carlton v. Petersburg General Hospital (1974), Zelda

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<sup>39</sup> Zelda Nordlinger, Testimony before the Virginia Commission on the Status of Women, 15 April 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>40</sup> Holt Carlton, “To Editor of “Voice of the People,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 11 May 1972, sec A.

<sup>41</sup> Women’s Lobby of Virginia to Zelda Nordlinger, 23 June 1974, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>42</sup> This shows the hostility women faced when dealing with the E.E.O.C. Instead of sending their complaints to Washington D.C. which was the office for their region they had to send it to Atlanta if they wanted anybody to act on it.



Nordlinger v. Southwestern General Life Insurance Company, and Zelda Nordlinger v. Richmond Times-Dispatch. The majority of these cases were settled in arbitration, with both sides making compromises.

Carlton and Nordlinger owed much of their success in litigation with the E.E.O.C. to their relationship with the national organization. They coordinated their E.E.O.C. disputes with Sylvia Roberts, the Regional Coordinator in the South for NOW.<sup>43</sup> Roberts provided contacts, guidelines, and leadership when they were just beginning to pursue litigation. NOW allowed them to pursue bureaucratic change by providing resources, assistance, and an organization with a national name. Nordlinger became so adept that other NOW chapters would ask for her expertise in implementing Title IX, the law providing girls with equal sporting opportunities in public education, in the summer of 1974.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the rest of the early 1970s these women would deal with other economic issues, albeit without any consistency. These emphases also were clearly indebted to the national organization's lobbying and/or expertise. For example, in July 1972, Nordlinger and Carlton visited the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company of Virginia, ostensibly to observe the company's hiring policy. This visit produced no changes locally, nor did Carlton's continued lobbying after the visit. Their tour of C & P had been inspired by large scale, national protest at A.T.&T's widespread gender discrimination and was an example of national-level politics providing Carlton and

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<sup>43</sup> Roberts connected Richmond NOW with Elizabeth Paschall who worked for the Atlanta branch of the E.E.O.C. Zelda Nordlinger to Sylvia Roberts, 19 October 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>44</sup> Cynthia Eichberg to Zelda Nordlinger, 18 July 1974, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Nordlinger with a chance to gain publicity for the cause, through local media coverage, as well as a chance to lobby the company.<sup>45</sup>

Political activism was Richmond's women's movement's main activity through the early 1970s and is a primary example of its willingness to rely on more than one organization. Early on the women in the movement began lobbying for passage of the ERA. Nordlinger took charge of this issue by becoming a registered lobbyist for the Virginia Women's Political Caucus from 1972 to 1974. The Women's Political Caucus, a political off-shoot of NOW, was created in 1971 to encourage the election of women candidates and to lobby in support of women's issues. The Richmond women's movement basically saw the two organizations as interchangeable and placed the emphasis in 1972 and again in 1974 on the V.W.P.C. rather than NOW. Nordlinger and Margaret Williams, a college freshman, began lobbying the General Assembly in 1972. They lobbied for laws, spoke before congressional committees, and worked to raise the consciousnesses of the legislators. Their work achieved little in the way of policy and legislation but it gained the press' attention.<sup>46</sup> Margaret Williams had a profile in the *Times-Dispatch*, amongst other publicity. Their work also provided experience that would allow the movement to expand. Nordlinger's work during this period would establish her as a political leader in the liberal wing of Virginia's feminist movement. As the seventies progressed she would direct, or be asked to direct, legislation workshops at conferences and in 1974 she would lead Richmond NOW's ERA program. Political

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<sup>45</sup> These visits occurred throughout the country and succeeded nationally in putting more pressure on A, T, & T.

<sup>46</sup> "Last year we did practically nothing. The anti's crawled out of the woodwork about this time of year and caught us flat-footed . . . . And we do have our heads together for a high-class, professional-caliber, lobbying effort" Zelda Nordlinger to Elise Heinz, 26 October 1973, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

activists, from northern Virginia to the Williamsburg region, would also continuously ask her for advice and aid.

The V.W.P.C. also lobbied the bureaucracy to increase the number of women in executive appointed positions. This was a major focus of its 1972 political campaign. Much like E.E.O.C. litigation, Williams and Nordlinger acted as conduits. Women would get in touch with Williams when interested in a governmental job opening, and Williams and Nordlinger would then apply pressure to the Governor and Lieutenant Governor's offices. They endorsed women for the State Corporation Committee, Virginia Commission for Children and Youth, the Economic Development Advisory Committee, Committee on Education for Health Professions and Occupations, State Council of Higher Education, and for the Department of Labor and Industry among other positions. These lobbying efforts largely failed, especially economic appointments, a source of much frustration, but it allowed the V.W.P.C. to become familiar with the bureaucracy and to subtly shift the debate. They also worked hard, albeit unsuccessfully, to get Jane Chittom, one of their own, elected to the House of Delegates in 1972, including shutting down the consciousness-raising sessions of the Women's Rights Organization in order to focus all women's attention on her race.

The women in Richmond were naturally drawn to politics. Not only did they spend most of their time publicly on politics but they also spent a tremendous amount of time lobbying members of Congress through organized letter writing. In 1970-71 Nordlinger and Carlton sent over ten letters to Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr. and Representative David Satterfield, while Nordlinger sent seven to Senator William Spong and Carlton sent two to Senator Samuel Ervin (NC), all in regard to the ERA. This does

not include the dozens of letters sent to other representatives in Congress or to those sent to state Senators and Delegates when the amendment came up for ratification in Virginia. Politics, however, did not remain solely in the domain of NOW. Nordlinger and Williams worked through the V.W.P.C., New University Conference (NUC), and the Women's Lobby of Virginia.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, in times of increased political activity other aspects of the movement slowed down or completely stopped; as in 1971 when the women suspended the weekly "rap session" in order to run Jane Chittom's campaign.<sup>48</sup>

Economic and political equality may have been the ultimate goal of Richmond's liberation movement but the means of achieving those goals came less from NOW's national agenda and more from consciousness-raising, an Old Leftist program brought back in vogue by the radical movement. Consciousness-raising had been controversial within N.O.W. because it focused on educating rather than advocacy, one of NOW's "guiding principles."<sup>49</sup> Eventually it would come to be accepted as the second generation of NOW members, of which Nordlinger and Carlton were a part, brought increased radicalism to the organization. In Richmond consciousness-raising took on three forms, private meetings, public speeches and writing, and public protest. In spending a large portion of their time engaged in consciousness-raising these women were looking less to create an enlightened vanguard or to alter sexual relations like many in the radical

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<sup>47</sup> "We will take political action to achieve our goals. The Caucus served a most important function by bringing this message to the public." This quote emphasizes the commitment to politics as change (liberal agenda) as well as the willingness to alternate between groups. Zelda Nordlinger to Llewellyn Greenwood, 18 October 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>48</sup> Women's Rights of Richmond, *Newsletter #8*, 16 July 1971, p. 1, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>49</sup> Maryann Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 49.

community and more to pragmatically spread their message amongst the women in Richmond as well as to gain a committed membership.

Consciousness-raising was the main focus of these Richmond women early on because of Richmond's conservative culture and the hostility to progressive causes that was ingrained in the city's collective psyche. Starting as early as April 6, 1971, the Women's Rights in Richmond group set up a structure for consciousness-raising by meeting two or three times each month with an orientation for new members on the first Sunday of each month.<sup>50</sup> Two months later they were still trying to work out the kinks looking for a "workable medium that retains spontaneity in discussion, without chaos . . . The idea of women paying serious intellectual attention to each other is a kind of revolution in itself, and very difficult to carry out."<sup>51</sup>

These meetings would be temporarily suspended to campaign for Jane Chittom, who was running for the House of Delegates and was an early leader of the W.R.O.R., but a year later Eleanor Lawrence, an early member of the organization, would still be complaining about the "futility of our rap sessions."<sup>52</sup> The leaders of W.R.O.R. were consistently disappointed in the quality of these meetings, as evidenced by Lawrence's despair. Too often they thought the meetings devolved into complaints and emotions without meeting the intellectual rigor that leaders, like Lawrence, desired. Further, they

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<sup>50</sup> Women's Rights of Richmond, *Newsletter #8*, 6 April 1971, p. 1, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>51</sup> Women's Rights of Richmond, *Newsletter #8*, 23 June 1971, p. 1, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>52</sup> Lawrence had hoped these meetings would pull together a small group of women that would create a "viable organization" rather than the handful of women who were running women's liberation. She believed the best step was to stop c-r and move into politics, "grooming women" for city council. Eleanor Lawrence to Zelda Nordlinger, 14 April 1972, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

were not convincing women to join the W.R.O.R. This led Lawrence to observe that, “when one’s best is given in generous portions and it all goes down the drain the next step is to look for another project.”<sup>53</sup>

If private meetings were unsuccessful in gaining new women, public forums acted as a place in which these women, especially Nordlinger, could confront skeptical Richmonders involuntarily. Nordlinger used her speeches to confront, confound, and to push the boundary by using language and making assumptions that most Richmonders were not accustomed to. In 1971 Nordlinger spoke to a prominent business group, the Richmond First Club, on the anniversary of the beginning of the suffrage movement. The group, expecting an innocuous presentation from women advocates on the anniversary of women’s suffrage, had clearly not understood the goals or ideology of Richmond’s women’s movement. Nordlinger began by asking all the men to stand by their chairs and “reverently” acknowledge forty feminists from United States history who had made strides towards equality.<sup>54</sup> Having paid respect to her elders she opened with an acerbic proposition,

Gentlemen: I welcome this opportunity to speak to the Richmond-First Club, and I sincerely hope that the following remarks will be taken in the spirit of consideration for the weaker sex, namely – men! I did not come here to praise you gentlemen – merely to castrate you.<sup>55</sup>

Her irreverence in this formal atmosphere caused some to walk out, but Nordlinger was clearly looking to cause outrage. Earlier in 1971 in a speech before the Advertising Club

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<sup>53</sup> Eleanor Lawrence to Zelda Nordlinger, 14 April 1972, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>54</sup> Zelda Nordlinger, interview by Betsy Brinson, tape recording, 7 July 2007, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>55</sup> Later on in the speech she asks, “By the way . . . what is a “gal friday?” What is a broad? As High Priestess, I demand an answer!” Zelda Nordlinger, Speech to the Richmond-First Club, 26 August 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

of Richmond, Nordlinger asserted that political males were under “gun and slave influence” which kept gender spheres apart economically.<sup>56</sup> This was a more militant expression of a typically liberal argument that men as well as women would be better off with women’s equality. By this argument men were being coerced, through violence and conformity, to uphold traditional gender roles. In 1970 Nordlinger gave four speeches and in 1971 she gave eleven. Nordlinger’s message was consistently liberal in ideology but radical in presentation. These speeches provided an outlet to push the debate farther toward equality as well as speed up the city’s collective consciousness-raising at a time when soliciting memberships privately was proving unsuccessful.

Nordlinger also published her arguments in a column titled “From Across the River James,” for a local South Side of Richmond weekly called *The Observer*. The column was criticism on three fronts; criticism of suburban culture, selfishness and/or greed, and the role of women in society. The caustic wit that she showed in speeches shines through in her writing as well. Discussing the wide-spread apathy that surrounded the city’s annexation of parts of the South Side she argued “One prevalent opinion emerges, however, which may or may not make sense; that is, taxes will be raised which means that keeping up with the Joneses becomes a high-powered endeavor adding further burdens to a strained budget and a harried house-wife.”<sup>57</sup>

Her feminism begins to emerge, however, in the various forms that she will put into her speeches and letters to the editor. There is discussion of the role religion has played in determining women’s position: “Why? . . . . . Our Judeo-Christian heritage is

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<sup>56</sup> Zelda Nordlinger, Speech to the Advertising Club, 26 May 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>57</sup> From Across the River James, *The Observer*, 11 June 1970, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

to blame. The Divine Word, beginning with the story of Adam & Eve which makes Eve the villain on through Leviticus which enumerates the laws governing sex, marriage, and family.”<sup>58</sup> She discusses people’s gender assumptions; “Somehow, in our culture, we are not conditioned to thinking of women as surgeons!”<sup>59</sup> And there is discussion of contemporary issues; “All this dialogue brings to mind another great moral issue, Abortion Reform, which our General Assembly reluctantly put into law and which will take affect [sic] soon. I suppose all the anti-abortion people are anticipating a run on the abortion factories they so direly predicted . . . The fact is, our Abortion Reform law is so restrictive as to impose additional and superfluous Red-tape.”<sup>60</sup>

All together there are twelve op-eds from the second half of 1970 in the archives. They show the range of Nordlinger’s political and cultural interests and they show her to be a perceptive, if over the top, critic of 1970s America. Her writings probably left many on the South Side of Richmond unconverted, but like her speeches, they jump out due to their language and wit and they show Nordlinger’s communitarian side that would reemerge in the late 1970s when she would join the upstart and small Richmond chapter of the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee.

Not all of Richmond’s feminists saw consciousness-raising as a tool for confrontation, however. While Nordlinger would push boundaries in public and in print, Holt Carlton was the more introspective and accommodating feminist.<sup>61</sup> Her speeches

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<sup>58</sup> From Across the River James, *The Observer*, 5 August 1970, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>59</sup> From Across the River James, *The Observer*, 16 September 1970, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>60</sup> From Across the River James, *The Observer*, n/d 1970, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>61</sup> An example of Nordlinger’s deliberate public provocations comes from the *Times-Dispatch*, “Mrs. Nordlinger said the Richmond NOW group is a structureless setup – on purpose to demonstrate that



looked to explain the necessity of women's liberation by looking at women's oppressed condition and comparing it to the equal status they could achieve. Her speeches challenged women by calling for autonomy. She said women "remain more comfortable with decisions or analysis made by others than by themselves individually, they are remaining comfortably 'female' and keeping other women from realizing their potential as human beings."<sup>62</sup> She also preached that engaging the opposite sex was a precursor to enlightenment; "some women want to stay on the pedestal so they won't have to look men in the eye."<sup>63</sup> Finally, she sought the deconstruction of gender stereotypes, especially women's manipulation, "Why are they willing to get what they want by manipulation of the male by playing on his weaknesses, by flattery and trickery? That is the image of most women in the Bible – remember Delilah, Bathsheba and Jezebel?"<sup>64</sup> Carlton sought to downplay conflict in order to pursue women's self-actualization. Thus NOW was a "conservative, non-militant organization" and until women were willing to "comprehend the magnitude of women's political oppression, the status quo will prevail."<sup>65</sup>

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it is "completely liberated" from any restrictions", Emma Livingston and Sally Cox, "Thalhimers' Soup Bar "Liberated by Women", *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 27 August 1970, A1.

<sup>62</sup> Holt Carlton, Speech to B'Nai Shalom Sisterhood, 25 October 1970, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>63</sup> Holt Carlton, Speech at Annual Meeting for Virginia Council on Social Welfare, 24 April 1974, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>64</sup> Holt Carlton, Speech to Student Nurses at Richmond Memorial Hospital, April 1970, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>65</sup> Holt Carlton to Henry Gemmill, Editor of *National Observer*, 19 March 1973, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia; Holt Carlton to Suzzannah Lessard of the *Washington Monthly*, 9 April 1973, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

Carlton, like Nordlinger, also tried to shape the feminist movement through writing. While Nordlinger remarked upon contemporary politics in her op-ed for *The Observer*, Carlton sought to reinterpret Southern women authors and activists. Over the course of the seventies and into the eighties Carlton wrote four articles in two magazines, *The Richmond literature and history quarterly* and *New Dominion Life Style*, discussing Ellen Glasgow, Mary Johnston, Lila Meade Valentine, and Grace Evelyn Arents. This was a field that Carlton showed interest in within the NOW organization as well. In 1974 she went with three other NOW members, Beth Marschak, Hope Montoni, and Janice Jensen to the NOW Women in Writing Conference.<sup>66</sup> Locally she also gave speeches on these women. Through these women, and Carlton's comments on them, one can see Carlton's emerging, or established, views on feminism.

Carlton was the granddaughter of a former mayor of Richmond and a member of the Richmond elite and she saw herself following in the footsteps of the women she studied. Like her, these women were members of high society and as such sought changes from within. They sought out change where it was needed while maintaining tradition and existing political and cultural institutions. Hence, these essays can be seen as an attempt to outline an ideology and precedent for her advocacy within NOW and on her own.

For instance in a segment on the "Good Morning" show on Channel 12 she argued that, "Both Glasgow and Johnston were "feminine", attractive, widely traveled (had a sophisticated and wider view of life than many southern, sheltered ladies). However, they both were every inch Virginia ladies in that they were charming,

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<sup>66</sup> Holt Carlton to Valerie Harms, 8 August 1974, Carlton Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia..

distinguished and guilty of not the slightest impropriety. Both were outspoken, courageous and ahead of their times.”<sup>67</sup> One can see her insistence on being both activist and traditionalist. Carlton’s institutionalism is given historical weight in her depiction of these women.

Her articles range in topic but all follow this template, looking at each woman’s activism within the system. Following Carlton’s own religiosity Grace Evelyn Arents’ “physical and spiritual needs were nurtured in the nucleus of St. Andrew’s Church, where Grace Arents walked as one of St. Paul’s veritable ‘children of light.’”<sup>68</sup> Further Arents represented the best in philanthropy for she “preferred to exercise good works directly, shunning the publicity of solicitation on a team for the charities she espoused,” a statement that Carlton herself followed.<sup>69</sup>

Meanwhile in Lila Meade Valentine Carlton found a style of activism that she thought suited the modern feminist movement, “Mrs. Valentine employed “quiet educational propaganda” to approach the uninformed individual. She was compassionate in her regard for the feelings of those who were frightened by any possible change in the traditional status of women.”<sup>70</sup> Her inclusive style and her wide-ranging advocacy are the models a southern woman should follow.

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<sup>67</sup> “Good Morning Show”, WWBT-TV – Channel 12, August 26 (no year), Carlton Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>68</sup> Holt Carlton, “Grace Evelyn Arents: Child of Light,” *The Richmond literature and history quarterly* 4, (Fall 1981): 49.

<sup>69</sup> Holt Carlton, “Grace Evelyn Arents: Child of Light,” *The Richmond literature and history quarterly* 4, (Fall 1981): 51; “Asked how many pledges she had gathered, Ms. Holt said, “None.” “I don’t like to do that sort of thing . . .” Priscilla Cummings, “Shorts and Sneakers: Walk-A-Thon Held for ERA,” *Richmond News Leader*, 27 August, 1977, n/a..

<sup>70</sup> Holt Carlton, “Lila Meade Valentine: Two Tributes,” *The Richmond literature and history quarterly* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1979): 36.

Finally, Carlton also saw feminism in Ellen Glasgow's work. Her strength and her fight against the cult of womanhood made her unique. Yet, Carlton also saw inclusiveness in her fiction; "Today the antique mahogany table with candlelight is in disuse where husband and wife eat hurried meals to be off in different directions; but novels of vision still point the way to mutual consideration and cooperation existent between civilized partners."<sup>71</sup> In this view, the cult of womanhood at the turn of the century could be defeated without antagonizing men and, via her interpretation of Glasgow, Carlton argued that women in the 1970s could also achieve equality without alienating men or overturning Southern culture.

Like Nordlinger the written word is an extension of her speeches. They promote the same message in the same tone but for different audiences. Here one can see Carlton politely reminding Richmond's establishment that the women's movement is nothing new; that reform had been part of Richmond women's DNA since the turn of the century. Carlton's vision for the feminist movement and the philosophy behind much of her own work comes from the work of these women that she idolizes, and reinterprets, through the seventies.

Finally, Richmond's women's movement sought to raise consciousness through protest and public events. The movement began with an act of civil disobedience. In August 26, 1970, Carlton, Nordlinger, and the three other members of Womens's Rights in Richmond went to Thalhimer's Soup Bar, which was an all men's establishment, and sat down and refused to leave until they were served. August 26<sup>th</sup> represented the date that the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment passed and it became a national date of protest each year for

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<sup>71</sup> Holt Carlton, "Ellen Glasgow – A Turn of the Century Feminist?," *New Dominion Life Style* (Aug-Sept 1975): 33.

NOW. While lacking the violence and resistance that characterized Civil Rights sit-ins in the 1950s, for the women were served within minutes after the media started taking pictures of the scene, this willingness to stand up to the Richmond establishment came to exemplify the Richmond movement. It is also telling that Nordlinger decided to collaborate with Larry Selden, a Richmond representative of the American Civil Liberties Union, rather than through the national office of NOW, which had called for a national day of protest in honor of the anniversary of the start of women's suffrage. Local necessity overcame national affiliation.

The soup bar was not an isolated incident, however. Other forms of protest and political activism would periodically occur, including Carlton's "liberation" of the Miller and Rhoades Tea Room, which desegregated seating by gender, Zelda Nordlinger's one-person picketing outside the Richmond newspapers building in the pouring rain in December 1970 in protest of sex-classified want-ads, and multiple cases of outdoor festivals that included street theater, women's defense presentations, and political activism. Two examples include, Richmond N.O.W.'s outdoor festival on the anniversary of women's suffrage, August 26, 1974, that included Hope Montoni directed consciousness-raising skits and karate instruction, and a celebration held on August 27, 1976, also in celebration of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, that was successful in registering over eighty women to vote.

Part of the "big tent" approach of these Richmond women included going off on individual causes that were unrelated to organizational efforts. The best example of this was Holt Carlton's long-standing push for equality within the religious sphere. Carlton

believed her role within Richmond's movement was to "stay with the church."<sup>72</sup> She saw women's inequality as being "rooted in religious attitudes and traditions" and thus worked to change these perceptions by advocating for women bishops in the Episcopal church, lobbying for changes in children's bible stories, and working with her own minister for a theology that advocated equality.<sup>73</sup>

Carlton first became an advocate for women bishops through her correspondence and acquaintance with Allison Cheek, the first woman to be ordained a deacon in the Diocese of Virginia and then one of the first women to become a priest in the Episcopalian church. In 1971 Carlton joined the newly formed Episcopal Women's Caucus (E.W.C.) to protest the reactionary movement against women priests and in July 1974 when the "Philadelphia Eleven," eleven women, including Cheek, who were irregularly ordained as priests within the church, were ordained she became an active supporter.<sup>74</sup>

Carlton also focused her attention on children's religious literature. In September 1973 Carlton had gone to the dentist and flipped through a children's book called The Bible Story, which included stories that Carlton believed misogynist. This led her to lobby the publishing company personally and become a national advocate for gender

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<sup>72</sup> Carlton's full line to Elizabeth Farianas gives a succinct description of the philosophy of the movement as I describe it, "My part in our conservative Richmond's little group of avant garde liberationists is to stay with the church [keep pressing it to change] and try to change it from within in any way I can without arousing hostility." Holt Carlton to Elizabeth Farianas, 10 June 1971, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>73</sup> Jill Vaden, "Women Air Pros, Cons of Equal Rights Amendment," *The Catholic Virginian*, 24 November 1972, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> It would take two years for the eleven women to be officially accepted by the church. During those two years any priest or bishop who allowed them to preach was punished, Holt Carlton to Rev. Robert Hall, 9 August 1974, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

equality in religious literature.<sup>75</sup> Ironically, Carlton brought this issue to NOW becoming the chair of a task force on sexism in Children's Religious Literature. However, this task force quickly became inactive due to lack of interest. Carlton sent informational packets to a couple of chapters and then all discussion of the topic was dropped. In 1976, when fellow Richmonder Juanita White inquired about the task force, there was noticeable derision in Carlton's response that, "I'm apparently still national chairperson."<sup>76</sup>

Finally, Carlton looked to liberate Richmond's religious community through the relationship with her priest, Reverend John Shelby Spong.<sup>77</sup> Jack Spong was in Richmond from 1969 to 1976, and during this time Carlton came to influence his theology. His correspondence to her is filled with gratitude for "aiding in my own sensitivity" or for providing a "constant education," and being a source of "enlightenment."<sup>78</sup> From the beginning of his tenure they collaborated within the church, including working on sermons, committees, and activities. One sermon that they collaborated on, titled "Biblical Faith and the Woman's Liberation Movement," became a central ingredient in Carlton's advocacy throughout the 1970s. By June 1971 she had sent out over one hundred copies of it to public leaders, fellow feminists, media organizations. The central argument of the sermon was that the women's liberation

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<sup>75</sup> She did not have any success. Edwin Glenz the book's manager told Carlton, "Only a misanthrope could read into this the subjugation of womanhood . . . you could use your time in a far more constructive way than in trying to discredit literature produced by Christian people, who have only the blessing and uplift of mankind in mind." Carlton took the high road in her response, Edwin Glenz to Holt Carlton, 27 September 1973, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>76</sup> Holt Carlton to Juanita White, 17 June, 1976, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>77</sup> Spong would become the Bishop of Newark and a well-known liberal theologian, who has clashed theologically with Rowan Williams the current archbishop of Canterbury among others.

<sup>78</sup> Jack Spong to Holt Carlton, 15 March 1972, 7 September 1972, 26 January 1979, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

movement would inevitably succeed and therefore the church should join the movement for two reasons; first, that the Christian Gospel calls every child of God into life, and secondly because the Judaeo Christian heritage has always been more tolerant than other traditions. Echoing themes that Carlton pushed in the secular sphere, Carlton and Spong argued for an autonomous woman who was free to choose between housework and the business world as long as the power of decision-making was the woman's.

Carlton's influence on Spong was not only evidenced in sermons but in other theological matters. He called Carlton "enlightening" because she advocated theological interpretations that challenged his religious positions. In 1972 Carlton was pushing the church for a gender-neutral pronoun to take the place of 'he' in the Nicene Creed and appealed to him for help in lobbying the Episcopalian establishment. Spong, a liberal by nature, replied, "However, I do understand your point, and if there is any way in which we can find a sexually neuter pronoun that is more personal than the pronoun it, I would be delighted to see it substituted."<sup>79</sup> Her goals went beyond changing the institution, however. She wanted change in the local parish and she called on Spong to address these topics in sermons, Bible class, and committee. Discussing the patriarchs in the Old Testament and their influence in the perpetuation of women's inequality, Carlton appealed to him to use "your power" to treat the issue properly.<sup>80</sup>

Richmond's women's movement's first micro-cohort was an extremely small pocket of women who aggressively pursued their goals through whatever manner

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<sup>79</sup> Jack Spong to Holt Carlton, 7 September 1972, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>80</sup> Holt Carlton to Jack Spong, 8 March 1972, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.



necessary.<sup>81</sup> Their ideological background was liberal by nature, with its emphasis on equality, their embrace of both sexes, and their economic and political agenda, which made them a perfect fit for N.O.W.'s national program. And indeed these women did appeal to N.O.W. for membership and built up a local organization that was broadly aligned with the national office. Yet, their acceptance of N.O.W. and its ideological underpinnings did not pigeonhole them into one role within the larger women's movement. They were liberal by orientation but in their application they were pragmatic, which led to the adoption of techniques and emphases on issues that would gain them the most members and support. As a result they incorporated a diverse range of elements into their movement, including an emphasis on religion, which would have been considered reactionary and conservative amongst feminists in other areas of the country, an assimilation of the tactics used by the radical wing of the liberation movement, and a willingness to move throughout different organizations to accomplish their goals.

This cohort's vision and engagement would come to be outdated, however, as contingencies, successes, and time brought forth a newer group wary of Nordlinger and Carlton's view of the women's movement. Nordlinger and Carlton fought to establish a movement, something that required monumental effort, a fact that would make them de facto leaders of the movement throughout the 1970s. But it also required publicity, pugnacity, and fluidity, traits that would be more controversial as the movement filled out with women of the newer cohort.

The new-found popularity of the movement induced this change. Women joined the movement in growing numbers due to the increased public awareness of women's

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<sup>81</sup> Micro-cohort is being used in Nancy Whittier's definition and is separate from waves, another common differentiation amongst the women's movements.

issues; particularly Congressional passage of the ERA in 1972.<sup>82</sup> The ERA was introduced in Virginia's General Assembly in 1973 and the pro-ERA movement began in earnest in 1974. This changed the movement's calculus, and the goals and tactics of the movement adjusted accordingly. The methods that Carlton and, particularly, Nordlinger had used to modest success were now seen as outdated.

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<sup>82</sup> One should keep this in perspective. In Richmond NOW's case this meant a membership of up to 90 women with optimistically 25% of them active.

**Chapter Three: A New Cohort and Organizational Evolution: Changed Tactics for a Narrowed Agenda, 1974-1977**

1977 was a pivotal year for the E.R.A. in Virginia. For the proponents of the amendment there was an increase in publicity, a push for greater minority participation, and the staging of E.R.A. week, a yearly program meant to coincide with the beginning of the General Assembly's session, capped off with a rally in Monroe Park headlined by Gloria Steinem.<sup>83</sup> The failure of 1976 had forced pro-ERA supporters to change tactics, a move that provided some forward momentum but also showed the Virginia movement's inherent weaknesses in what was the amendment's most popular period, 1972-1976.<sup>84</sup> Behind the scenes, however, the Virginia Equal Rights Amendment Ratification Council (VERARC) faced criticism on two fronts: politically oriented women were critical of Gloria Steinem's visit to Richmond while feminists like Zelda Nordlinger were upset over an attempt by the VERARC leadership to exclude the Socialist Worker's Party (SWP), and its leader Toba Singer, from the Ratification Council.<sup>85</sup>

This attempt, ostensibly a motion banning political parties from affiliation with the council, led Nordlinger to write an impassioned letter to the Council stating that, "I find such action reprehensible and counter productive to the on-going work of ratification of the E.R.A. I am personally ashamed that a small clique can succumb to "red-baiting" and impose their distorted views on the entire organization . . . The important criteria

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<sup>83</sup> Interestingly enough it would also be the only year that the amendment made it to the Senate floor.

<sup>84</sup> Mary Bezbatchesko, "Virginia and the Equal Rights Amendment," MA. Thesis., Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008, 77.

<sup>85</sup> Bezbatchesko, 78.

should be a willingness to work for ratification of the E.R.A. – nothing more!”<sup>86</sup> A Toba Singer ally in Richmond NOW, Juanita White, added, “I found myself confused by deliberations which seemed to center more around who should be excluded than who should participate, who should be silenced than who would speak out.”<sup>87</sup>

This letter, a defense of inclusion, was typical Nordlinger but it also represented her alienation from both NOW and the larger Richmond women’s movement. What was a minor tempest in the history of the VERARC perfectly encapsulates the shift from first generation to second generation in the Richmond’s women’s movement, and more specifically in Richmond’s NOW chapter. For years Nordlinger had been slowly becoming less active with NOW. As early as 1975 Vera Henderson, a feminist ally from Virginia Beach, was commiserating with Nordlinger via letter. Henderson noted that, “Like you, I am out of the mainstream of the feminist movement. I attend no meetings, call for none and rarely see any feminists . . . but you can see, NOW has completely gone down the drain since I left it . . . You have made a great contribution to the women’s movement and you are simply progressing from one stage to another. It is impossible for the same women to keep up the struggle from year to year when there is little cooperation.”<sup>88</sup>

Nordlinger began to feel isolated in the movement that she had helped build. It was not just that Nordlinger had come to a different place ideologically, although that was the case, but also that the new generation of women did not identify with

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<sup>86</sup> Zelda Nordlinger to Richmond Ratification Council c/o Evelyn Glazier, 31 March 1977, Hellmuth Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>87</sup> Juanita White to Evelyn Glazier, 11 April 1977, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>88</sup> Vera Henderson to Zelda Nordlinger, 29 July 1975, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

Nordlinger's brand of feminism. She had always been farther to the left than her fellow local activists and, unlike the others much of her activism was filtered through an economic perspective, a view that explains her work with Socialist groups both within and independent of the women's movement.

Further, her actions, past history, and free-wheeling pragmatism seemed out of place, an anachronism, as well as a potential weakness in the struggle for the ERA. As NOW became institutionalized and women began working through the organization this style could be viewed as a hindrance, or worse potentially damaging to the ERA's prospects. As a result she was often misunderstood or patronized; Henderson articulated this divide in a letter stating, "I must say, I really don't understand your reputation in Richmond . . . I think you are right about cultivating your own garden for a while. You are certainly unappreciated. And those people are simply not feminists. Simply being in favor of some women's rights does not make a feminist out of a person. It is a whole attitude, a whole viewpoint."<sup>89</sup>

Nancy Whittier's essay on generational shifts in the women's movement in Columbus, Ohio, argued that shifts occurred because the generations "were politicized at different times."<sup>90</sup> Nordlinger and Holt Carlton came of age at the beginning of the second wave of feminism. They had to create events, like the Thalheimer's sit in, stir up allies and enemies, by moving through different organizations and confronting all people that would listen to them, and, in Nordlinger's case, be brash in order to gain attention. Their big-tent pragmatism meant that they had to be inclusive and take on any group or issue that came before them. Institutions had yet to arise, for they had to create them, and

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<sup>89</sup> Vera Henderson to Zelda Nordlinger, 17 March 1976, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>90</sup> Whittier, 181.

the movement lacked an issue that could rally Richmond women around feminist goals and aspirations.

In contrast Richmond's second micro-cohort represented a distinctly different brand of activist. These women were still few in number; reaching ninety dues-paying members by the late 1970s. Betsy Brinson, a leader of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Southern Women Project, recalled that circa 1975, "It was not a large group, I mean I don't recall ever being with them at a meeting where there were more than ten people at the most and at that point."<sup>91</sup>

Yet they came of age at a time when the women's movement was making significant strides and when it was increasingly coalescing around the Equal Rights Amendment. As Mary Bezbatchesko noted in her study on the ERA in Virginia, "Like the suffrage movement ninety years before, the effort for the ERA in Virginia helped to politicize women . . . As the campaign continued, women took more of an active role in making their voices heard. Women on both sides of the issue wrote letters, visited legislators, and marched in support of their cause."<sup>92</sup>

Locally, the ERA led to increased rolls in the women's groups' memberships, particularly for NOW. Juanita White remembers going to her first meeting in 1975, at the behest of her daughter; "So she took me to the first meeting that I went, it must have been about 1975 . . . And yeah it was pretty big right from the start. I can't give you numbers but it was pretty big. And at that time the main focus of course was the ERA

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<sup>91</sup> Betsy Brinson, interview by author, 11 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>92</sup> Bezbatchesko, 113.

everything seemed to be you know around the ERA.”<sup>93</sup> That these women focused almost exclusively on the ERA became a source of angst for some of the first micro-cohort of women. Such a narrow focus belied the philosophy they adopted during the group’s formative years. For them NOW was not a top-down single-issue organization but rather a way for a diverse range of women to advocate for a variety of issues.

Writing to Juanita White about Jean Hellmuth’s push for ERA priority in NOW meetings, Eleanor Lawrence noted that, “Zelda and I spent sometime [sic] together this past Saturday and we discussed in detail our NOW meetings and where, possibly, we are headed. We concluded that no matter what the topic of general discussion if it always focuses on one particular issue we are headed for decline in interest and attendance. This modus operandi as an allover [sic] plan for future meetings, despite our general interest in ERA, should be discussed at our executive meetings.”<sup>94</sup> The focus on one issue went against the variegated experiences of women like Nordlinger, Lawrence, and others. It cut against their sense of feminism, what Vera Henderson had called “a whole attitude, a whole viewpoint.”<sup>95</sup>

In fact this new micro-cohort came to activism fairly ignorant of the local movement’s history. Beth Marschak, who like Zelda Nordlinger was one of the first active feminists in Richmond’s women’s movement, argues that part of what separated the cohorts was that the newer group “did not have the same kind of history and so I think in [sic] some times they couldn’t really understand what the ideas and goals had been. So

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<sup>93</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>94</sup> This letter was part of a collection from Eleanor Lawrence to Juanita White during White’s term as editor of the newsletter in 1976. Eleanor Lawrence to Juanita White, n.d., Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>95</sup> See footnote #74 on page 31.

there was a lot of going over things again and in some cases what ended up was fairly different, it didn't end up staying the same."<sup>96</sup> In the case of Richmond's NOW chapter the institutional brain drain was quite literal. In the March 1976 chapter newsletter Juanita White, its editor, noted that of the thirty one women who had convened the first official NOW chapter meeting on April 18, 1973, only three were still active, Nordlinger, Carlton, and Charlene Linnell.<sup>97</sup> NOW had literally taken on a completely different identity.

The NOW member from the second micro-cohort was much more likely to fit the stereotype of a mid-1970s feminist; they were "middle-class, established women, often with families."<sup>98</sup> These women tended to be part-time activists due to the constraints of work and/or family and they tended to focus on a narrower set of issues. This led to an organization that was much more compartmentalized than the smaller group of activists who made up the NOW chapter at the beginning of the 1970s.

They were divided by the issues they championed. As a result women used NOW, much like Zelda Nordlinger and Holt Carlton had used multiple organizations in the early 1970s, as a conduit in which they could work on issues they cared about. Yvette Gerner, the 1977 NOW chapter President, recalled that, "personally I thought we should have had a goal like what are we going to aim at, are we going to expand the membership (that was personally that would have been my goal), are we going to be

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<sup>96</sup> Marschak was active in the Virginia Women's Political Caucus and a founder of the Richmond Lesbian-Feminists, amongst other feminist activities. Beth Marschak, interview by author, 20 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>97</sup> *NOW What? Newsletter*, December 1976, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>98</sup> Suzanne A. Shepard, "Dignity, recognition, and equality: lesbian feminists in Richmond, Virginia, 1974-1979," MA. Thesis., Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007, 25-26.



better known? But for some reason I felt that they were going to do their own things which might not have been what I was thinking was most important.”<sup>99</sup>

Gerner, however, is a prime example of this compartmentalization. Unlike members of the first cohort, she only joined one organization, NOW, where she was an ally of Jean Hellmuth. Hellmuth was one of the most influential women in the movement. Much like Nordlinger she joined many organizations but unlike Nordlinger, Carlton, or a woman like Beth Marschak, Hellmuth used her membership in those organizations to push for one issue, the ERA.<sup>100</sup> She gained allies in each organization and used those contacts to push her agenda.<sup>101</sup> An example of this was Yvette Gerner. Gerner noted that, “Jean Hellmuth really pushed me into being President because she didn’t want a gay women to be President,”<sup>102</sup> and Muriel Smith of the League of Women Voters and the Virginia Equal Rights Amendment Ratification Council noted that “Jean was kind of one of these people who was able to get people put into different positions to be effective. She never chaired any thing but she just made sure that things got done.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Yvette Gerner, interview by author, 7 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, interview held by author.

<sup>100</sup> “There was a whole string of people who were consistent throughout the whole time [ERA Ratification], Jean Hellmuth being the prime example.” Muriel Smith, interview by author, 11 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, interview held by author.

<sup>101</sup> This tendency, seen in a positive light by Smith, was a matter of derision for some as evidenced by Eleanor Lawrence comment to Juanita White that, “Jean had herself elected as president of the Women’s Alliance at the Unitarian Church in order to gather more following for promoting ERA.” Eleanor Lawrence to Juanita White, n.d., Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia..

<sup>102</sup> The issue of gay membership in NOW will be discussed below. Many women feared that if NOW was perceived to be a lesbian group that it would lose legitimacy and therefore not be able to lobby effectively for the ERA. This is why Jean Hellmuth tried to prevent, successfully, lesbian leadership of NOW. Yvette Gerner, interview by author, 7 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, interview held by author.

<sup>103</sup> Muriel Smith, interview by author, 11 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, interview held by author.

Gerner was “interested in passage of the ERA because . . . we wanted equal rights.”<sup>104</sup> With Hellmuth’s help she became President of NOW in order to keep the emphasis on that issue and in 1978 she worked as NOW’s representative to the VERARC. Women like Gerner, or Laurabelle Yoder the 1979 NOW representative to the VERARC, were the part of NOW that focused on the ERA. Muriel Smith, who for a time was President of the VERARC, noted that these women “were in one section of the organization and even though the entire organization supported the ERA the people who worked on it were in one section. Other people were working on other issues. In that way it was compartmentalized.”<sup>105</sup>

While the women of the second micro-cohort began by focusing on the ERA, the issue that led many of them into the women’s movement, their pursuits inevitably expanded outward over time. Here a comparison to the first micro-cohort is needed on two fronts. First, is to look at the sundry issues they promoted and secondly the tactics that they used to achieve their ends. By comparing these two cohorts two theses will become evident. First, is that Whittier’s generational (micro-cohort) thesis proves true in Richmond. The second cohort, arising in the mid 1970s was distinct, and “as successive waves of activists gained influence, new organizations began, existing organizations changed or disbanded, and conflicts developed among feminists who entered the women’s movement at different times.”<sup>106</sup> The second micro-cohort took the movement in its own direction organizationally and ideologically.

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<sup>104</sup> Yvette Gerner, interview by author, 7 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, interview held by author.

<sup>105</sup> Muriel Smith, interview by author, 11 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, interview held by author.

<sup>106</sup> Whittier, 180.

Second, however, is that the overarching theme of big tent pragmatism remained, what changed was the introduction of the ERA and, therefore, NOW's increased membership roles and public visibility. Women in the second micro-cohort remained pragmatic, looking to achieve goals whether through liberal or radical tactics. It is as hard to pigeonhole the second-cohort into a national women's movement discourse as it was the first-cohort. Pragmatism, however, became more identified with political strategies, organizational structure, and a group and issue focus. This led to a more moderate sensibility in tactics and ideology and a more disciplined focus on narrower issues. The hyperbole and eclecticism of Nordlinger gave way to the behind the scenes work of the specialized activist, the Yvette Gerner who focused on the ERA or the Juanita White who focused on reproduction rights. But however different the two cohort's were and however much they argued over tactics the philosophy behind both remained the same; to build up the local movement and to achieve feminist goals.

For women in Richmond, and in the nation writ large, activism often ended up being a part time or off and on activity. As Beth Marschak noted in an interview, "Women's personal lives were changing so you might have somebody who did have a baby or somebody who decided to go off to law school so there was some of that as well."<sup>107</sup> This was particularly true of the women who joined NOW in the second micro-cohort. Zelda Nordlinger was a stay-at-home mother who, due to financial security and a progressive household, could afford to spend a large amount of time on the women's movement while Holt Carlton was in a childless marriage and came from one of Richmond's oldest political families. Their circumstances were not universal. As Juanita

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<sup>107</sup> Beth Marschak, interview by author, 20 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

White noted, “It was not easy. You know I was still trying to juggle my job and my family. And I at one time I was editor of the newsletter and that was a big job.”<sup>108</sup>

These women were therefore more likely to focus on individual issues. As noted above these women began with a focus on the ERA, which was pushed by leaders like Jean Hellmuth. Soon, however, they branched out into other areas. Juanita White explained this as an organic process, “Later on we formed what we called Task Forces and . . . we branched out in other areas. And some of it just happened by accident I think, you know actually an issue came up that we hadn’t anticipated.”<sup>109</sup> White explained that these pursuits were often individualistic in nature, “I think you’d be accurate in saying that they followed their individual interests mostly. Except you know some people like Anne Cooper [editor of newsletter in 1975 and head of media taskforce in 1976]. She seemed to be able to juggle an awful lot of hats at the same time.”<sup>110</sup> A look at the February 1975 newsletter shows that NOW had task forces on rape, image, women in arts, credit, consciousness-raising, and compliance.<sup>111</sup> A year later they were down to three task forces, rape, media, and women in arts.<sup>112</sup>

That these women saw NOW as a vessel, in which they strove to work for specific goals is evident by the struggle that the chapter as a whole had in maintaining interest and participation. In the February 1975 newsletter the President, Mary Parsiani, appealed for

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<sup>108</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>109</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>110</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>111</sup> *NOW Notes*, Feb. 1975, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>112</sup> *NOW What?*, June 1976, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

greater support for the whole, “Apathy has struck in some corners. Task forces that were once productive now have trouble whipping up a meeting. Membership attendance at business sessions is down. A few of our CR groups have either died or are threatening to falter. Some of us have lost enthusiasm.”<sup>113</sup> This poor attendance was also noted by Betsy Brinson of the ACLU, who, as noted above, had never seen more than ten or so members at a general meeting.

Yet, in individual arenas NOW was active. Its interest in the ERA has already been noted. NOW was a consistent presence on the VERARC and was continuously active in marches, teach-ins, and other activities that would benefit ERA ratification. In 1975 eight of the sixteen members on the ERA committee were NOW members, while women like Louise Wright, NOW’s Vice President in 1976, who was President of VERARC, also in 1976, served in official positions. Within VERARC they contributed to its various activities. Activities ranged from educational activities such as the 1977 ERA teach-in where Toba Singer, also a member of NOW, and Norma Murdoch-Kitt, a NOW member and lobbyist for VERARC, paneled a session titled “Speak-Out,” to protest events like an ERA Caravan in May 1977 where the women walked several miles from Willow Lawn Shopping Center to City Hall.<sup>114</sup>

Outside of VERARC they also functioned individually. They held events like a Walk-a-Thon in 1977, organized by Jean Hellmuth, in which it was estimated that forty-

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<sup>113</sup> *NOW Notes*, Feb. 1975, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>114</sup> Schedule for ERA – Facts for Action Teach-In, July 8 and 9, 1977, Virginia Equal Rights Ratification Council Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia; *KNOW NOW*, May 1977, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

eight to seventy-five people participated raising one thousand dollars for the ratification of the ERA or spoke at panels in order to convince skeptics and shore up support.<sup>115</sup>

Overall the ERA represented a chance for the women of NOW to engage in a variety of tactics. Juanita White states that they engaged in “all of it. Letter writing, intense lobbying, marches, oh how many times we marched from Monroe Park down to the Capitol and those male legislators were hanging out the window of the John Marshall.”<sup>116</sup> While women like Jean Hellmuth, Louise Wright, and Yvette Gerner sought, unsuccessfully, to rally the chapter specifically around the ERA it was not a challenge to gain the women’s support during General Assembly sessions or when it involved bigger ERA events.

As the years passed, however, fewer women actively participated in the ERA battle. Zelda Nordlinger gave up being active in it relatively quickly but even women of the second-cohort moved to other things. Ultimately, it became an issue that many would support and give time to but few would actively participate in; Beth Marschak summed up this mentality when she noted that “In the early ‘70s it seemed possible that the Equal Rights Amendment would pass, it seemed like a good possibility. I think that what happened was it became more and more obvious that it wasn’t going to pass . . . for some people it didn’t make sense for that to be such a big focus because it’s not going to happen so you’re spinning your wheels. For some of the people who stayed with it it was

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<sup>115</sup> Priscilla Cummings, “Shorts and Sneakers: Walk-A-Thon Held for ERA,” *Richmond News Leader*, 27 August, 1977; For instance, Nordlinger and Hellmuth were on a panel discussing the ERA at the Unitarian Church entitled, “It’s Time to be Humans,” *NOW What?*, October 1976, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>116</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

like it almost became like a religious conviction . . . And it wasn't very realistic to think it was going to pass in Virginia."<sup>117</sup>

The ERA tended to gain the attention of political women; women who thought that politics, and working within the political system, were the best way to accomplish feminist goals. These women tended to be older and more conservative than their fellow feminists. VERARC was the outlet for their activism. VERARC tended to be dismissive of issues that would not benefit the ratification of the ERA. Beth Marschak noted that, "To a certain extent their approach was anything else will harm the Equal Rights Amendment chance so we want nothing to do with it [abortion] . . . and I think that in terms of successful politics that was a mistake."<sup>118</sup>

Many young women did identify with the reproduction movement, and more broadly the privacy of a woman's body. Marschak noted that in the broader movement, and especially amongst younger women, reproductive rights was uncontroversial as a source of activism, "I think like NOW and the women's political caucus, certainly groups like the women's center were perfectly comfortable with that as an issue."<sup>119</sup> For the Richmond NOW chapter the issues of rape and abortion tended to be advocated by the same women.

These were certainly not new issues for Richmond's NOW chapter. Zelda Nordlinger had been a member of the Underground Railroad, a group that transported

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<sup>117</sup> Beth Marschak, interview by author, 20 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>118</sup> Beth Marschak, interview by author, 20 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>119</sup> Beth Marschak, interview by author, 20 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

women to places where abortions could be obtained.<sup>120</sup> Eleanor Lawrence, a woman who bridged the two generations, single handedly turned the rape task force into NOW's most successful issue. Whether fighting for rape victims in court or working on a guidebook for women to protect themselves, Lawrence had achieved many successes. As a result rape and abortion remained issues at the forefront of NOW's agenda.

The rape task force, however, is another area where one sees a difference between the first generation and the second generation. The second generation of women rarely took intellectual or activist leadership in NOW's organization. They would take formal positions in NOW, such as Yvette Gerner's term as President in 1977, but rarely did they take the lead on specific issues. This often fell to individuals with a strong sense of mission like Jean Hellmuth on the ERA, Zelda Nordlinger, who continued to be active in various issues that she cared about, or Eleanor Lawrence on rape. As a result, many of these women, particularly Lawrence and Nordlinger, became exasperated at what they saw as a lack of passion.

In 1976 Lawrence decided to step down as the chair of the rape task force and hand the position over to someone else. For two years Lawrence had been actively working on this issue and felt that it was time to give someone else a chance to lead. She was shocked, therefore, to find that nobody wanted to chair the task force. "It's not so much the fact that no one volunteered to take over the rape program," she wrote, "but what really bothers me is that no one even asked for details to see if they would or could take over the leadership henceforth. Juanita, the air is always rare up top . . . ."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Juanita White, "Letter to the Editor," *Style Weekly*, 1 June 1999, n/a.

<sup>121</sup> This undated letter was amongst the batch that was written in 1976. Eleanor Lawrence to Juanita White, n/d, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia..



This assessment, however, represents an overly pessimistic picture of the NOW chapter's involvement with rape as an issue. Even though no one stepped up to take over Lawrence's position, many women were following her lead on rape as well as on abortion. The women of the second-cohort were comfortable working through the institution rather than molding it or the movement. They saw NOW as a means of mobilizing to exert pressure for the issues they cared about. And the second-cohort in NOW did continuously support pro-choice rallies, help protect women at the local abortion clinic from protesters, and work toward rape reform bills. If nobody took on the leadership role that Lawrence left vacant, she could at least take comfort in the infrastructure that she had created, which made leadership less immediately necessary.

Abortion was an issue that cut across feminist organizations in Richmond. One of the main activities that these groups participated in post *Roe v. Wade* (1973) was abortion clinic protection. Beth Marschak noted that, "Different people would do that clinic support so it wasn't just one organization."<sup>122</sup> Within the NOW chapter Juanita White was one of the main activists who went to the clinic. "We used to go down to the clinic every Saturday morning," noted White. In the post *Roe v. Wade* environment, one that became increasingly charged, "It wasn't a nice job, I mean it was a terrible job. We were literally escorting those women in and passing through a barrage of insults and threats."<sup>123</sup>

While they sought to protect women who needed an abortion, an extension of the work that Nordlinger performed for the Underground Railroad, they also engaged in

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<sup>122</sup> Beth Marschak, interview by author, 20 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>123</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

public events, whether through protest or educational forums. The May 1977 newsletter shows examples of both of these events. On May 8, NOW participated in a rally at Lafayette Park, Washington, D.C., called “Motherhood by Choice.” The event was an effort “to keep Medicaid paid abortions, provide maternity disability benefits, increase funds for family planning and prevent forced sterilization.” Meanwhile a week later on May 17, NOW member, and one time newsletter editor and media task force chair, Anne Cooper participated in a forum titled, “The Right to Make a Choice: The Adult Woman as an Individual.”<sup>124</sup> Events like these are seen sporadically throughout the newsletters and represent an attempt to maintain a pro-choice presence in Richmond.<sup>125</sup> Participation in these events is impossible to gauge but their appearance in the newsletters and the recollections of former members show that NOW remained dedicated to abortion as an issue.

The issue on which Richmond’s women’s movement made the most progress, however, was rape. Rape was an issue that was taken up by founding members - Nordlinger spent much of 1974 and 1975 trying to pass a rape reform bill through the General Assembly - as well as by the second micro-cohort.<sup>126</sup> Eleanor Lawrence had universally won plaudits for her work in this area. As the September 1976 newsletter noted when it made her feminist of the month, “As the rape chairperson, Eleanor

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<sup>124</sup> *KNOW NOW*, May 1977, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>125</sup> A further example is NOW’s March 10, 1977 meeting. At this meeting Dr. Robert Bluford, Director of the Richmond Medical Center for Women and author of the book *Unwanted Pregnancy* spoke. *Know NOW*, March 1977, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>126</sup> Nordlinger wrote H.B. 1342 herself and had it introduced by Delegate Ralph “Bill” Axelle. The bill failed to make it out of the Courts of Justice Committee. Nordlinger had this to say about the proceedings: “The men sneered, smirked, made innuendoes about “certain women being suspect” and “making false charges” and generally acted like 6<sup>th</sup>-grade boys with a dirty joke. I do believe, however, that our attempt was worthwhile.” *NOW Notes*, February 1975, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

conceived and engineered the printing of the rape folder which has been distributed to thousands of local women. Her rape trial-watching with groups of women identified by their NOW badges has, according to one NOW member, had an ‘inestimable impact’ on the treatment of women rape victims in court as well as the outcome of their trials.”<sup>127</sup>

Women became Lawrence’s foot soldiers, going to court in order to influence the attorneys and juries because as Juanita White noted, “often the victims were treated worse than the perpetrator. The attorneys would you know [ask] what is your sexual background? Have you been sexually active? Did you dress in a provocative manner? You know all this kind of thing.”<sup>128</sup>

Finally, there were women in the second generation of NOW who were involved in the cultural side of the feminist movement. These women were attracted to the Women’s Center, a place that “had more of a cultural and spiritual base than a political one. Although it’s a type of politics, it’s a type of community organizing but not in a traditional politics sense.”<sup>129</sup> These women tended to be younger and they also tended to be less politically active. Beth Marschak noted that “There were a fair number of NOW members who were involved with the women’s center and I think not that many women from other groups . . . and then it also attracted women who were not involved in those groups . . . Another group that was attracted were younger women who were lesbian and

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<sup>127</sup> *N.O.W. What?*, September 1976, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>128</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>129</sup> Beth Marschak, interview by author, 20 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

were more out. In the women's political caucus and NOW there were lesbians but many of them were not out."<sup>130</sup>

The women that were a part of this institution received less ink in NOW newsletters and less attention in the correspondence of some of the leaders of the first generation. As a result there is not currently much about them in the archives. That NOW women were participating in the cultural realm of feminism shows how variegated the organization remained despite the generational turnover. Two important caveats, however, temper this diversity. First, NOW under the second-cohort saw a larger percentage of its time being used on one issue, the ERA, than ever before, and secondly this diversity was accepted only as long as the tactics used on these issues did not harm the NOW brand, and, therefore its ability to successfully lobby for the ERA.

Tactically, the women of the second micro-cohort, like their immediate predecessors, engaged in what historians label liberal and radical actions.<sup>131</sup> Philosophically, however, their action was more organizationally based and less variegated. The women of the second micro-cohort came into the movement after the various organizations had cohered. Further, many of the women became active due to the ERA, which required political mobilization. As a result of being politicized at that time, these women tended to be dismissive of individual action and instead tailored their actions around the group. Organized protests or events with a focus on narrower sets of

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<sup>130</sup> Beth Marschak, interview by author, 20 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>131</sup> Here it is appropriate to reemphasize Stephanie Gilmore's article on Memphis, Tennessee's NOW chapter. As Gilmore shows the historiography has tended to over dichotomize the relationship between liberal and radical. In reality women moved between actions and issues identified with both labels depending on local contingencies.

issues came to define this generation, rather than the free-wheeling, take-on-multiple-issues-at-a-time philosophy of Zelda Nordlinger, or even Holt Carlton.

As noted above the women of the second micro-cohort tended to focus on a single issue due to the constraints under which they worked. This led them to be more involved in the individual issues at hand so that when the first generation sporadically engaged there was tension. This can be seen through the abortion clinic protection that the various women's groups organized, and that certain women in NOW participated in most weekends. Juanita White notes that, "we used to go down to the clinic every Saturday morning . . . and I remember Zelda being there very seldom except when it was announced in advance that there was going to be a big thing and then she was always there."<sup>132</sup> To White Nordlinger was a "very good spokesperson but other than that compared to the names I've given you, Anne Cooper, and Betty and Ben Meredith, and Eleanor Lawrence, I felt that she was not that effective."<sup>133</sup>

This was at odds with the type of activism that Nordlinger herself practiced. "She [Zelda] was certainly out there as an activist," noted Betsy Brinson, "and she came to all kinds of public meetings and demonstrations and spoke up bless her."<sup>134</sup> And this type of activism led her to be just as dissatisfied with the second-cohort. In a letter to Meg Williams about the city of Richmond's budget in 1977 she noted that, "Our NOW chapter doesn't involve itself with much, so I keep up appearances by showing up at public

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<sup>132</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>133</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>134</sup> Betsy Brinson, interview by author, 11 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

hearings – not to speak, but to be seen and to keep informed.”<sup>135</sup> White’s claim that Nordlinger only attended when there was publicity may or may not be accurate but her view on Nordlinger’s lack of ongoing commitment to specific tasks is correct. But then, Nordlinger had never seen herself as a one-issue feminist. She was in agreement with Vera Henderson’s point that being a feminist “is a whole attitude, a whole viewpoint.”<sup>136</sup>

Muriel Smith described the local organization’s role in ERA ratification as “to encourage increased grass roots support so that the legislators from the Richmond area got letters or telephone calls or visits and literature and they then were organizing speakers groups to go out to local groups to increase the knowledge of the community about the ERA and to encourage increased local participation in support of the ERA.”<sup>137</sup>

Nordlinger did engage in these activities, both for the ERA and for other activities. But the sheer number of issues that she involved herself in, sex-segregated ads, rape laws, lobbying the General Assembly both for the ERA and for other feminist goals, public speaking engagements, written pieces for newspapers and magazines, letters to Congressmen and influential leaders, the creation of NOW, the Virginia Political Caucus, and the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee, and other various tasks all while raising a family led her to be sporadically involved in any one issue.

Meanwhile the women who joined NOW in the mid-seventies fit in perfectly with the organizational goals that Smith described. They saw consistency and organizational work as the means to achieve their ends, whether it was in the passage of the ERA or the

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<sup>135</sup> Zelda Nordlinger to Meg Williams, 30 November 1977, Williams Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>136</sup> Vera Henderson to Zelda Nordlinger, 17 March 1976, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>137</sup> Muriel Smith, interview by author, 11 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, interview held by author.

protection of abortion rights. To them individual action was showboating. It was not efficient. This focus on the group explains the second-cohort's attempt to cultivate a NOW organization more narrowly defined than under the first-cohort. There was a fear, whether it was of lesbian membership or Nordlinger's tactics, that NOW would be discredited or that a diverse platform would dilute its power and efficiency. This tension would never really be solved and would eventually be rendered moot by the movement's decline in the late 1970s.

#### **Chapter Four: The Cohorts at the End of a Movement, 1977-1982**

Nationwide the women's movement ran into obstacles in the late 1970s and into the early 1980s. A conservative resurgence led to increasingly stalemated fights over abortion and privacy rights while the ERA expired at its allotted deadline for ratification, June 30, 1982. Meanwhile the National Organization for Women was increasingly moving toward a formalized version of political advocacy, exerting its influence through political donations and the formation of political action committees.<sup>138</sup> In Richmond NOW had slowly ebbed. The organization would remain intact, and indeed is still active in 2010, but its period of overt activism was over. Why women stopped participating or minimized their role depended on individual circumstances but some basic observations about the two micro-cohorts can be made, which further highlight the thesis outlined above.

In the first micro-cohort Holt Carlton and Zelda Nordlinger had different reasons for stepping away from NOW, yet both remained engaged in the larger movement. For these women activism took on a larger role than strictly NOW-related issues. Carlton was the older of the two women and as a result slowly removed herself from the scene. She had tired of the spotlight, declaring in a letter that, "I was active for about five years (from 1969-1974) as the enclosed selection of letters will testify, but for the past several years I've become less willing to make myself a target for the limelight. I'm a 64-year-old woman with a traditionally conservative background. It's hard to be a leader gracefully when you're a woman, especially in Richmond, Virginia."<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Barakso, 90-120.

<sup>139</sup> Holt Carlton to *Chrysalis*, 9 June 1979, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.



Less willing, however, did not mean inactive. Through 1977 Carlton remained active in NOW through its ERA committee.<sup>140</sup> Further, it was not until the late 1970s that Carlton began putting her philosophy on activism to paper. Her ethos had been that, “I do not volunteer for any organizational work unless it is geared toward bringing about changes in society . . . My rationale for not pursuing a career, aside from caring for the family, is that the time I spend in bringing about change is a valuable contribution to my country.”<sup>141</sup>

As noted above, this flowed from her interpretation of Southern women writers and philanthropists, especially those from privileged backgrounds.<sup>142</sup> In the mid to late 1970s she finally got around to elaborating on her interpretations of these women. In 1975 she published an article on Ellen Glasgow, in 1978 one on Lila Meade Valentine, and finally in 1981 one on Grace Evelyn Arents. These articles were Carlton’s attempt to make further feminist in-roads on the southern establishment, something she had been at since the beginning of her advocacy.

Finally, Carlton remained a prolific political letter writer, both at the national and local levels. This included writing letters to Jimmy Carter over the state of his Presidency, Senator Harry Byrd over the ERA, and Mayor Henry Marsh, in an effort to get Muriel Smith a seat on the Richmond City Council, amongst others.

Nordlinger, like Carlton, remained active in a variety of ways. First, like Carlton she maintained her roots with the NOW chapter, including being responsible for NOW’s

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<sup>140</sup> Active enough that she was taking an active role in the committee, including organizing events, Holt Carlton to Edward Ruslander, Promotions Director of Willow Lawn Shopping Center, 27 April 1977, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>141</sup> Holt Carlton to *Redbrook*, May 1974, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>142</sup> See pages 28-30.

local press releases in 1981.<sup>143</sup> In the late 1970s Nordlinger was intermittently involved with NOW through individual endeavors, although she was increasingly out of touch with its goals and agenda. For instance, she ran book reviews in the NOW newsletter in August and November of 1976 and April of 1977, while at the same time trying to put together a program for battered spouses.<sup>144</sup> She also joined the advisory committee for the Human Rights Committee.<sup>145</sup> Her activism slowed, however, as she admitted to Bella Abzug in 1979, “as of the last two or three years, I have devoted a minimum of time to the movement . . . To be truthful, I have been discouraged by the painfully slow progress we have made thus far.”<sup>146</sup> NOW remained an outlet for Nordlinger but rather than play a leadership role she effectively isolated herself from its inner circle due to her increased pessimism about NOW’s progress or, in her eyes, lack thereof.

Nordlinger’s bleak outlook and felt isolation from the local Richmond movement was elaborated on in her correspondence with Vera Henderson, a feminist ally from Virginia Beach, as noted above.<sup>147</sup> Her pessimism, however, did not lead to inactivity. Rather, Nordlinger channeled her activism into socialism. Nordlinger had always been politically farther to the left than her fellow Richmond feminists but now she began to see the Socialist organizations as a means to further her goals for women. As Henderson put it, “you have made a great contribution to the women’s movement and you are simply

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<sup>143</sup> *NOW: Richmond Chapter Newsletter*, January 1981, Smith Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>144</sup> *NOW Newsletter*, August 1976, November 1976, December 1976, January 1977, April 1977, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>145</sup> *Know NOW*, May 1977, White Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>146</sup> Zelda Nordlinger to Bella Abzug, 26 February 1979, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>147</sup> See pages 37-38.

progressing from one stage to another. It is impossible for the same women to keep up the struggle from year to year when there is little cooperation.”<sup>148</sup>

This progression entailed a choice between the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee (D.S.O.C), a group formed by Michael Harrington and Irving Howe with the goal of pushing the Democratic Party to the left, or the Socialists Workers Party (S.W.P.), a group that was more radical and actively sought the overthrow of capitalism.

Nordlinger met with Toba Singer of the S.W.P., and an ally in the Richmond women’s movement, in January 1976 but ultimately helped form a small Richmond chapter of the D.S.O.C. There is little archival evidence of the activism that Nordlinger engaged in for the D.S.O.C. but it is clear that she was active and that it did not end her affiliation with NOW or other feminist groups. And in fact, in 1978 she wrote Carlton to say, “I’ve written some letters which had been pricking my conscience . . . Anyway, here’s the copies so you can see for yourself that I’m working again for the cause.”<sup>149</sup>

The leadership of the first cohort of NOW women in Richmond remained tactically and ideologically consistent throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. This led them to be less engaged with NOW but not unaffiliated for when they acted individually both sides stood to gain from their actions. Paradoxically, Richmond NOW needed Nordlinger for her name recognition at the same time that it was shunning and denigrating her tactics internally. Importantly, however, they continued to be active, working through organizations, or individually, to affect change where they thought it would be the most effective.

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<sup>148</sup> Vera Henderson to Zelda Nordlinger, 29, July 1975, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>149</sup> Zelda Nordlinger to Holt Carlton, 9 March 1978, Carlton Papers, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

The second micro-cohort's post-NOW advocacy is less easy to define for the archival record is thin. A couple of observations can be stated. First, for at least some of the cohort there was the feeling that NOW had stopped responding to their needs, specifically because lesbians had taken over policy. Juanita White noted that, "we had no qualms about lesbians . . . But toward the end it was almost as though the feminists [lesbians] had pretty much taken over NOW, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But I don't go anymore because I really don't feel . . . that I had a whole lot in common . . . although I deplored discrimination against gays, and I'm sure most feminists do. But it was just to me it was not the number one thing."<sup>150</sup> This had been an issue that had concerned more conservative-leaning members like Jean Hellmuth, who had helped elect Yvette Gerner President of the chapter in 1978 so that a gay woman would not be in charge.<sup>151</sup> And it is clear that the issue affected some of the members in the late 1970s, although how many is impossible to tell. The second-cohort, however, had tended to have narrower interests that they pursued more vigorously through NOW so that when NOW no longer responded to their policy concerns many women dropped out.

Secondly, many women disappeared from the NOW newsletters. White attributed this to two factors, "people were tired and I think they felt that most of their goals had been met."<sup>152</sup> Contributing to this was the end of the ERA battle. Many women were burnt out by the nine-year battle, while many had only joined for this specific issue. When it was over the organization lost its defining issue and the one it spent the most

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<sup>150</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

<sup>151</sup> See page 42.

<sup>152</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

time on. Other issues, like battered spouses or abortion, had been taken up specifically by individuals, and were therefore not part of the bigger group dynamic.

Finally, while many women stopped being engaged in the women's movement it is hard to tell how many dropped out of politics altogether. Some women engaged in women's issues by other means. Sylvia Clute, a NOW member, along with Ann Duffer, was the driving force behind Richmond's Women's Bank, the fifth such bank in the country at the time. The Bank was specifically not involved with the women's movement, or its goals, but was an instance of a woman from the movement trying to educate and influence women.<sup>153</sup> Others, like Jean Hellmuth or Muriel Smith, remained involved in politics, whether it was through a potential candidacy for city council or staying involved with the Democratic Party. And finally some remained engaged privately, voting for politicians who supported women's issues or writing letters to the editor. What is clear is that most women were no longer activists. They remained civically engaged without remaining within the movement.

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<sup>153</sup> While Clute was a veteran of Richmond NOW some of the other women on the Board were more conservative. In a Times-Dispatch article Phyllis Galanti, a board member, was quoted as saying that her, "first reaction was oh, no, I wasn't going to be involved in any women's lib thing," she said, "until I realized the purpose of the bank, educating women about finances." Estelle Jackson, "The Women's Bank Proposed," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, March 15, 1976, N/A.

### **Conclusion: The Multiple Facets of Richmond's Local Movement**

In 1971-1972 Zelda Nordlinger worked as a lobbyist for the Virginia Women's Political Caucus. At the time the Women's Rights Organization in Richmond, Richmond N.O.W.'s precursor, was made up of a handful of women who, in Norlinger's words, were "not really actively engaged as a group."<sup>154</sup> Nordlinger was involved in a variety of groups, as well as working as an individual, in order to build a movement. Her efforts were for publicity, solidarity, and, of course, material gains for the movement. This led to a pragmatic two-fold strategy. On the one hand Nordlinger actively sought out publicity, whether it was the sit-in at Thalhimer's, the confrontational speech at the Richmond First Club, or picketing the Richmond Times-Dispatch by herself in the rain. These activities were bound to attract press, if not convert the wary. Although, as the Fort Lee speech noted above showed, there is tangible evidence to show that this method produced converts as well as articles in the newspaper.

On the other hand, she sought to join together various ideologies into a coalition that would affect political and cultural change. Her work for the V.W.P.C exemplified this "big tent" approach. In 1971-72 Nordlinger kept up correspondence with women in Williamsburg. These women were more radical than the V.W.P.C.'s mainstream and were looking to incorporate African-American and working class women's issues into the Caucus. They continually pressured Nordlinger, whom they knew had influence as well sympathy for their argument, on class issues, particularly on the V.W.P.C.'s inclination to plan events that appealed or were available to upper class women. Nordlinger, while sympathetic and willing to incorporate some of their ideas, pushed back, and it is worth

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<sup>154</sup> Zelda Norlinger to Gene Broyer, 13 March 1971, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

quoting one of her letters at length. In this letter Nordlinger responded to criticism of a planned V.W.P.C. champagne benefit. She argued that:

I really did want to tell you how pleased I was with the response your group had to the “invitation for cocktails” affair.....that’s what I call raising conciousnesses [sic]! However, I believe our movement must allow for the upper-class women who feel they want to do something, and know of no other way.....we need to educate them but we also must understand their circumstances. In that way we can make the women’s liberation movement a totally encompassing, growing movement. At this point in our struggle, we cannot afford to turn off a single living woman. Here I am, sitting comfortable as a middle-class woman thinking of the plight of my poor sisters and totally disregarding the empty fluorescent life of my rich sisters. Imagine the power our movement would gain if they would join with us! I acknowledge that the politics of our movement is basically a class struggle, and the upper-class is male-dominated; however, our upper-class sisters must come to realize the sterility of their lives.<sup>155</sup>

This statement shows a touch of naivete as well as condescension for those deemed less enlightened but it was also clearly states the philosophy that imbued not just Nordlinger’s activism but the activism of all the women who originally formed Richmond NOW. It defines the method that guided the first micro-cohort, whether it was Nordlinger’s political activism or Carlton’s religiosity. They sought to include, by incorporating intellectual movements, leaving space at the table for the rich and the poor, and advocating for the victims of economic and criminal injustice. Their free-style, almost improvisational methodology, sought to build an inclusive movement pragmatically.

With the generational shift that occurred in the mid 1970’s Richmond NOW became more static yet this too was a form of pragmatism. With the increasing influence of the women’s movement came the ensuing backlash. Because it took energy away

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<sup>155</sup> Zelda Nordlinger to Chris Faia, 2 February 1972, Nordlinger Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

from the major legislative fight over the ERA amendment, the free-ranging activism of the early generation came to be seen as a liability.

This viewpoint can be seen in the attitudes of the latter cohort, such as when Yvette Gerner, discussing Nordlinger, stated, “She was very powerful because she had been there from the very beginning and she would always talk about Thalhimers.”<sup>156</sup> The implication being that the first cohort remained stuck in nostalgia and that they were out of touch with the present women’s movement. But more importantly it can be seen in actions that the groups adopted or attempted to adopt.

In February 1978 Marianne Fowler of VERAC and Jean Marshall Clarke of NOW’s state office, were arrested for protesting in the Capitol building and charged with disorderly conduct and causing an unnecessary disruption.<sup>157</sup> The leaders in VERAC complained that “the problem is that at the present time the only recourse that any of our organizations have when something happens to make the ratification of ERA more difficult is to withdraw from the Coalition. Now, the last thing a healthy coalition needs is for the objective, effective organizations to withdraw. Thus, perhaps we need a procedure for censoring a member or a member organization when they purposefully thwart our purpose, which is to see ERA ratified, with some action.”<sup>158</sup>

For women involved in the ERA fight, a cause that brought the second micro-cohort to the women’s movement, radical advocacy and/or radical issues hurt women’s causes because it brought negative publicity and sundered political alliances. Certainly this contention could be backed up with evidence. The General Assembly, for instance,

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<sup>156</sup> Yvette Gerner, interview by author, 7 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, interview held by author.

<sup>157</sup> Bezbatchesko, 88-89.

<sup>158</sup> Lulu Meese to Muriel Smith, 17 Sept 1978, Virginia Equal Rights Amendment Ratification Council Papers, Special Collections, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.



used Fowler and Clarke's arrest as an excuse to shut down the ERA in 1978.<sup>159</sup>

Ultimately, however, this was a judgment call, one that Beth Marschak believed backfired: "To a certain extent their approach was anything else will harm the Equal Rights Amendment chance so we want nothing to do with it . . . and I think that in terms of successful politics that was a mistake."<sup>160</sup> Yet it was based on pragmatic politics, what they thought was possible in Virginia and what they thought would attract the most support.

That women's organizations were tightening up was not surprising. Nordlinger's NOW never had more than a dozen or so active members. By the mid 1970s all of the women's organizations in Richmond saw increased membership. With this surge, and the increased viability of women's issues, came the perceived need to work in concert. Therefore issues were prioritized, individual free lancing was looked down on, and events were planned. All of which led to an increased tension between the generations, and new tactics for accomplishing the same ultimate task, pragmatic gains based on a big tent approach.

Richmond's National Organization for Women's chapter was an extremely small pocket of women. Even at its peak it could not compare to chapters in other major cities, nor could it withstand the movement that arose in backlash. Yet, the chapter was able to exert an influence in Richmond, with some achievements products of national trends and some through local advocacy. It did this through a variety of methods and across

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<sup>159</sup> "Legislators were upset by the arrests and so ERA sponsors believed further action could cause legislators to switch to nay votes. Although proponents gathered enough signatures on a petition to propose a rules change, McDiarmid [a main proponent in the General Assembly] refused to introduce it. She believed proponents had to work to repair their image before any other moves were made," Bezabetchenko, 89.

<sup>160</sup> Beth Marschak, interview by author, 20 August 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

multiple generations. As times changed so did the organization evolve and it remained a fluid and dynamic organization as the 1970s progressed.

The early women advocates that emerged in Richmond were a perfect fit for NOW's national program. They were by nature liberal. They emphasized equality, embraced both sexes, and focused on an economic and political agenda. And indeed these women did appeal to NOW for membership and built up a local organization that was broadly aligned with the national office. Yet, their acceptance of NOW and its ideological underpinnings did not pigeonhole them into one role within the larger women's movement. They may have been liberal in orientation but in their advocacy they were pragmatic. They adopted the techniques and emphasized the issues that would gain them the most members and support. As a result they incorporated a diverse range of elements into their movement, including an emphasis on religion, an assimilation of the tactics used by the radical wing of the liberation movement, and a willingness to move throughout different organizations to accomplish their goals.

This study furthers the research done on individual chapters within NOW. In her study of Chicago's NOW chapter, Suzanne Staggenborg found that the organization was constrained by its formalized and centralized structure, which led to a narrowing of its strategies and tactics.<sup>161</sup> She argued that while this allowed the organization to survive and remain an institution in contemporary times, it did not challenge the existing system compared to the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (C.W.L.U.), which was more decentralized, less hierarchical, and more radical but had a shorter life span. Staggenborg argued that both types of organizations are necessary for a social movement to survive.

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<sup>161</sup> Suzanne Staggenborg, "Stability and Innovation in the Women's Movement: A Comparison of Two Movement Organizations."

Meanwhile Jo Reger in her comparison of the Cleveland and New York chapters showed how each locality put in place different ideologies and structures that allowed each to govern itself.<sup>162</sup> She argued that these structures determined whether or not a chapter thrived or did not survive. Therefore, New York survived a dispute between politicians and cultural feminists because the chapter made room for both while in Cleveland socio-economic factors split the chapter into a suburban, higher-income chapter on the west end and an urban lower-income chapter in the east end because they lacked an apparatus to overcome the differences between the two groups.

Following Reger's study was Stephanie Gilmore's article on the Memphis NOW chapter.<sup>163</sup> As noted above, Gilmore sought to show how the Memphis branch blurred the lines between liberal and radical action. She showed how the ideological divides that historians use to describe the women's movement fell apart when local movements were dissected.

Richmond's NOW shows, much like Reger's and Gilmore's studies, the diversity of the autonomous local chapters that fit under the NOW umbrella. Nordlinger, Carlton, and others created a movement that accepted a variety of issues, tactics, and viewpoints that enabled them to overcome disputes and to work on a variety of topics at one time. This "big tent" approach focused on liberal values but branched off into radical tactics or conservative issues because activists believed that they could affect change or because those were the issues or methods that interested them.

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<sup>162</sup> Reger, *Organizational Dynamics and Construction of Multiple Feminist Identities in the National Organization for Women*.

<sup>163</sup> Stephanie Gilmore, "The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminist Activism in Memphis, 1971-1982: Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide," *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, 15 No. 1 (Spring 2003): 95-113.

This study breaks with these other scholars, however, in not seeing NOW as a monolithic entity. Staggenborg's article, in particular, shows NOW and C.W.L.U. as dichotomous organizations. However, as shown in this study, the women of Richmond's movement used organizations, organizations did not use them.<sup>164</sup> As a result these women worked to achieve their goals through the V.W.P.C., N.U.C., E.W.C., Women's Lobby of Va., and NOW. No two organizations were the same. They varied in structure, membership and governance. The W.V.P.C. was highly centralized with Zelda Nordlinger and Margaret Williams accountable to Flora Crater, Virginia's coordinator, while Nordlinger saw Richmond's NOW chapter, a group that was highly centralized nationally<sup>165</sup>, as "a structureless [sic] setup".<sup>166</sup>

These scholars, as well as Maryann Barakso who wrote on NOW's governance structure and the grassroots<sup>167</sup>, assume a singular identity, which makes the organization all-important rather than seeing the local people as actors in which the organization is a part of their collective identity. In an oral history interview in 2007 Betsy Brinson asked Nordlinger about her affiliation with the groups that were lobbying for the ERA, of which there were nine. She asked if she was part of the ERA Ratification Council of which Nordlinger replied, "I was just part of just about all of them. And you know it was like . . . at that point I was lobbying at the General Assembly on many issues, feminist issues,

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<sup>164</sup> This is true of the second generation as well, although to a lesser extent. Women, like Jean Hellmuth, that joined N.O.W. to support the E.R.A. also worked through V.E.R.A.C, while teachers like Juanita White pushed women's issues through teachers' organizations. The difference is that the second generation used these groups to push for the same issue, while women like Nordlinger and Carlton used different organizations to push different issues. In White's case education became a useful outlet to push women's issues because she was all ready a teacher and most teachers at that time were women.

<sup>165</sup> As well as in Chicago according to Staggenborg. Suzanne Staggenborg, "Stability and Innovation in the Women's Movement: A Comparison of Two Movement Organizations."

<sup>166</sup> Emma Livingston and Sally Cox, "Thalhimer's Soup Bar "Liberated by Women", *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 27 August 1970, A1

<sup>167</sup> Maryann Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004);

and, um, that was one was just part and parcel of it.”<sup>168</sup> NOW was the focal point of the Richmond women’s movement for these activists but it was just one organization amongst many. Its actions and successes did not represent the movement for these women but instead a percentage, how big or small depended on the woman, of their overall activities.

Juanita White recognized this when she noted in an interview that:

No, but it was it was pretty time consuming really, you know, to be really involved in one of . . . Although we still kept our hand in other things too. Even places where you would least expect it. I taught at a very conservative school in Chesterfield and there were only two of us on the faculty who were feminists and we took a lot of . . . But this particular feminist was the most charming person. And she got really angry because we put out a faculty list every year and we listed the faculty and the men would be John Brown but the women had to be Ms. or Mrs. Somebody. Well she thought that was the most . . . Why on earth, there that was one of the one of things the little things that we questioned. Why do women have to declare their marital state and men don’t. So she started this drive at school and by the time she got through the faculty list came out Juanita White. Her name was Dianne Kyle, she’s a professor now at the University of Louisville by the way. She’s a very dynamic person but just the little things. We were more or less required not only to keep bulletin boards but we were required to decorate our windows. You know we had huge windows. We tried as much as we could to sneak in feminist messages. Uh, Girls you know you’re important too.<sup>169</sup>

By cross checking the women of Richmond’s activism one finds a web of connections. It is not just, as Gilmore noted in her Memphis study, that the N.O.W. chapter blended the radical and liberal. It is that individual women blended the radical and liberal. Even in the second generation when organizational authority played more of a role than individual activism women still used the organization rather than vice versa. The goals had just changed. Whether it was Jean Hellmuth joining almost every organization in

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<sup>168</sup> Zelda Nordlinger, interview by Betsy Brinson, tape recording, 7 July 2007, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>169</sup> Juanita White, interview by author, 29 July 2009, Richmond, mp3 recording, Interview held by author.

Richmond to shore up support for the E.R.A. or Juanita White carving out space in her personal work life, women in Richmond confounded organizational limitations.

The study of the second wave women's movement has just begun to move past its first generation and its historiography is just in its beginning stages. Micro histories have begun to look past national organizations and into the local chapters. Yet, they have still based their arguments around specific organizations. This paper argues that research should instead focus on how the women in those organizations were tied to the broader movement as it developed in its given locality. Richmond's women sought to accomplish their goals through a wide range of institutions and tactics. Research that focuses on how the organizations are tied together demographically and logistically would create a "thick description" of women's movements in different localities. While N.O.W. acted as an autonomous organization with its own set of goals and processes the women within it were not confined to those parameters.

Indeed when those parameters did not fit an actor's views or needs, she used a different organization. The current organizational or ideological (liberal versus radical) approaches emphasize disagreement within the movement because of their inclination to emphasize a dichotomous relationship between feminist actors. By looking at the women in Richmond, however, we see that while disagreements existed the women used organizations less as ideological instruments and more as pragmatic tools to accomplish the equality of women. The women of N.O.W. were dedicated to N.O.W.'s goals yet more importantly they were also dedicated to the broader goals of the Richmond movement as well as women's rights writ large.

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