**Catherine Conroy 1920-1989**

Catherine Conroy, Communication Workers of America (CWA) union staff leader was preparing her workshop on volunteer overtime at the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, in June of 1966. They were in Washington, DC at the conference run by the Women’s Bureau. Someone suggested to Catherine that “Betty Friedan was in her workshop” to fight against forced overtime. She thought it was a shame she had never heard of Friedan or the *Feminine Mystique*. But they both agreed that OT limited job opportunities for women w/ families and anyone.

Catherine, a product of the “other Women’s movement” had been president of her local, male dominated, CWA for almost 10 years. The first influential women’s group Conroy became involved with was

Kay Clarenbach’s WI Governor’s commission on the status of Women.

The conference, sponsored by the Labor Department would become the nexus of four important WI leaders, the two Catherines and two nuns, Sr. Austin Doherty and Sr. Joel Read.

Several state commissioners indicated in their reports the need for enforcement of Title VII of the Civil Rights act. Kay and Conroy offered to place action resolutions on the floor to rally support. They wanted a guarantee that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the enforcement arm, would prevent future sex discrimination. The Director of the Women’s Bureau, Mary Keyserling, informed them that it was “not appropriate” to criticize the sponsoring agency w/ commission resolutions.

After this response, several angry attendees met that evening in Betty’s hotel room. Nothing was decided. The next morning at breakfast, they proposed that a pressure group had to be created to ensure women’s equality. After they agreed to form a new organization, NOW, Betty wrote up a statement of purpose on a napkin. NOW was born June 29th, 1966.

That day, Catherine recalls seeing 26 women passing notes at the Bureau luncheon to consider the new entity, NOW. Mary Keyserling, the Bureau Director, had to wonder “what in the hell is going on there at these tables”.

Catherine was familiar with other union players, such as Dorothy Haener, who offered NOW an address in the UAW (United Auto Workers) office. Catherine’s practical side laid down $5.00, saying “we have to put our money where our mouth is” and shortly became temporary treasurer of the new organization for equality and human rights.

A native of Milwaukee, active in the Catholic Worker Movement, Catherine’s Labor background and experiences offered many tools to a start-up national organization for equality. In the 40s, as a telephone operator Catherine experienced the rigidity of Ma Bell, confining females to a feet-flat-on-the-floor regimen as operators. “Straw bosses bullied operators to tears”. World War II required two times the number of operators with unreasonable work hours. Catherine was annoyed that these women never put up a fight.

After attending a meeting of a new union, she was elected “steward” before she joined. By1947 she was picket line captain for the CWA national strike. The union demanded wages across the board and pensions. They picketed nine hours a day for 6 weeks. Of the 345,000 strikers, 230,00 of them were female. Most of the male strikers were electricians. The picketers cheerfully sang songs, ran baby showers on the line and caused mischief. The strike confirmed Catherine’s determination to build an organization that would right the wrongs of the corporation through union activism.

She became totally immersed in constitutional conventions and union by laws. In 1950 she defeated a male candidate for WI CWA treasurer. (No small feat!) The next year as mechanization caused a loss of jobs for long distance operators, Catherine developed training programs through the union w/ the vocational school.

She ran for president of her Local 5500, won, and served for over 9 years. In 1960 when 50% of the CWA members were women, Catherine decided to take the CWA staff job as a regional representative in Wi and IL. “Do everything to find a sister to fill an opening.” She saw the unfair representation when only 2 out of 100 union staffers were female.

Most complaints of a minor nature came from craftsmen, while women waited for the union to solve their larger job problems. Catherine encouraged the women to solve their problems together in the union, to stop crying and fight for themselves.

Conroy’s activism for women and labor unions merged with the founding of NOW. Catherine appreciated Betty Friedan’s vision and ability to analyze problems, but saw that she was a “terrible organization person”. Catherine supported Kaye Clarenbach as Chair of NOW National board w/ headquarters in Madison WI. “Betty has the ideas but Kaye will make them happen”.

Over the years on the WI women’s commission Kaye became an effective mentor to Catherine. CC also had become fast friends with Sr. Joel and Sr. Austin, having met two women who wanted to build a strong institution and strong independent women.

All NOW founders pledged to start NOW chapters in their local communities. A stellar team came to the Sherman House (now the Illinois Center) in Chicago w/ Catherine and Kaye to start Chicago NOW.

Catherine also assisted in starting the Milwaukee NOW chapter, as well as becoming a national founding member of Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW).