

## **Priscilla M. Leith**

### **Passing the ERA in Congress and ratifying in Massachusetts**

I worked on the Equal Rights Amendment campaign from 1971 until the deadline, June 30, 1982. After joining N.O.W. in Oshkosh, WI in order to form a Chapter under the leadership of Dr. Audrey Hansen, a faculty member at Wisconsin State University there, I moved to Newton, MA, became active with Boston and then Massachusetts



N.O.W. We lobbied for passage of ERA in Congress, then worked hard to ratify the Amendment in the Massachusetts Legislature. Encountering some efforts to block it, N.O.W. members and their allies swamped the galleries of the House to show support, and the House approved it. The Senate leadership "lost" the ERA bill (the actual paper document needed by the Clerk to process the bill). Thanks to detective work by Rep. Lois G. Pines (D-Newton), the bill was found in the desk drawer of the Senate President, Kevin Harrington, and pulled out so it could be voted on. N.O.W. coordinated a letter-writing campaign and again filled the State House with supporters so that the Senate passed ERA. This is not to imply that there was no serious opposition: there was! We just had too much momentum and a well-coordinated lobbying campaign that the opposition could not beat back.

### **Combining Political and Feminist Action with Family and Personal Growth**



After  
several  
years  
serving  
as

Treasurer of Mass. N.O.W., participating in the organization meetings of Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus, and serving as State Coordinator/President of Massachusetts N.O.W., I entered graduate school at Babson College, going part time and juggling this with my N.O.W. and ERA efforts. My two children were in college, too. During visits to Vassar College, transporting and visiting my daughters, I attended some meetings of student feminist groups and mobilized letter writing on behalf of the ERA Extension (campaign to extend the seven-year deadline).

I received my MBA from Babson in May 1982 the same weekend that my younger daughter graduated in Poughkeepsie, NY. I attended both graduations, and in between went to the State Democratic Convention in Springfield, MA to vote for Rep. Lois Pines who was running for Lt. Governor of Massachusetts. At the end of May I drove down to North Carolina to work on the ERA ratification campaign in Chapel Hill-Raleigh-Durham area until the NC Legislature voted (negatively) on the ERA bill. ERA was done in by "turncoat" legislators, including Lt. Governor Jimmy Green.

A group of ERA workers attended the NC Democratic State Convention, organized a demonstration against Jimmy Green during the Convention, turning our backs to him while he was at the podium. Later, we went to Charlotte to work on behalf of two pro-ERA Candidates endorsed by a local group called FAIR who were running against two turncoat state senators. We organized mailings, attended campaign events, canvassed, planted political signs at crossroads in flat, dusty outback areas of Cabarras and Mecklenberg Counties on behalf of our candidates. They won. All of us then drove to Washington, DC to attend a June 30 ERA Rally in front of the White House and stay for the 4th of July fireworks

in Washington.

### **Working on ERA Ratification in Illinois**

In February 1980 I took time out from graduate school in Massachusetts to concentrate on



some volunteer work I had undertaken, including field work on the ERA ratification campaign. I drove to Illinois early that month and stayed in Evanston with Maureen Rogman and Naomi Ross, the Illinois NOW State Coordinator. Naomi was attempting to hold down a fulltime job at a local medical center, run the ERA ratification campaign and Illinois NOW, and get 8 hours' sleep per night - which was impossible! There were meetings in the middle of the night at O'Hare Airport with National NOW President Ellie Smeal; trips to

Springfield to lobby for the ERA, and long hours spent on the telephone over strategy with allies like the Civil Liberties Union. I can remember running into Betty Friedan, standing alone at the door of the State Capitol Building one day and looking like we all felt: discouraged and exasperated at our inability to convince moderate and liberal legislators to vote for the ERA bill. We had the usual problems: hidden opposition from some of our allies, open opposition from the insurance companies, and Phyllis Schlafly talking about co-ed bathrooms.

Meanwhile, Jane Byrne was making headway on her campaign against incumbent Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley because snow was still piled up in the streets of the neighborhoods from a record blizzard. Byrne, who supported ERA, defeated Daley that spring and went on to serve as Mayor of Chicago. Despite a large, national ERA Mother's Day March in Chicago that year, we never ratified ERA in Illinois. Democratic internal politics fractured our coalition and split the legislative vote.