

FINAL
Carol Pierce

I'm Carol Pierce and I had the honor of serving as Chair of the first New Hampshire Commission on the Status of Women.

Two things preceded the creation of the Commission: The most influential was the growth of women concerned about women's issues across the U.S. in the 1960's. That surge included hundreds if not thousands of New Hampshire women. The second was that, in 1962, President John Kennedy decreed a Commission on the Status of Women in every state for two years under the U.S. Department of Labor. State legislation was to follow, creating a permanent Commission. Margaret Normandin of Laconia chaired New Hampshire's temporary group from '63 to '65. They successfully got women on juries and opened up toll booth jobs to women.

In 1969, the New Hampshire Legislature created our permanent state Commission. I am occasionally asked how I came to chair the first Commission. I was not known politically by the Governor. I was the state president of American Association of University Women during the late '60s,

and I was concerned that the legislature had created the Commission, but Governor Walter Peterson had not appointed its members.

I called together the presidents of 10 New Hampshire women's organizations. We formed the Women's Inter-organizational Council. Our first order of business was to encourage Governor Peterson to appoint Commissioners. Five of us were designated to go to the Governor's office to speak with him.

We appeared in his office unannounced—five women wanting an answer NOW! Caroline Gross, his Chief of Staff, greeted us and after checking with the Governor, it was decided that our organization would suggest five women to represent women's groups and he would select another five. That seemed like a good compromise.

At the Commission's first organizational meeting on October 16, 1970, we showed up to the Governor's office only to discover that we had no agenda, no Chair, and no place to meet!

With 10 women waiting expectantly to begin, the Governor offered his Chambers for our meeting. We filed in, each avoiding the chair at the head of the table. We sat in silence in the room—no one sure of what to do.

Again, we turned to the Governor's Chief of Staff—who will be our Chair? The Governor's answer: "You select your chair!" Jean Hennesey of the NH Charitable Foundation, a well-respected and firm voice, blurted out, "I nominate Carol Pierce, the only one without a full-time job." *PAUSE*

I frantically tried to decide my response. Should I be humble and say others should also be nominated? No, I thought. This may be MY time.

But, with little pause, Jean said, "all in favor say, 'Aye'." Everyone, or at least most, did. And that was that.

I chaired from October 1970 to January '75. When I saw the first publication of Commissioners names, I was Mrs. Robert Pierce, as everyone married was a MRS; and I was a Chairman.

With some mixed discussion, that DID change.

Our first meetings involved brainstorming for where to put our effort. We made a list: discrimination in education, applying for credit, physical and mental health issues, New Hampshire laws, employment, and politics.

We were 10 women who knew what needed to change, but how? Chairing this commission weighed heavily on me. I wanted us to work as a team and have as many women as possible join us in this work.

As commissioners, we found we identified with not being able to open our own bank accounts, have access to credit, and if, God forbid, were divorced, there were no support systems, training, or options for us, because we were “just displaced homemakers.” Anger focused us.

The incredible energy that Commissioners would bring to these and other issues was amazing over the next four years.

I was concerned about the resistance the Commission might face as we pursued our work. How far could we push for change against the vast discrimination women faced? How safe were we from backlash? Attorney General Warren Rudman told me “Carol, no one can undo you as a group. You are mandated by the legislature.” It gave us assurance, at least for a time.

Hearings throughout New Hampshire would focus our work. We started with general hearings in Laconia and Concord. The days were always full, starting at 10 am and closing at 9pm at night, with at least 3 commissioners present. We held 14 hearings in every part of the state from ‘71 to ‘74.

Women gave us their stories and THAT gave us our work.

To encourage New Hampshire women to take initiative on their own, we planned Women’s Days at the State House in 1973 and ‘74, chaired by Roberta Tenney and Liz Hager.

Nearly 400 women attended workshops on Sexism in Education, Disadvantaged Women, Women & the Law, Divorce, Employment, Politics, Credit, Women & Unions, and Women in Policing. One workshop on health, organized by women in the field, led to the creation of the N.H. Women's Health Center, today known as the Equality Health Center in Concord. Another workshop on the psychology of women generated Concord's counseling service, known as Womankind.

Commissioners were often asked to speak. We were safe, as representatives of state government. It pushed me into doing some personal growth. After speaking, women would say quietly, "Where did you learn to talk like that?" I would say, "I had joined a consciousness-raising group with friends!" Consequently, what I talked about and how I talked about being a woman, changed. I felt more real. Serving on the Commission changed me.

Every commissioner has her story.

Thanks for listening to mine!