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My Life as a Feminist
by Janet Daasch

I was the sixth child of eight, born at home in rural Wisconsin because Dad could not get Mom to the hospital on time. It was a difficult delivery. I was left with a helper at home while Mom had to go to the hospital afterward. My sister, born three years later, was a disappointment to Dad because it was another girl. A message I absorbed as a child of immigrants was that boys were more important than girls in the family.

Moving to Marshfield from rural Arpin, I attended 5th grade at St. John's Catholic Grade School. I would come home and "play mass" instead of "playing school" with my siblings and was disappointed to learn that only a boy could grow up to be a priest. My female role models growing up were Wonder Woman and the Blessed Virgin Mary. My mother was "just a wife and mother" with only a 3rd grade education. I never knew what her name was until I was older. She was just "Mom." I was not inspired to get married and live the life she was demonstrating to me.

The seed of rebellion was growing in me at the unfairness of the position of women in my culture. I was the first member of our family to attend college. My family did not agree with my goal to obtain further education with my mother telling me I should just get a job to save money until I got married. My aunt, an migrant from the Netherlands, would always say to us girls, "When are you going to get married?"

In the 70s, when I was reading a magazine article about women in journalism rebelling, I could identify. I was married to a firefighter, had a daughter, and was living in a mobile home park in Marshfield, having been pressured by the norms in my social circle. I had completed two years and one summer of college before I got married, and in the first year of my marriage I realized I needed to continue to invest in myself. I commuted to Stevens Point to finish my bachelor's degree with a carpool of wonderful women. A neighbor, Eileen Kelz, who also lived in the mobile park, and I, connected and shared an interest in the women's movement.

Our first real efforts in spreading the movement to area women, was to hold Consciousness Raising Groups. We met a woman, Marlene Travis McElroy, who was a font of knowledge about the movement and provided us with lots of feminist literature. By now, my spouse and I had followed the "American dream" starting out in an apartment, then the mobile home and now a cute little house with our two daughters. When there was an ad or



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article about consciousness raising groups meeting in my home in the local newspaper, Wayne, my spouse, was harassed by the other firefighters about his wife. Wasn't he able to control her? Even all my brothers-in-law were wary of my sisters spending time with me cause it might rub off. They were afraid their wives might divorce them. Unrealistic fears, but they were there!

Marlene, the new woman who provided us with literature, also encouraged Eileen and I to begin a National Organization for Women (NOW) chapter in Marshfield. I remember that when I was leaving my daughter with Mom so I could attend my first NOW State Council meeting in Milwaukee, my dad expressed some concern about me going. I appreciated his concern but by now no one was going to stop me from learning more about this movement. With majors in education and history and a political science minor, graduating from the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, I had never heard of the original feminists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton until I checked out some books from our local library. I was amazed, finding out women were strong, fighting for their rights way before I was born!

We were having regular meetings for our consciousness raising group. With the Equal Rights Amendment put to referendum by the Wisconsin state legislature, we formed an ERA coalition of members of NOW, AAUW, BPW and League of Women Voters. Our NOW chapter was the leading force. Eileen and I spoke to many groups regarding

this issue. Some of the groups we spoke to were Parish Council of Catholic Women in Bakerville, McMillan 49ers Homemakers Club, Homemakers Club of Chili, Senior Citizens, Young Jaycees and a school forum. Eileen spoke at a U.W. symposium on ERA and feminism. On March 26, I was on a radio show with our Assemblyman John Oestreicher regarding the Wisconsin ERA. This may have been the time that I was debating Phyllis Schlafly, an American Conservative activist who opposed feminism and campaigned against the ratification of the ERA.

On April 11, 1973, we officially convened as a NOW Chapter and elected our first officials. President was Eileen Kelz, Vice-President Sue Neve, Secretary and Public Relations Carol Farber, Treasurer Sue Neve, Legislation Janet Schultz (me) and Consciousness Raising Mary Rein. In May of 1973, Eileen, Carol, and I attended our first state NOW conference in Green Bay. I was very impressed with our State President, Margo House

August 26 was officially chosen as Women's Equality Day. We planned a celebration with Assemblyman John Oestricher and me as speakers on the ERA, a suffragist skit by Betty Schloesser and a parade march up Central Avenue with TV coverage.

Over 50 people attended. In the spring of 1973, as part of the project entitled "Attitudes, Women and Employment," I participated in conducting training workshops for job personnel and interested employers in the LaCrosse area to increase their awareness of and sensitivity to the problems of women in employment. This pilot project was contracted by the Department of Industry Labor and Human Relations, was successful and granted more funding for all Job Service Offices in Wisconsin. I became most interested in the movement's push for day care centers. Women who wanted to work to support themselves needed day care. I was lucky that my mother helped, but I could see that many women did not have that option. Being able to support myself was a freedom that I relished. Besides our NOW chapter, I was active in the League of Women Voters, the Democratic Party, and became Secretary of the 7th Congressional District Democratic Party.

In 1974, my focus changed to running for political office. A professor I had in one of my classes suggested getting active in a candidate's campaign committee to understand local politics. I was very shy and spoke little as I absorbed the information I could when I participated in a state senator's campaign committee.

Later I became involved in John Oestricher's assembly campaign committee. I actively campaigned in Wood County running for Wood County Clerk as a Democrat in a Republican county. I lost to the incumbent although the race was close. I ran once again in the spring of 1975 for the City Clerk's position and came in second out of six candidates. During my Campaign for both positions, I faced questions about how a mother of two could handle a full-time job.

My marriage was beginning to unravel at this point due to Wayne's alcoholism. In order to change the situation, divorce seemed the only option even though financial fears kept me in the marriage longer than I wanted. I was pregnant with my second daughter when I graduated from college and interviewed for a teaching position at Marshfield Senior High. The big question in the interview was, "Who will take care of your children if we hire you?" The man interviewing me could not see hiring a woman with small children. I was so angry that I could not get a full-time job to support myself and my daughter so I could leave the marriage. Looking back on that time I am glad that I used that energy to fight for women's rights. I decided to go back to school to find a career to support myself and my daughters as I was not getting any financial support from my ex-spouse.

I continued to be active in NOW but had to move to Menomonie, WI to attend UW -Stout where I was entering a new master's program in drug and alcohol counseling. Half of all alcoholics are women but counselors in the field were male. I learned that most research in the addictions field was with men, not women. After graduation, I was hired at the L.E. Phillips treatment center in Chippewa Falls in 1978. At the same time, a single male was hired with the same credentials. I discovered later that he was paid a much higher salary than I, a single mother with two daughters to support.

In 1981, I formed a group called Concerned Chippewa Citizens to combat rape and domestic abuse in Chippewa county and wrote a grant to start a domestic abuse program. I thought I had picked a less controversial area. By this time, I was Janet McLaughlin, having married again. I worked for almost 10 years at the treatment center, putting up with lots of teasing about being a "women's libber," but co-workers were impressed with the work I had done on my master's thesis regarding women in treatment and the publication "Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly" wanted to publish my research.

In 1988, I took a job at Chippewa Valley Technical College as the Program Director of a new two -year Associate Degree Program in Drug and Alcohol Abuse counseling. I was very excited about writing the curriculum for the program. There was a need for more training for addiction counselors

since most working in the field were males in recovery with only one year of on-the-job training. The program offered better opportunities for women to enter the field.

By now my daughters were in college, as it was never a doubt that they would need to find a career and be financially independent. I was very pleased that my youngest was interested in political science, following in my footsteps. She entered the political field and is a legislator at the Capital in St. Paul. My oldest daughter had a bachelor's in English and some work experience, but spent 17 years as a stay-at-home mom. I worried about her not having a career to allow herself to be financially independent. Years later, it was difficult for her to re-enter the work force after her divorce. In the end, she did find a successful career in communications and is now designing and building her "dream home".

After teaching for 16 years, I packed it in and decided to retire in "the middle of nowhere," as my grandson calls it! My second husband died and I reconnected with Wayne, my first husband, after he completed treatment for alcoholism. I bought property in the Upper Peninsula before I retired, and after retirement, Wayne helped me build my final home. I spent three years researching books in order to develop the home in which I wanted to spend the rest of my life. Shortly after the house was finished, Wayne died of cancer. In Wayne's 5 years in recovery, my daughters and I had the opportunity to heal and mend our relationships with him.

I have now been living on the Garden Peninsula in the UP of Michigan for over 18 Years and of course I could not "quietly retire." I became a board member of our local Village Artisans. I joined a quilting group that met every Tuesday, was active in our little Catholic Church, joined a book club and of course got involved in local politics, running for the township board. I married again in 2006 to a former friend from the 90s.

For several years, there was a lot of turmoil over an industrial wind farm coming onto the peninsula in spite of the objections of the National Fish and Wildlife Service. In fighting against the wind farm, my life was threatened and someone reported to me that men in the bar were threatening to burn my house down. I refused to be bullied. All is quiet now, the company decided to limit the number of wind turbines and settled the lawsuit the landowner had filed. I now enjoy my quilting and gardening and am hoping that the Trump followers do not start a war.

I am so grateful for my experiences in Al-Anon, in the women's movement, especially the consciousness raising groups, in politics, in women's support groups and in my faith that I was brought up in. This combination of life experiences gave me the courage and self-esteem to confront many obstacles in my life. Many thanks to my very Polish Catholic mother and my stubborn Dutch father who brought me into this world.