EILEEN KELZ

by Jane Kennedy and Georgette Frazer

When Eileen Kelz moved to Marshfield in 1968, she didn't see her future as a warrior for the women's movement. She was newly married to her husband Bill and about to give birth to their first child. She intended to nest with her new family and support Bill in his new job as an elementary physical education teacher in the Marshfield School District.

Eileen was raised on the oldest family farm in Minnesota. She loved farm life and all the animals, especially her horses, and became an accomplished horsewoman. She moved from home to study at Winona State University, where she would meet Bill. Eileen loved learning about what makes people tick. She graduated with a BA in Sociology and Psychology.

Eileen was hired as a caseworker for the Department of Public Welfare for Washington County, MN. This job opened her eyes and would inform her future as an advocate for women. In particular, she remembered a 42-year-old farm woman whose husband abandoned her and expelled her from the farm, leaving her homeless with no skills outside of farming and no legal rights to the farm as a woman. She was forced to reach out for public assistance. This injustice haunted and motivated Eileen to work for change.

One day, pushing her baby stroller around the mobile home park where they lived in Marshfield, Eileen met Janet Feenstra Schultz. She and Janet became fast friends as they explored the beginnings of their growing interest in the women's movement and their desire to do something about the many obstacles women faced. They began a local chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW).

NOW members were first called into action to promote the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. The group was unstoppable and continued to work together on many causes to improve the lives of Marshfield women. They tackled issues of reproductive freedom, property ownership, financial equality, domestic violence, childcare, pay equity, sexual assault, and many others.

The 1972 Title 9 Act legislated that schools receiving federal funding must dedicate equal resources to girls' sports and academics. Local groups then worked to make it happen. "So any women and their daughters who have benefited from playing sports or have succeeded in the fields of math and science have a feminist to thank for it," Eileen exclaims. Because of Eileen's work with equality in education, she was appointed by the governor to a state task force to look at ways to bring more gender equity to Wisconsin schools.



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Eileen saw a local need for a support system for women who were in transition and who needed some training in life skills. At the time there were no female counselors or mental health providers or clergy in which women were able to confide. Along with Bette Weber and Mary Pat Swamy she started the Personal Development Center (PDC). Bette was a trained peer counselor and provided much needed support for women. In addition to counseling, they developed classes in Assertive Communication, Back to School-Back to Work, Surviving Divorce, and many other topics. PDC became incorporated as a non-profit in 1975. Nearly 50 years later, the visionary staff and board have established the PDC-Orenda Center, which provides shelter and services to families experiencing domestic abuse.

Eileen recognized other needs that arise for women experiencing unplanned pregnancies. In the early 70's there was still debate about whether contraception should be legal in Wisconsin. As a caseworker she had met a very desperate mother of four who died due to a self-inflicted abortion. That heart-breaking experience solidified Eileen's drive to work for reproductive rights.

In 1977 Eileen was approached by Janet Mensching, then Wood County Nursing Service Director. The county board had just voted to discontinue a voluntary Family Planning Program for Wood County clients. Janet knew that women were desperate for information and access to birth control and that the Wisconsin Division of Health was

offering grants for new providers. Eileen wrote a grant request and was awarded funding in 1978. She decided to partner with the experts in delivering reproductive health care for women, Planned Parenthood.

Despite opposition from a few religious and conservative groups, the Central Wisconsin Chapter of Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin became a reality. Eileen, as regional director, developed clinics in Marshfield (now closed due to budget cuts), Wisconsin Rapids, Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls. The clinics provided birth control, education, cancer screening and STD screening for many women, especially those with limited financial means. For many women, Planned Parenthood is still their only source of affordable health care. Today, the Wisconsin Rapids and Eau Claire clinics continue to serve women with reproductive health care..

The Planned Parenthood clinics were off to a solid start so after 10 years in health care Eileen moved on to become a student organization advisor at UW-Stevens Point. She was there to help students learn through community service and participation. She loved working with young people and preparing them for adulthood. The students voted for her as their favorite mentor; she was awarded the University Leadership mentoring award. She is most proud of this.

Eileen's next venture was as a business entrepreneur. In the 90's, more women, young and old, were going to work and moving into leadership positions. She began her own business, offering casual wear. She earned several sales awards and her interest in supporting businesswomen grew. She served as President of the local chapter of Wisconsin Women Entrepreneurs, introducing the concept of Success Teams and Idea Parties to Marshfield where women gathered to generate ideas and business solutions for each other.

Throughout her life, Eileen was aware of how one's environment affects one's mental state, success, health and relationships. She became interested in the ancient concept of Feng Shui. After studying under Denise Linn in Seattle, she returned home and started Dynamic Environments, a business to help people thrive in their own space whether it be home, work, education settings or business. After earning her Master Teacher designation, she trained other practitioners from the local area and several foreign countries. Eileen loved this work. She retired in 2015.

Today, Eileen's legacy lives on with the many area women still served by Planned Parenthood, and with the many women and their families who have escaped domestic abuse at the PDC- Orenda Center. She also hopes that Dynamic Environments served people well as they learned how to make their environment a supportive place. In retirement, Eileen volunteers at Marshfield Area Pet Shelter (MAPS) taking care of cats and falls in love with a new one each week. Of herself, Eileen states, "I like to start and develop things. I enjoy the process of seeing need and searching for creative ways to meet that need. The more people say that 'It can't be done,' the more determined I become."