

Kathryn F. Clarenbach was an early leader of the modern feminist movement in the United States and the first Chairperson of NOW, the National Organization for Women.  
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## **Early life**

Kathryn “Kay” Dorothy Frederick was born in Sparta, Wisconsin on October 7, 1920 to Nina and Alexander Frederick. Just 42 days before her birth, women in the United States won the right to vote. Kathryn did not overlook her birthright; she later became recognized as the mother of modern feminism.

Her mother, Nina, was very active in the community and was elected on the Sparta school board in the early 1920's. Both of her parents were committed to help their children receive the best education possible. Kay started school at age 2 1/2, taking 1st and 2nd grade in the same year. It was expected for the Frederick children to attend college. Their parents agreed to finance all of their children's education through a master's degree.

Attending Sparta High School, Clarenbach took part in numerous clubs including German club, a capella choir, orchestra, debate, yearbook, volleyball, basketball, and had the lead part in the senior play. She thought of school not as a place to learn but a place to showcase what she knew.

## **College**

Clarenbach never took a final exam until 1937 when she got to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, so that experience was entirely new for her. Another new experience for her was the need to study. She had a mixture of study partners who later became a Supreme Court justice, a local lawyer, and a progressive left-winger. Due to the fact women were not allowed in the Rathskeller (a fact that annoyed her), she and her study partner would meet in the Paul Bunyan Room in the union.

Initially, Clarenbach was undecided as to what her major would be. Her father believed she should prepare for a practical career, such as teaching. However, in 1941 she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in political science.

Clarenbach worked at a gift shop and sold tickets to make spending money during her college years. She spent her free time working on extracurricular activities. She joined the Alpha Chi Omega sorority and later became the house president in 1941.

## **Early career**

In 1942, Clarenbach received her master's degree. In order to support the war effort, she took the federal Civil Service Exam and passed. She then moved to Washington D.C. to work as an administrative analyst with the War Production Board for 2 years. When she moved back to Madison in 1944, she went back to school to get her Ph.D, which she

received 2 years later in 1946. During her graduate studies, she spent her time as a teacher's assistant. One of her professors introduced her to a fellow student, Hank Clarenbach. On September 5, 1946 Kathryn and Hank Clarenbach were married in Sparta.

After her marriage, Clarenbach was offered teaching jobs at both Purdue University and Bryn Mawr College. She accepted Purdue's offer to teach Political Science. She enjoyed her experience there but left because she was tired of having a commuting marriage. In 1948 Clarenbach and her husband joined others to work on Henry Wallace's unsuccessful presidential campaign. During that time Hank received his Ph.D.

Clarenbach then left the work force to raise her 3 children, Sara (1949), David (1953), and Janet (1957). During her time as a new mother she was also busy with volunteer work including holding a position on the state board of the Missouri League of Women Voters.

In 1961, when Clarenbach and her family moved back to Madison, Clarenbach took a teaching position at Edgewood College. She also got elected on to the Board of Trustees at Alverno College. She was very energized by the idea of an all-women college and believed strongly in its mission.

Throughout her life, Clarenbach's career took her all over the United States, including Hawaii (4 times), the Virgin Islands (1977), Cuba (1978), Europe, Canada (3 or 4 times), and West Berlin. A large part of this was due to her father's encouragement to his children to appreciate and be curious about the world outside of Sparta.

## **Feminism**

In 1962, the focus of Clarenbach's work became women's issues when she was asked to devise a program for continuing education for women through the University of Wisconsin Extension Office. Clarenbach was worried about finding childcare when she took this job but her husband rescheduled his real estate work so he could be at home when the children got home from school. She believed strongly in her work and was impressed by the changes she saw in co-workers and those in the program.

During a statewide conference she organized, Clarenbach's life was changed. The idea of a state wide Commission of Women was unanimously approved. Governor Reynolds was supportive of the idea and worked to get the commission started. In July of 1963, Governor Reynolds asked Clarenbach to lead the planning commission and the first conference. The conference took place in January 1964. After the conference the governor asked Clarenbach to chair the commission and she accepted. During her time as chair she helped change and redefine several laws which were unfair to women, such as sexual assault, divorce, and marital property. Clarenbach was chair of the commission for 15 years.

## **Establishment of NOW**

In 1966 Betty Friedan and Clarenbach set forth to put some pressure on federal establishment. NOW, the National Organization for Women was founded to fit that need. Clarenbach became the first chair of NOW. NOW's first action was to confront the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission about their sexual discrimination. When they made their point, they received much support. NOW kept growing.

Clarenbach was requested to be the conference coordinator for the International Women's Year conference in Houston, Texas. Clarenbach learned a lot during her tenure as executive director on the International Women's Year Commission, even though many poor decisions were made during that time due to fear and anxiety from conservative harassment. The conference took place in 1977 and was a success.

### **Later life**

Clarenbach was proud of all that she has done, but was most proud of starting NOW and the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women. She was, of course, also proud of her work in the field of continuing education for women. Clarenbach was on the steering committee on the National Association of Commissions on the Status of Women and was its first president in 1970. She chaired the National Women's Political Caucus, and was committed to seeing that women got elected. In 1988 she retired from UW-Madison. Clarenbach and some other co-workers have created a film that has been on demand over the nation, Never Underestimate the Power of Women. She has also edited and published a book, Green Stubborn Bud: Women's Culture at Century's Close.

Clarenbach believed the women's movement hasn't done all it should, such as not educating the younger generation enough. She was frustrated about how long it takes to get women elected to congress even though there's been much progress. But overall, she was proud of the work and progress.

In 1994 Clarenbach's habit of smoking caught up to her. On March 4, 1994, she died due to complications with emphysema. Kathryn Clarenbach's intelligence, eloquence, and strong take charge approach inspired many friends and colleagues who greatly respected her.