

NORMA SCARBOROUGH, founding member of CARAL (Canadian Association to Repeal the Abortion Law, later Canadian Abortion Rights Action League), died of congestive heart failure on April 2, 2009 at the age of 82.

Norma Scarborough remembrances

Gathered by Amanda Le Rougetel

I wrote a piece for Herizons magazine to mark Norma's passing, but wasn't able to include all the data I gathered from women who shared their memories with me. I didn't want the stories to be lost, so have collected them together here in one document...for the record.

Louise Dulude Ottawa

I had the honour and the pleasure to serve on the board of directors of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women with Norma Scarborough for several years in the early 1980s. Inevitably, many of these meetings were far from serene, but unless abortion was involved (there she was uncompromising), Norma was one of the few among us who always remained above the fray. Her remarkable common sense settled many of our disputes.

Once, I asked Norma why she cared so much about women's right to an abortion. She told me that in the 1940s, when she was in the Canadian Women's Army Corps, one day she came back to the barracks and found a colleague moaning in bed. There was blood everywhere but the woman hadn't summoned help because she was afraid to be punished because she had had an illegal abortion. Norma told me that the woman bled to death.

She never forgot it. Asked later to help start a movement to legalize abortion, she didn't hesitate for a minute before saying "yes."

Louise was NAC president from 1986 to 1988. This is an edited version of a posting Louise made on the feminist listserv Par-L on April 9, 2009

Kathy Coffin Halifax

I met Norma through my work with NAC. I was drawn to her on the issue of abortion, and she became a dear friend. Norma was desperate for women to work on CARAL in Atlantic Canada, so she asked me to revitalize the Nova Scotia chapter. All those great women from back then – Mary Petty, Jane Wright, Nancy Bowes, Elaine Wright...Norma would come down often.

She and I saw eye to eye about most of the issues; we were good allies in NAC and on CARAL. Norma understood the need to get CARAL out of Toronto, to reach out across Canada.

She had the ability to stay level-headed, to argue the point and to allow us our differences. She never seemed to lose her temper. She never backed down, but always tried to make sure everyone was heard. We didn't always reach consensus, but in the end everyone could live with the collective decision.

Norma was fairly low key; she was a very good public speaker. She was a loyal supporter of Henry Morgentaler through thick and thin. She didn't ever waver in her support of him.

She was employed as a secretary of a school board; she came from a large family that met every Sunday to discuss and debate with each other. She really honed her skills at NAC and CARAL. She was a constant reader; she had an enquiring mind. We would discuss books and music; she just loved Rita MacNeil (Cape Breton singer) and I was able to get Rita's autograph on a record for Norma – she was thrilled! She had a lasting friendship with me, and also with Doris Anderson. The three of us would have dinner together when I was in Toronto; we would go out or Doris would cook for us...we would laugh! They were evenings of wonderful exchanges. Their minds were keen to the end.

One memory of Norma: She and I gave a workshop on abortion rights in Sydney, Cape Breton in 1986. I took her to my Mom's house, a staunch Roman Catholic. We talked and ate- in true Cape Breton fashion and finally Mom asked Norma what she thought of this abortion fight; Norma spoke to her of what she had seen, and the need for women to have choices. They were contemporaries, about the same age with the same life experiences. I watched my Mother as she listened and took it in. She understood Norma in a much deeper way than she did all my ranting and raging. I loved both these women and was glad they met. It makes me remember Norma's power to convince. I will miss her deeply.

Kathy was vice-president of both NAC and CARAL in the 80s (specific dates forgotten).

Anne Burnett

Ottawa

When I was moving back to Ottawa from Montreal in 1988, I wrote to Norma offering my help on the abortion issue. Blodwen Piercy replied on her behalf and I joined CARAL.

I worked on the medical abortion issue. Norma and I attended a conference in Germany with Roussel.

We met a lot, writing letters like mad.

Norma was very low-key; she would very quietly talk to people. She was a very credible woman. She was effective and well regarded. I think later on she was appointed to a health board in Ontario.

At the very beginning, I was working on a very old PC and Norma encouraged me to get on email and the Internet. She was miles ahead in the computer world.

After Norma's 70th birthday, we stayed in touch but she wasn't so active any more.

Anne was a director on CARAL's board and advocated for medical abortion.

Kit Holmwood

Ottawa

Norma was interested in listening to us, in listening to our ideas. She was really strong, but not dogmatic on the issue. She was warm and loving. She would listen first, and ask where you were coming from. She wanted to understand the "why" of what was important to us, and she would explain why it was important to her.

She made good connections with women in the disability community. Norma really listened to their concerns about the language we were using in the pro-choice movement.

Norma knew abortion isn't just a woman's issue; she listened to women and to men. She understood that we're in this together.

She would work with the OCAC (Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics) women,

was very willing to support them. She recognized that their approach (rallies) was just as important as ours (lobbying) and that we needed to work together.

To anyone who said to Norma that they were too busy, that they couldn't find the time to attend a demonstration, she would say: "If you do one thing, write one letter" to an elected official.

She had a wonderful sense of humour and was able to reach out to people. She was an amazing woman.

Kit Holmwood was president of CARAL from 1989-94.

Norah Hutchinson British Columbia

When I first met Norma, it was probably in 1985. I was an active member of CARAL, and the local organization Concerned Citizens for Choice on Abortion. (CCCA).

I was constantly in touch with Norma, Carolyn Egan and others throughout the next number of years, as we relied heavily on the expertise that the Toronto activists had acquired in their impressive defence of Henry Morgentaler's legal challenges, and the opening of his clinic in Toronto.

I was a board director for CARAL for British Columbia, and that was where I got to know Norma in her true, fine form. She was always so welcoming to me, and such a powerhouse of a woman. I remember thinking at the time that she was like the "encyclopedia" of the pro-choice movement in Canada. She was a talented and wonderfully good-humoured woman, who taught me a lot about how to deal with the press.

Ultimately, it was her total commitment to the pro-choice movement and her passionate belief that we would win the battle for free standing clinics, and that women would be able to seek confidential and respectful abortion care in clinics across the country that I and so many others had so much admiration for.

A truly fine woman.

Dr. Linda Rapson Toronto

I became involved with the abortion issue after signing an abortion rights petition being circulated by June Callwood and Pierre Berton; I signed as "Dr." and was called by someone to join Doctors for the Repeal of the Abortion Law. Later I met Dr. Henry Morgentaler and the writer Eleanor Wright Pellerine.

I had never discussed abortion with Norma, but knew her through her sister with whom I was friends. I met Norma in 1960. I was at a family brunch with Norma and her sister and just asked her if she would be interested in going to Ottawa to lobby for abortion rights and – just like that – she said yes. We lobbied in groups of 3; I lobbied with Ruth Miller and May Cohen. We met with Herb Gray, Perrin Beatty, and James Jerome, the Speaker of the House at the time. It was a really interesting experience. That same weekend, CARAL held its founding meeting, which is when Norma met Eleanor; they became friends. I became Norma's doctor.

Norma came from a large family: She had nine living siblings; the tenth died very young of strep throat.

I don't remember Norma getting any grief ever from her family on the abortion issue.

Her mother was rather like the Queen; she was a church member and a member of the IODE. She was very dignified, had a great presence. She was really something. Everyone called her Grandma Brown. She had 23 grandkids.

Her father was a funeral director who owned McDougal & Brown Funeral Parlours (two of them) in Toronto. The family lived above one of the parlours and Norma's father would ring a bell to let his wife know to keep the children quiet when there was a visitation going on downstairs. Later, the family moved to a farmhouse in Scarborough and they no longer lived with a funeral parlour below them...but Mr. Brown eventually turned the farmhouse into a funeral parlour!

Norma had a great sense of humour; her whole family did.

She was very clear where she stood on the issue of abortion. She was steady as they go. She was very sound; you could rely on her. She was very solid, but fun. She was very bright; she understood all the legal stuff on the issue.

As for the OCAC marches and demos, of course Norma would go.

She started out behind the scenes and gradually became more public.

I saw Norma regularly; we would go to the annual dinner at Henry's to mark the (January 28, 1988) Supreme Court decision.

Ruth Miller

Toronto

I attended my first CARAL meeting in Ottawa (before moving back to Toronto in '77); it was held in a Catholic high school! Then, when Henry was arrested, an ad hoc committee was established to support him and a CARAL chapter was formed in Ottawa. Then I moved back to Toronto, where I became concerned that CARAL would flounder, so we started having weekly meetings.

Norma had the ability to connect with people. We ran the organization from the CARAL office in Toronto; every Monday night had a meeting. The Board, with Norma as president, ran the organization. We were very hands-on; every Monday evening we would decide what to do next week. We were always facing crises.

Once Norma and I took the plane to Ottawa to lobby Rousell, the drug company, to release RU 486 in Canada. We had lunch in their corporate boardroom and made our case.

We had these little clashes with OCAC, but were always clear that we needed to create a climate within which the Supreme Court of Canada could make its decision. It's thanks to the perseverance of Norma and others...we always went to those demos. It was really intense activity for 10 to 15 years.

Norma had tenacity, but her image was motherly. People would accept from her mouth what they wouldn't from someone more radical looking.

She and I had a parting of the ways [when women from outside Toronto took on leadership roles within CARAL]. But Norma and I reconnected before it was too late; I saw her at one of Henry's dinners and started to visit her. We had good laughs together. I got involved in the abortion rights movement in the 1970s. The group's name was Women's Liberation Birth Control and Abortion Referral Service; the office was at Spadina and Harbord. Our job was to help women get abortions, sometimes in Buffalo.

I remember asking my own family doctor for assistance, saying that we needed GPs to make referrals; he said that he'd refer unmarried women for an abortion but not married women. And we were grateful for any of it. It was just hellish in those times. You could only call the hospital on Fridays.

Ruth Miller still counsels women at the Morgentaler Clinic once a month. She was a driving force behind the Childbirth by Choice Trust, which was recently wound up; the Canadian Federation of Sexual Health received the Trust's archives.