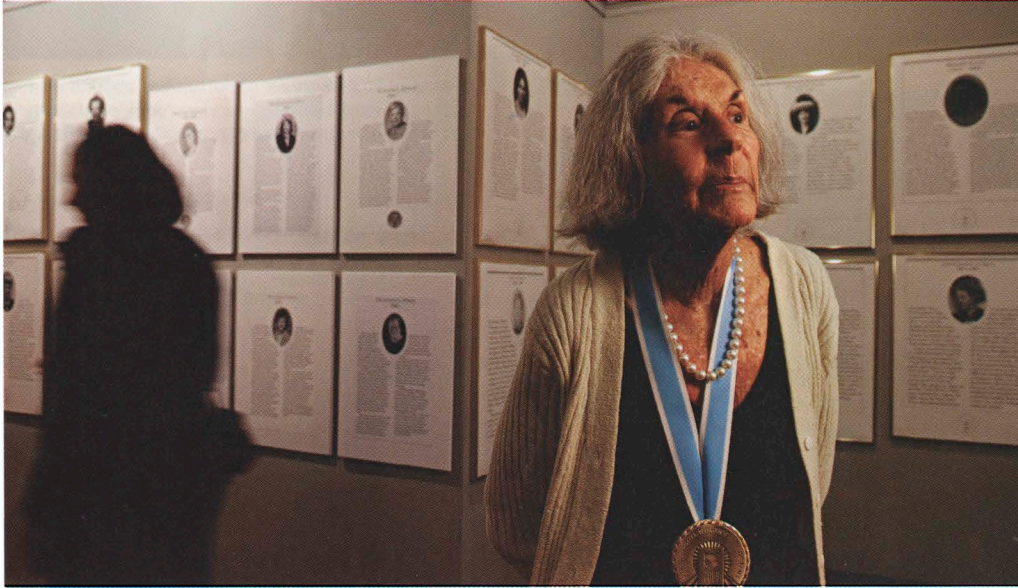


# EQUAL RIGHTS VISIONARY



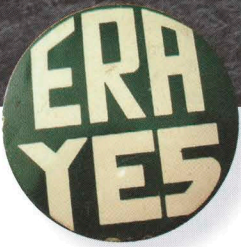
In recognition of her pioneering support for gender equality, Karen DeCrow L'72 is inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame

BY AMY SPEACH

**I**t was a fluke of weather that led Karen DeCrow L'72 to become a member of the National Organization for Women (NOW)—a decision that would initiate historic changes in her life and the lives of countless others. She was visiting her mother in Miami Beach in January 1967, and because it was pouring rain the two were watching TV rather than walking the beach. A talk show guest mentioned the formation of a new women's organization and invited anyone interested in being a part of it to send in the \$5 registration fee. "So my mother and I sent in \$10," says DeCrow, who went on to become a celebrated leader of the women's movement. "Was I a feminist—whatever that means—at that point? Probably not. I hadn't thought a lot about equality between men and women. I am an economic determinist: I joined because I heard there was an organization formed to get women equal pay for equal work. And having joined



“ Now they talk about the young women—and men—who are active in the equality movement as the ‘third wave.’ I don’t make that distinction. I think we are all part of the same wave. ”



Karen DeCrow carries a NOW sign while leading a march outside the 1976 Republican National Convention in Kansas City, Missouri. DeCrow was president of NOW at the time and rallying support for the Equal Rights Amendment.

NOW so early, I became a pioneer. I was an ardent, jump-in-with-both-feet, do-everything, influential member. So it was kind of an existential thing: First I became a NOW member; then I developed the philosophy or underpinnings of a feminist.”

Just months after joining, DeCrow co-founded a Syracuse chapter of NOW with former College of Home Economics dean Bernice M. Wright '29, G'34. “Our first meeting was held in a very small room in the Women’s Building at the University,” says DeCrow, who still serves as the local chapter’s vice president. “You only needed 10 members to start a chapter, so we fit.” From the start, she recalls, the group exhibited a strong sense of purpose. “I think most of us felt we were on to something,” she says. “We realized this was important for history.”

Now a nationally recognized attorney, author, and lecturer specializing in employment law, civil liberties, and gender and age discrimination, DeCrow served as national president of NOW from 1974 to 1977. Under her leadership, the organization’s efforts to advance gender equality included convincing NASA to recruit women; persuading the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to investigate sex discrimina-

tion complaints; pressuring national television networks to include women and minorities in front of and behind the camera; and influencing all-male Ivy League schools to admit women. An outspoken supporter of legal abortion and gay rights, she campaigned tirelessly for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, traveling the country to debate anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly more than 50 times.

For more than four decades, DeCrow has lectured and written on feminist issues, publishing essays and articles in such major news-

papers as *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *USA Today*. A Central New Yorker, she was a columnist for the *Syracuse New Times* for 22 years. Among her notable books are *The Young Woman’s Guide to Liberation* (1971), *Sexist Justice* (1974), and *Women Who Marry Houses: Panic and Protest in Agoraphobia* (1983), co-written with Robert Seidenberg M.D. '40, G'43. In 1970, she served as national coordinator of the Women’s Strike for Equality, and in 1977 she convened the first meeting of what would become the Central New York Women’s Bar Association. In 1988, DeCrow and Seidenberg co-founded World Woman Watch to urge international leaders not to use religion or culture to mask gender discrimination.

### Famed Feminist

DeCrow continues to practice law, using litigation as a tool for social change. She works from her home in Jamesville, New York—a quiet, no-nonsense place set in the woods. Practically furnished and sparingly decorated, it is nonetheless as welcoming as she is, and as gracious. “Today, the things we in NOW posited as wild and creative new ideas are widely accepted by most



people," she says. "But when we started, we were definitely not in the mainstream. To say we were unpopular would not be inaccurate. We were considered to be overturning life as everyone knew it. And in fact, we were doing that. I would walk in somewhere, quietly, and it was like you held up a red flag in front of a bull. People would find me at social events and denounce me and tell me what was wrong with women's rights. And this was not new. We were the so-called 'second wave' in the gender equality movement, the first being Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. Now they talk about the young women—and men—who are active in the equality movement as the 'third wave.' I don't make that distinction. I think we are all part of the same wave. I've read everything I can get my hands on about the 1848 people, and it was the same thing. They were attacked, reviled. *The New York Times* ran an editorial saying these women fighting for suffrage should 'go back where they came from.' Well, where they came from was places like Boston! You know, they weren't exactly foreigners."

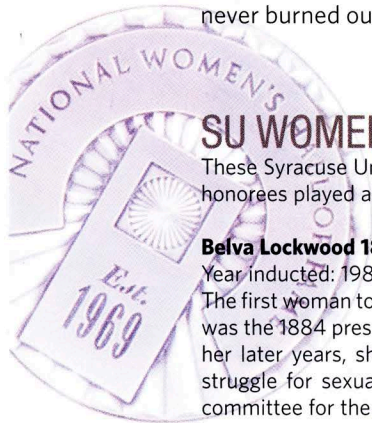
More than a century later, DeCrow and her contemporaries confronted many of the same challenges as the early feminists. "We were ignored to a great extent," she says. "When they paid attention to us, they were making fun of us. And when they were not making fun of us, they were just hostile. That was what it was like in the beginning. Was I upset? Did I mind it? Was I miserable? No. I thought it was kind of fun, and somewhat funny. If you are doing something that's changing the culture, that's what you're going to encounter. I felt it was important to me. I felt it was important to the United States. And, immodestly, I felt it was important for the world. So although there were times when I couldn't help but take it personally, I never burned out, and I never thought of stopping."

That unwavering dedication was recognized in a high-profile way this October, when DeCrow was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame (NWHF), joining the ranks of some of the most celebrated women in U.S. history. "What an honor," she says of the event, which was held in Seneca Falls, New York, home of the women's rights movement. "What a surprise! There were a lot of people who did what I did, so to be picked for this is just an outstanding event in my life. Of course, I've been there dozens of times. Other hosts take houseguests on wine tours, but I take them to Seneca Falls. And every time I drive on the Thruway and see the sign that says, 'Seneca Falls,' I cheer! So I'm thrilled about this."

According to Christine Moulton, executive director of the NWHF, the organization was equally honored to include DeCrow among its 10 inductees for 2009. "Her tireless work on behalf of women everywhere has left an indelible mark on our country," Moulton says. "For decades, she has advocated, debated, spoken out, pushed the envelope, broken barriers, and mentored others to do the same. Her leadership and groundbreaking legal work continue to inspire and empower."

### Unconventional Woman

Born and raised in Chicago in what she describes as a traditional Jewish middle-class family, DeCrow credits her parents with modeling political activism and providing "a great deal of encouragement" to her and her younger sister, Claudia Abt Lipschultz, now a biologist with the National Institutes of Health. "No one ever said, 'You can't do this because you're a girl,'" says DeCrow, a self-described "bookish person" who excelled in school. "My father owned a business and my mother was a very quiet person. You would never think of her as a revolutionary, but she



### SU WOMEN OF THE HALL

These Syracuse University alumnae and National Women's Hall of Fame honorees played a significant role in U.S. history:

**Belva Lockwood 1857, G 1872, H 1909** (1830-1917)

Year inducted: 1983

The first woman to practice law before the U.S. Supreme Court, Lockwood was the 1884 presidential nominee of the suffragist Equal Rights Party. In her later years, she was recognized internationally as a pioneer in the struggle for sexual equality and became a member of the nominating committee for the Nobel Prize.

**Ruth Johnson Colvin '59, H'84** (1916-)

Year inducted: 1993

Founder of Literacy Volunteers of America, Colvin was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007.

**Reverend Betty Bone Schiess G'47** (1923-)

Year inducted: 1994

Bone Schiess led the successful effort to have women ordained priests in the Episcopal Church in America, elevating the position of women in the church and in society.

**Eileen Collins '78, H'01** (1956-)

Year inducted: 1995

As the first woman to pilot a space shuttle, Collins guided *Discovery* on an eight-day mission in 1995 that included a rendezvous with the Russian space station *Mir*. In 1999, she became the first woman to command a NASA space mission, leading the *Columbia* during the deployment of the Chandra X-Ray Observatory, the world's most powerful X-ray telescope.

**Karen DeCrow L'72** (1937-)

Year inducted: 2009

A nationally recognized attorney, author, and activist, DeCrow is a noted leader of the women's movement. She served as president of the National Organization for Women from 1974 to 1977.

### WALL OF FAME TRIBUTE

**Helen Barben '23** (1901-2001)

Year honored: 1990

A founding member, Barben was awarded the first Wall of Fame tribute in recognition of her support and commitment to the National Women's Hall of Fame.





Karen DeCrow speaks at the 1976 Democratic National Convention in New York City. As NOW president, she pursued a plan calling for 1980 convention delegates to be equally divided between the sexes.

had an unusual background. In the 1920s, she went on the road as a ballet dancer. She'd say to me, 'Oh, I'm such a conventional person.' And I'd say, 'Right: A ballet dancer traveling across the country when women weren't supposed to do anything like that.'" DeCrow's father died when she was 21, before she became active in the women's

movement. "But my mother loved every moment," DeCrow says. "She was always very supportive, even though some of our relatives would call her up and say, 'I saw Karen on the *Today* show. How can she say that?' My mother didn't like confrontation, so I gave her a line to use: 'I can't tell her what to do.' It was a good line, which she used for decades. And that kind of got her off the hook with neighbors and relatives who were angry at her about me."

A 1959 graduate of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, DeCrow has always loved words. "I began my life as a writer even before going to school," she says. "I am a lawyer; that's my occupation. But I see myself as a writer. I think in terms of words." She was in her 30s when she decided to attend law school after moving to Syracuse with her now former husband. "I was taking classes at Newhouse with the goal of getting a master's in journalism, but there were few writing jobs in Syracuse. So I thought, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' And the idea of law school popped up. The things I like to do best are read, write, and talk. I had gotten involved with the feminist movement by then, and I was passionate about that. We were saying in the movement that women can do anything, and being a lawyer was a good fit for me. We were also all thinking, 'How can I better the cause?' And I thought this was a great way: bring cases to challenge all the sexist laws and represent women who are being discriminated against—everything I've been doing all these years."

The only female in her class at the College of Law, DeCrow was anything but a traditional student. "I was 10 years older than most of my classmates," says DeCrow, who was recognized by SU in October with a 2009 George Arents Award, the University's highest alumni honor. "I was female, I was married, and I was an ardent feminist. But I loved it. I'm very grateful to the College of Law for giving me this wonderful profession that I enjoy every day. And who would have dreamed

that one day the dean of the law school and the Chancellor of the University would both be female? Even I could not have envisioned that at the time."

College of Law professor emeritus Travis H.D. Lewin, who taught DeCrow when she was a Syracuse law student, calls her one of his favorite people. "She was unafraid as a student to raise issues in class, just as she has been fearless on behalf of equity for women in the workplace, in so-called private organizations, and in many walks of life," he says. "Karen is the standard-bearer for pro bono lawyering. Her unrelenting lifetime pursuit of justice for those for whom justice has been denied is the hallmark of the highest lawyering skill. We at the College of Law are very proud of her achievements."

Lewin's praise is echoed by the Reverend Betty Bone Schiess G'47, who met DeCrow in 1968 in the Syracuse NOW chapter. The two women remain good friends today. "She has a great sense of humor, which I am sure sustained her, a great determination, and great insight into what really needs to change," says Bone Schiess, a 1994 NWHF inductee who led a successful effort to have women ordained priests in the Episcopal Church in America. "One of the genius things that Karen and the early NOW organization did was to take on issues that were personally meaningful and close to home. For me, that meant going up against the refusal of the Episcopal Church to ordain women, which I saw as something that diminished both the church and women. But I certainly would never have been ordained if Karen hadn't pressed me and encouraged me. In fact, she told me if I didn't stay in seminary, she'd never speak to me again!"

Bone Schiess has also long respected the affection and appreciation DeCrow always expressed for her own mother. "That is something I find wonderful about her—the fact that she so loved her mother," Bone Schiess says. "At a time when so many women were trying to point out how different they were from their mothers and their mothers' lives, I think that was very unusual and very precious."

Reflecting on her achievements, DeCrow recognizes the cultural shifts advanced by her efforts. "I have witnessed the change for women in the employment world and the change for girls in education and what they think about as their future," she says. "Much of that has been via my work as a lawyer, so I'm proud of that, and very proud of my work with NOW. When we were so active in the '70s, challenging every institution in society, I didn't realize how long it was going to take. Social progress can be slow. But as Reinhold Niebuhr said in 1952, 'Nothing that is worth anything can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.' Fortunately I was very young when I started. So I'll see a woman president of the United States, I'm sure."