

Army of Three *continued from page 16*

New York to California on a Bicycle

In the late 1950s, free spirit Rowena Gurner rode from New York to California alone on a bicycle, a feat that garnered newspaper mentions throughout the country. This tough, tiny woman had to fly to Puerto Rico for an abortion during a weekend off work, and, like Pat, had become enraged at the brutality of U.S. abortion laws. In San Francisco, she first heard of SHA at a naturalist meeting. When she finally stopped by the Society's ramshackle storefront office, she was appalled at its apparent chaos and decided to take Pat in hand.

While Pat had little regard for convention, Rowena possessed the shrewd marketing abilities of a born businesswoman. She harnessed Pat's prodigious energies and spruced up her makeshift image, tossing her thrift-store dresses in the trash and grooming her into a "respectable lady." Rowena organized the office, scheduled media appearances and generally ran the Society like a martinet. "She was so bossy," Pat recalls fondly, "and she understood the value of image."

As Pat and Lana both told me, "You couldn't find three more different women." But their differences were insignificant in the face of their shared determination to eradicate U.S.

abortion laws by any means necessary.

In an era when police routinely arrested women as they lay bleeding from botched abortions, and even sending birth control information through the mail was illegal, the Army of Three marshaled the almost inconceivable courage to transform the personal into the political, unveiling our country's most taboo topic in the streets, the public halls, the media, and the courtroom. With their indomitable activism leavened with sardonic humor, the three women would spend the next decade in relentless organizing, public education, protest, and political theatre.

From the Street to the Courtroom

Although Pat's original organization, the Society for Humane Abortion, focused on education and exposure, she believed that more radical activism was necessary, so the Army of Three created ARAL (the Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws, the precursor of today's NARAL) specifically to support their new direction: illegal actions that would provoke examination of the law in court.

Enduring multiple arrests, threats, and emotional and physical exhaustion from their round-the-clock commitment, they expanded their crusade to offer direct assistance to women in need and to force the repeal of all abortion laws. Flying from coast to coast on a shoestring budget funded almost entirely by their own meager income from day jobs, they held groundbreaking conventions for medical and legal professionals and conducted widely attended speaking engagements and provocative TV and radio appearances.

And, mindful of the urgency of women's immediate needs, they gathered together in private homes and union halls, where they offered emotional support, contraceptive information, and referrals to safe Mexican abortion providers, as well as the practice for which they became infamous: a controversial class in self-abortion.

As the years passed, the Army of Three's visionary blend of in-your-face activism, wry wit,

and passion for women's well-being heightened abortion awareness throughout the country. Thanks largely to their efforts, the movement caught fire and grew until finally, Roe v. Wade created a new world for American women in 1973. The Army of Three's comprehensive groundwork had finally borne ripe and promising fruit, but ironically, as Pat recently pointed out to me, almost half a century after she, Lana, and Rowena first took to the streets, our reproductive rights are now in greater danger than ever before.

The Army of Two

Rowena Gurner has passed away, but Pat Maginnis and Lana Phelan Kahn are still with us. At 83, Lana is frail, though her spirit remains as vital as ever. Pat, the "mother of the movement," retains an amazing memory and a razor-sharp wit. At 76, she continues her activism in many fields, including her trenchant work as a political cartoonist. She still commits most of her time and funds to women's rights, antiwar organizing and animal rescue.

At 70, she was attacked by an anti-abortion protester as she defended an Oakland clinic; undaunted, she continues her volunteer work there. In 2004, her local N.O.W. chapter funded her trip to the historic March for Women's Rights in Washington D.C., which she experienced as a culmination of her life's work.

Last year, Andrea Bowers, a noted feminist artist, created a video documentary of a weekend of interviews I conducted in December 2004 with the two women. This video, "Letters to an Army of Three," was completed last year and is being shown internationally.

And in 2005, Pat Maginnis received the National Women's Health Network's "30 for the 30th" Award, which honored the 30 activists over the last 30 years who have made the greatest impact on women's health. She accepted the award on behalf of not only herself, but of the half-century of struggle by her two compatriots and all the women who fought for and preserved the reproductive freedom we depend on today.

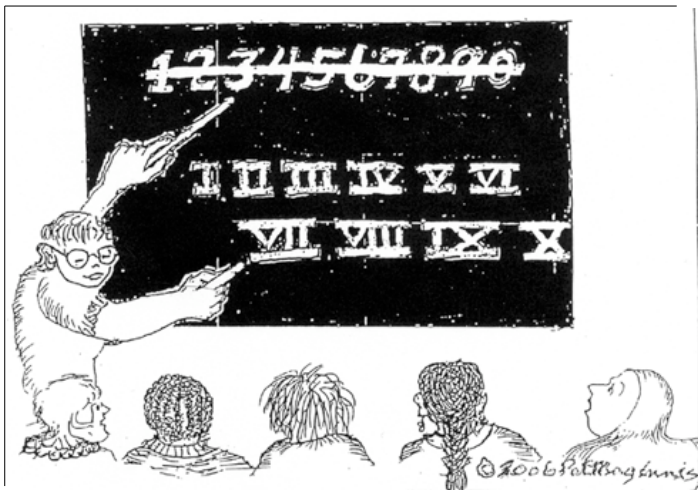
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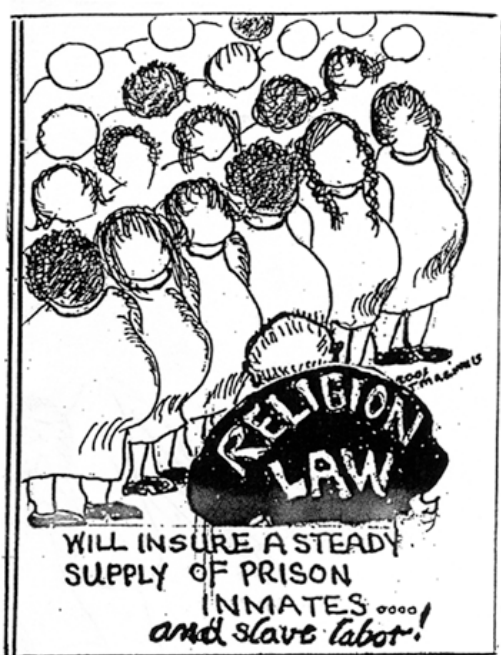
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WILL INSURE A STEADY SUPPLY OF PRISON INMATES..... and slave labor!



Did you ever hear of a priest who goes to an auto mechanic for health care? Then why would the Church force women to turn to back alley services for reproductive health care?

cartoons by Pat Maginnis