

Ithaca's liberal Republican gets a documentary film

Matthew Hayes, mhayes@ithacajournal.com | @IJmhayes 5:49 p.m. EST November 14, 2014

Assemblywoman Connie Cook of Ithaca pioneered a shakeup in gender attitudes during a career that pushed women into new roles in education and politics. A new documentary explores her life.



(Photo: Sue Perglut / PROVIDED)

ITHACA – In protest on the streets of New York City in the late 1960s, Sue Perglut and other feminists of her day congregated in fervent demand for women's right issues, including a call for the legal right to end a pregnancy in New York.

Then, in the spring of 1970, those pushing for fuller reproductive rights suddenly had one less reason to keep up the protest: On April 9, a bill decriminalizing abortion passed the New York state assembly by a single vote, a full three years before the Roe v. Wade decision by the U.S. Supreme Court changed women's reproductive rights for the entire country.

Wrapped in the exuberance of the age, Perglut at the time credited vocal feminists in the trenches like herself for shaking free what many considered an essential right. It wasn't until decades later that Perglut heard of a Republican politician from Ithaca who had set the political groundwork of that momentous vote revolutionizing women's rights.

"It was Connie," Perglut said of Constance Cook, the Republican assemblywoman from the 128th district who pushed through the decisive New York bill. "She really impacted a lot of people's lives."

Cook, who for 10 years led the assembly district of Tompkins, Yates and Seneca Counties, pioneered a shakeup in gender attitudes during a career that pushed women into new roles in education and politics.

That path started and ended for Cook at Cornell. She earned her undergraduate degree there in 1941, followed two years later by a Cornell law degree. After her political career ended, she became the first woman elevated to a top administrative post at Cornell, serving as vice president in land grant affairs from 1974-80.

As a young law school graduate, Cook broke gender barriers with a corporate law position at a Wall Street law firm. By the end of the 1940's she returned to Ithaca, and later became an assistant to Assemblyman Ray S. Ashbery. When he retired in 1963, voters elevated her to his seat as one of only three females in the male-dominated legislature.

"She did what you had to do at that time to get things done," Perglut said. That included dressing conservatively in a way meant to look like everyone's aunt, she said.



After serving in the New York Assembly from 1963-1974 and then as a vice president at Cornell, Constance Cook made an unsuccessful bid for Congress in 1980. (Photo: Sue Perglut / PROVIDED)

Perglut, who is producing a documentary film about Cook, said the politician had to struggle to lay claim to a political world long dominated by men. Even the letter welcoming Cook to the state Assembly used gender terms reserved for men.

"They didn't know what to do; they didn't even know how to write the letter. That's what it was like for her," Perglut said.

While using her unassuming persona to build the consensus needed to push through divisive legislation, Cook acted with a bold commitment to her constituency, particularly to the challenges facing women's rights issues.

For Perglut, a feminist doing avante garde street theater throughout New York City, she was animated by the same enthusiasm for equality as Cook. Although unaware at the time of the upstate politician, the two shared the same commitment to female causes, although expressed in different ways.

In New York City, Perglut protested many of the issues that rattled the nation in the social unrest of the 1960's and 70's. In one stunt, she descended on Wall Street with other agitators to turn the tables on the public attitudes of women voiced by men. The demonstrators pinched the cheeks of bankers and businessmen striding along the business district, hooting and commenting on their looks in a role reversal to the catcalls common to the

experience of women out in public.

Since moving to Ithaca in 1982, Perlgut has been a fixture in the community, especially in the theater world. She has served in positions at the Hangar Theatre, Kitchen Theater, and the First Street Theater when that existed, and currently directs an acting troupe at Lifelong.

For years she worked at Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services, with a focus on marketing for the nonprofit development agency. In a short media spot after the Channel 7 news, Perlgut led a program melding a social cause with her flair for presentation.

That experience provided a creative outlet to the New York University theater graduate, and demonstrated the power of a visual medium beyond the stage.

During her time at INHS Perlgut met Cathy Cook, the daughter of the former assemblywoman. When Connie Cook died in January 2009, Perlgut took on the charge of creating the program for the remembrance services.

It was there while attending the funeral that she saw the outpouring of support for the late assemblywoman, and became determined to learn more about her.

"I remarked at the time, that someone should really do a documentary about her," Perlgut said.

Working with filmmaker Nils Hoover, Perlgut has combed through archives to uncover material, video footage and accounts of the humble but determined Cook.

"Connie would probably hate this," Perlgut said of the attention being paid the politician. "She just didn't put herself forward."

More than just an analysis of Cook the person, the documentary focuses on the work she accomplished. Unassuming by nature, Cook wielded considerable power, and used that influence to further issues important to women.

Her impact extended even into religion. In 1976, Cook lodged a legal challenge when a woman ordained as a priest in the Episcopal church was blocked from getting the license she needed by the central New York diocese. Cook led a charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, in a move that convinced the Episcopal church to adopt language barring gender as a consideration in ordination.

From her home office on Ithaca's Southside Perlgut peruses dailies, edits footage, and relentlessly pursues the funding needed to complete her vision for the film.

She hopes to have a preview screening of the documentary ready by late winter, with a full release sometime in 2015.

Getting out the story of Cook and her accomplishments keeps Perlgut motivated.

"I want young people to understand that the rights that they have now weren't always there," she said. "There are those pioneers like Connie who made all this happen."

Follow Matthew Hayes on Twitter: @Jmhayes

More films by Sue Perlgut

Sue Perlgut of Ithaca has created several films under her production company Close to Home Productions

- 101 Ways to Retire — or Not!
- Beets and Beans: Living and Dying with Hospice
- It's All Right to be Woman Theatre
- Stay Strong: Lift for Life

More information on the films and company can be found online at www.close-to-home-productions.com/ (<http://www.close-to-home-productions.com/>)

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