

# Opening Doors for Iowa Women: Gender, Politics, and the Displaced Homemaker, 1977–1983

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IN WENDY SCARCELLO'S CLOSET hung a red and gold Bill Blass evening gown, a reminder of the "comfortable and lovely life" she had led during the 1970s as "a good homemaker." She had raised two children, kept house, and cooked; she did volunteer work. Although Scarcello earned no wages, the family lived comfortably on her husband's income. But the salary that paid for the designer dress disappeared when her husband did. When divorce displaced her from her occupation as a homemaker, Scarcello was left to support herself and her two children. If she had been a nurse or a secretary, she might have collected unemployment or relied on professional acquaintances to ease her transition into a new job. As a laid-off housewife, however, Scarcello had no such help. She could clean toilets and manage a home, but without recent experience in the waged workforce, she discovered that she had "nothing concrete to offer employers." In the 1970s she had been a financially secure housewife; by the early 1980s Scarcello and her children were making do on about a third of their previous income.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Scarcello's story is told in Sherry Ricchiardi, "Wage Gap Creates New Class: The 'Pink-Collar' Poor," *Des Moines Register*, 10/31/1982.

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The experiences—divorce, widowhood, or the disability of a spouse—that thrust Iowa women like Scarcello into the job market after years of unwaged homemaking were certainly not a new phenomenon in the United States. Yet efforts to ameliorate the plight of wives and mothers expelled from their domestic careers by the loss of a breadwinning spouse were galvanized when activists in the 1970s and 1980s made displaced homemakers a household name.

Letitia “Tish” Sommers, a California divorcée, had coined the term *displaced homemaker* in 1974. A feminist activist who led the Task Force on Older Women for the National Organization for Women (NOW), Sommers had both the organizing experience to articulate the problem and the media savvy to popularize the term.<sup>2</sup> The zeal of Sommers and her allies led to legislation in the Golden State that funded the nation’s first displaced homemaker center, which opened in Oakland in 1976. Soon after, a similar bill in Maryland established the nation’s second center in Baltimore. As a result, the still limited scholarship on the history of displaced homemakers has emphasized the movement in California and, to a lesser extent, Maryland.<sup>3</sup> Yet the displaced homemaker movement was national in scope, and the strategies adopted by each center varied according to local circumstances.

The Door Opener, a displaced homemaker center that opened in Mason City, Iowa, in 1977, was the vision of Shirley M. Sandage and Margaret Garrity, energetic activists whose commitment to displaced homemakers combined expertise from previous antipoverty work with a keen understanding of gender inequality and community politics. For the displaced homemaker movement to thrive in Iowa, activists needed to cultivate friends in what historian Dorothy Schwieder has called the

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2. Patricia Huckle, *Tish Sommers, Activist, and the Founding of the Older Women’s League* (Knoxville, TN, 1991), 14, 186; National Organization for Women, “NOW Task Force on Older Women,” November 1973, box 5, Tish Sommers Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, San Diego State University, San Diego.

3. Much of the history of the movement has been written by movement activists and others close to the movement. See, for example, Laurie Shields, *Displaced Homemakers: Organizing for a New Life* (New York, 1981); and Huckle, *Tish Sommers*. See also Annegret S. Ogden, *The Great American Housewife: From Helpmate to Wage Earner, 1776–1986* (Westport, CT, 1986).

“middle land.”<sup>4</sup> Helping displaced homemakers in rural Iowa not only required a different approach than in Oakland or Baltimore, but also carried with it the symbolic value of mobilizing in America’s heartland. In a place and time marked by skepticism of both feminism and state-run antipoverty programs, The Door Opener’s success depended on a strategic use of government funds and feminist critiques to better the lives of former homemakers in Iowa.

Focusing on the history of the movement in northern Iowa broadens our understanding of efforts to help displaced homemakers in three significant ways. First, the agency’s efforts to help displaced homemakers coincided with debates about the proper role of government in people’s lives. The Door Opener opened its doors for the first time in 1977 with funding from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). Originally passed in 1973 to combat unemployment through job training and job creation, by 1977 CETA legislation was the subject of congressional hearings on reauthorization. Opponents weary of the Great Society’s expansion of federal government rejected CETA’s job creation programs and charged that it was prone to fraud and inefficiency at the local level. The Door Opener and programs like it became even more conspicuously linked to federal antipoverty programs in 1978, when President Carter signed the reauthorized CETA into law, explicitly recognizing displaced homemakers as one of the disadvantaged groups on whom federal funds should be spent.<sup>5</sup> Support for the War on Poverty had been precarious almost from the moment of its inception, and stereotypes about poor women’s manipulation of welfare were already congealing. Negative images of obese, lazy, non-white welfare mothers appeared in the speeches of Ronald Reagan and in publications like *The New Yorker*.<sup>6</sup> Despite these problems, government funds were a crucial component in helping poor

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4. Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames, 1996), ix–xii.

5. Dorothy McBride Stetson, “Gendering Policy Debates: Job Training and Abortion Regulation,” in *Gender and American Politics: Women, Men, and the Political Process*, ed. Sue Tolleson-Rinehart and Jyl J. Josephson (Armonk, NY, 2000), 119–21.

6. Susan Sheehan, “A Welfare Mother,” *The New Yorker*, 9/29/1975, 42–43, is described in Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined Women* (New York, 2004), 173–75.

women. Operating during an economic recession and amid a political climate that included suspicion of government assistance, The Door Opener attempted to unite the potential of federal grant programs with the flexibility of a local, private non-profit organization. It navigated the restrictions attached to federal money, and it reassured community members that the agency helped to keep vulnerable people off of government assistance.<sup>7</sup>

Second, The Door Opener highlighted the gendered dimensions of poverty and violence in an environment skeptical of the women's movement. Evidence of destitute or beaten women challenged pretenses to community serenity. Only 15 years before The Door Opener opened, Warner Bros. movie studio promoted Mason City not only as the inspiration for the community immortalized in *The Music Man*, but also as a living example of tranquil American life where patriarchy meant peace and order rather than the feminization of poverty.<sup>8</sup> The displaced homemakers served by The Door Opener challenged this Hollywood fantasy. Issues of sexual assault were so threatening to the community and so rarely discussed that Joyce Krukow, an intern and later a board member of The Door Opener, recalled, "One of the first things that I learned was the word 'incest,' and I had to look it up in the library."<sup>9</sup> Today, Music Man Square, a nostalgic tribute to a fictional, idyllic version of Mason City, stands just around the corner from The Door Opener's old office. In this atmosphere, displaced homemaker activists struggled to market their movement to a constituency that could be wary of feminist critiques. The Door Opener's staff could choose to prioritize feminist identity or to do feminist work. As activists within the national Displaced Homemakers Network, Shirley

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7. Shirley Sandage, interview with author, 8/30/2010, Iowa City, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City (hereafter cited as IWA). Historians are rethinking the War on Poverty, highlighting successes at the grassroots level that benefited and empowered poor people in communities across the nation. See *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*, ed. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens, GA, 2011). See also Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston, 2005).

8. Linda A. Robinson, "Right Here in Mason City: *The Music Man* and Small-Town Nostalgia," in *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*, ed. John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel (Minneapolis, 2011), 133-56.

9. Joyce Krukow, interview with author, 6/24/2012, Mason City, IWA.

Sandage and others could be frank in their feminist leanings. In a 1979 speech, for example, Sandage compared her efforts to help women become financially independent to the efforts of Victoria Woodhull, a nineteenth-century feminist activist who, Sandage acknowledged, had been too radical even for many American suffragists.<sup>10</sup> But for *The Door Opener* to succeed in helping women locally in northern Iowa, its staff could not emphasize feminism.

Finally, focusing on northern Iowa broadens our understanding of the movement by highlighting the particular experiences of displaced homemakers in rural areas. The heritage of political activism that shaped local understandings of the displaced homemaker centers in Oakland (the birthplace of the Black Panthers) and Baltimore (where social upheaval followed Martin Luther King's assassination) differed from the political discourse in rural northern Iowa. Mason City had a population of 30,000, and only ten percent of the other communities in the multicounty area *The Door Opener* served had populations greater than 5,000.<sup>11</sup> Although the divorce rate in rural areas was beginning to match the rate in urban areas, many Iowa women felt that the stigma of divorce and welfare was greater for rural women.<sup>12</sup> Isolation was a significant reality for women on farms, and that isolation tended to shield domestic abuse from public recognition.<sup>13</sup> The particular experience of the farm crisis of the 1980s, when interest rates skyrocketed and farm incomes plummeted, meant that many of Iowa's rural homemakers were forced into waged employment just to keep their families afloat.<sup>14</sup> One former Iowa farm wife

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10. Sandage also cited the British feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft as an intellectual foremother. Shirley Sandage, "The Door Wasn't Locked; Only Slammed," keynote address, Waterloo Area Extension Service Workshop, 12/4/1979, box 3, Shirley M. Sandage Papers, IWA.

11. Sandage, interview with author; Shirley Sandage, "Rural Women," speech for the Women's Study Group in the People's Republic of China, May 1981, box 3, Sandage Papers.

12. *The Feminization of Poverty . . . Is this Happening in Iowa?* (Des Moines, 1984), 4; Deborah Fink, *Open Country Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (Albany, NY, 1986), 208.

13. Krukow interview.

14. Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 309, 313; Mark Friedberger, *Shake-out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s* (Lexington, KY, 1989).

who faced bankruptcy—though not the experiences of divorce or widowhood that characterized the displaced homemaker in other parts of the country—explained that the term *displaced homemaker* “defined what happened to me as a housewife” during the farm crisis in Iowa.<sup>15</sup> Rural Iowa homemakers faced their own particular set of problems and possibilities.

THE DOOR OPENER began “opening doors for women” in the summer of 1977. The agency was proud of being “multi-purposed and multifunded.”<sup>16</sup> Although its founders were always concerned about the difficulties faced by those they called “reentry” women, the staff did not originally connect with the emerging national displaced homemakers movement. They envisioned the new center as a resource for solving whatever problems women in north central Iowa faced. The staff dealt with a wide variety of crisis situations, including domestic violence, unemployment, incest, and widowhood. Each year hundreds of displaced homemakers visited The Door Opener in Mason City and its satellite offices in Algona, Osage, and Kensett.

From the beginning, a guiding principle was that the center would collaborate, rather than compete, with existing agencies. The Door Opener guided women through the often bewildering bureaucracy of federal, local, and internal programs ranging from counseling and food assistance to job training and safe houses for victims of abuse. The women (and a few men) who sought assistance at the center met individually with a staff member to assess options, receive referrals, and create a strategy for “follow-through, follow-along, and follow-up service.” In this way the center created an independent space for women while it also influenced and partnered with mainstream institutions. One client enthused, “I feel less trapped. The Door Opener helped me find a way out.”<sup>17</sup>

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15. Krukow interview.

16. “The Door Opener,” undated brochure, box 2, Sandage Papers.

17. Ibid. In her study of the Texas Battered Women’s Movement, Claire Reinelt explains how a “politics of engagement,” in which autonomous women’s institutions educate and work with mainstream institutions, offers both risk in the form of co-optation and reward in the form of opportunities for growth. Claire Reinelt, “Moving into the Terrain of the State: The Battered Women’s

The Door Opener drew funding from a variety of private and public sources, beginning with a \$100,000 grant through the governor's discretionary CETA funds.<sup>18</sup> Iowa was then one of more than two dozen other states with displaced homemaker legislation pending.<sup>19</sup> In its 1978 session, the Iowa legislature appropriated \$60,000 through the Iowa Department of Social Services to fund a pilot project for displaced homemakers, which was awarded to The Door Opener.<sup>20</sup> The center also received some revenue-sharing funds in amounts such as \$1,000 and \$5,000 from the counties it served, though never as much as it requested.<sup>21</sup> Volunteers were also crucial to the center. Locally recruited workers from AmeriCorps's Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA) ran The Door Opener's nationally recognized rape hotline. The agency also won financial support from private groups such as the Ms. Foundation for Women, churches, and

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Movement and the Politics of Engagement," in *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement*, ed. Myra Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin (Philadelphia, 1995), 85.

18. Dix Hollobaugh, "N. Iowa Project Pioneers in Aid for Working Women," *Des Moines Register*, 11/26/1978; Ford Foundation Proposal, 1982, box 2, Sandage Papers.

19. Shields, *Displaced Homemakers*, 64.

20. "The Helpmate: A Resource Guide for Women," 3, box 2, Sandage Papers; "Door Opener May Be National Model," undated newspaper clipping in scrapbook, box 18, Sandage Papers. The \$60,000 allotted for a year of displaced homemaker services in Iowa was less than the \$180,000 in state funding for two years awarded to the nation's first displaced homemaker center in Oakland. See Aileen C. Hernandez and Associates [San Francisco], "First Quarterly Report: Evaluation of the Displaced Homemakers Center, Inc., September, 1976–November 30, 1976," D-216 Displaced Homemaker Archives, Special Collections, University of California–Davis. The state of Maryland funded the nation's second displaced homemaker center, in Baltimore, at \$190,000 per year for three years. See "Maryland Center for Displaced Homemakers, First Year Report—October, 1976–October, 1977," D-216 Displaced Homemaker Archives. In 1979 the Iowa legislature appropriated \$100,000 for each of the fiscal years 1979 and 1980 for programs for displaced homemakers, including the new six-week transition program in Des Moines cosponsored by Drake University and the Des Moines Junior League. See "The Helpmate"; Hollobaugh, "N. Iowa Project."

21. In 1982 The Door Opener requested \$35,000 from the Cerro Gordo County Board of Supervisors and received \$5,000. Franklin County supplied \$4,000, and Mitchell County and Forest City put in \$1,000 each. "Door Opener to Ask Council to Reconsider Aid Request," *Mason City–Clear Lake Globe-Gazette* (hereafter cited simply as *Globe-Gazette*), 3/10/1982.



individuals. Sometimes wives subverted antagonistic spouses by donating money behind their husbands' backs.<sup>22</sup>

Other displaced homemaker centers existed in Iowa and throughout the Midwest, but The Door Opener achieved an unusual degree of national recognition. During her visit to The Door Opener in 1980, First Lady Rosalynn Carter declared, "We are using [The Door Opener] program as a model program for those across the country, and I want to assure you that you have a friend in Washington." The agency's director, Shirley Sandage,

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22. Sandage, interview with author.



became prominent in the displaced homemakers movement. She had won a Winthrop Rockefeller Award for Distinguished Rural Service, served on an exchange delegation to China, and, in 1981, was elected president of the national Displaced Homemakers Network's board of directors. *Ms. Magazine* profiled *The Door Opener* in its September 1982 issue.<sup>23</sup>

Such visibility increased the significance of the center's successes and failures because contemporaries often viewed Iowa as a "barometer of the times."<sup>24</sup> *The Door Opener* thus had significant symbolic value as a litmus test for national sentiment.<sup>25</sup>

MOST OF THE WOMEN who became displaced homemakers in the 1970s had walked down the aisle at a time when wives had little choice but to pursue the occupation of housewife—whether or not they balanced it with waged work. Testifying before the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women, one displaced homemaker explained, "I did everything society asked me to do—grew up, got married, did my very best to raise kids, kept my house cleaned. Now he's gone and I have nothing." Other women explained that their husbands urged them to focus exclusively on homemaking and childrearing, shortsightedly discouraging education or wage-earning for their wives.<sup>26</sup>

For brides of the Depression era, the protection of male breadwinners justified institutionalized discrimination against wage-earning wives. Iowa women's participation in the work-

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23. *The Door Opener*, Annual report for July 1, 1979–June 30, 1980, box 2, Sandage Papers; Ruth Fossedal, "Comprehensive Planning and the Displaced Homemaker Network 1980's Style," box 4, Sandage Papers; Joseph D. Le Valley, "Safe-House Network for Rural Victims," *Ms. magazine*, September 1982.

24. David A. Cooper Associates, Inc., "The State of Iowa: A Survey of Voter Attitudes and Opinions Concerning ERA," May 1980, box 9, Iowa ERA Coalition Records, IWA.

25. This is not to say that Iowa was statistically representative. Judith Ezekial's study of feminist activism in the 1970s focused on a location considered "typical"—Dayton, Ohio—but Ezekial finds that the history of feminism in Dayton departs from the model that emerges from studies of larger cities. See Judith Ezekial, *Feminism in the Heartland* (Columbus, OH, 2002). I make no claim that the experience of displaced homemakers or of their advocates in Iowa was actually typical, even of the rural Midwest.

26. *The Feminization of Poverty. . . Is this Happening in Iowa?*, 4, 28.

force increased 56 percent during World War II as women found employment at the hemp plants in northwest Iowa, in an ammunition plant in Burlington, or driving city buses in Waterloo. After the war, however, postwar sentimentality and fears of economic depression combined to encourage many wives to return to their homes.<sup>27</sup> Postwar prosperity ensured that even many working-class families could afford to keep mother at home.

Married women who did pursue waged work faced the reality of a second shift performing domestic duties at home. Even college-educated women assumed that homemaking would be an important part of their future. Until 1958, home economics students at Iowa State College (later Iowa State University) learned homemaking skills and child development in the nation's longest-running "home management" program, complete with live-in babies.<sup>28</sup> Childrearing could further complicate the lives of women who managed to combine marriage with a professional career. In the era before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), that a ban on the use of contraceptives violated the right to marital privacy, even married women had limited access to contraceptives; and some school districts dismissed pregnant teachers.<sup>29</sup> Community disapproval was also a concern. As Shirley Sandage explained, "A married mother stretches that umbilical cord to the office at her own risk. If her kids get in any trouble, she'll be blamed."<sup>30</sup>

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27. Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 283.

28. Megan Birk, "Playing House: Training Modern Mothers at Iowa State College Home Management Houses, 1925–1958," *Annals of Iowa* 64 (2005), 39. This is not to suggest that home economics lacked academic rigor. Scholars are increasingly reassessing home economics as a serious discipline—even when it was marketed as preparation for homemaking. See Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti, *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of the Profession* (Ithaca, NY, 1997); Margaret Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Before Affirmative Action, 1940–1972* (Baltimore, 1995); Megan Elias, *Stir it Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia, 2008); and Gwen Kay, "If it did not exist, it would have to be invented: Home Economics in Transition at Iowa's Regents Institutions," *Annals of Iowa* 70 (2011), 132–60.

29. The legality of such regulations continued to be disputed in the 1970s. See *Cedar Rapids Community School District and Cedar Rapids Board of Education, Appellants, v. Joan Parr et al, Appellees*, Supreme Court of Iowa 227 N.W.2d 486 (1975).

30. Shirley Sandage, "Women's Work," convocation speech presented at Morningside College, Sioux City, Iowa, 10/22/1980, box 3, Sandage Papers.

In 1975, as the country prepared for bicentennial celebrations and the term *displaced homemaker* entered the national lexicon, housewives faced a myriad of laws, regulations, and traditions that suggest how substantially their legal and social identities continued to be tied to their husbands. Many legal and institutional rules still evinced the legacies of coverture—a system of gender relations rooted in British common law in which woman’s civil existence in marriage is “suspended” or “entirely merged . . . in that of the husband.”<sup>31</sup> Many American institutions still assumed the primacy of the idealized American family arrangement—male breadwinner and stay-at-home mother. As late as the mid-1960s, for example, a female student enrolled at the University of Iowa could lose her resident tuition status if she married a non-resident, while marriage had no effect on the residency of a male student.<sup>32</sup>

This system made it particularly difficult for non-wage-earning housewives to benefit from social safety nets. A housewife could not qualify for workers’ compensation benefits, even if her injuries required a family to purchase replacement help at substantial cost. If homemakers lost their jobs as a result of divorce or widowhood, they could not qualify for unemployment benefits while they looked for a new means of supporting themselves. Because non-wage-earning housewives earned Social Security only in their husband’s names, they lacked their own disability, retirement, or health benefits. A housewife had access to survivors’ benefits, but a young widow whose children reached the age of 18 (or 22 if enrolled as students) lost those benefits until she turned 60. Until 1979, a divorced woman who had been married for fewer than 20 years lost any right to her husband’s Social Security—no matter how much her contributions inside the home had allowed him to flourish in the job that

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31. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England, Book the Second*, 7th ed. (Oxford, 1775), 433.

32. Plaintiffs’ Opening Brief on the Merits, *George Clarke and Joan Clarke v. S. Redeker, et al*, Civil Cases, 1963–1969, Des Moines, Iowa, Central Division, Southern District of Iowa, Records of the U.S. District Court, Record Group 21, Central Plains Region, National Archives and Records Administration, Kansas City; Nic Goeres, “Tuition Rates to Be Studied by Regents,” *Daily Iowan*, 3/11/1966. In 1967 the Regents removed marriage as a factor in determining residency for tuition purposes. “Tuition and Marriage,” *Des Moines Register*, 5/12/1967.

provided those benefits. President Carter's signature on PL 95-216 lowered the Social Security marriage requirement to ten years, a revision that offered no help to women whose marriages lasted less than a decade.<sup>33</sup>

Many displaced homemakers found themselves caught in this gap—too young to collect Social Security, but too old to compete successfully for a living wage. Age coupled with gaps in a professional resume could seem insurmountable. One client explained that, without *The Door Opener*, "I would have killed myself. I was so afraid. I finished college 20 years ago. I didn't think anyone would want me." Another client of *The Door Opener* added, "I worked hard to put my husband through school. I worked hard to start the business. Now he wants a divorce and I'm left with two children to raise. I only have a high school diploma and I'm scared."<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, changes in divorce law ensured that more and more Iowa housewives would lose their vocations. California, the birthplace of displaced homemaker activism, first instituted no-fault divorce in 1969; Iowa quickly followed, becoming the second state to do so on July 1, 1970.<sup>35</sup> A writer in the *Drake Law Review* waxed poetic, declaring approvingly, "The winds of change in this field are now blowing strongly."<sup>36</sup> While many in Iowa's legal circles believed that no-fault divorce would encourage, as one attorney put it, "a more human and humane approach to dissolution of hopeless marriages," others worried that divorce had become "as easy as buying a package of gum."<sup>37</sup> Be-

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33. Richard B. Corbett, Carol C. Fethke, and Nancy R. Hauserman, "Achieving Economic Justice for Homemakers," *Journal of Home Economics* 72 (Summer 1980), 17-23; Carol C. Fethke and Nancy R. Hauserman, "Homemaking: The Invisible Occupation," *Journal of Home Economics* 71 (Summer 1979), 20-23.

34. "The Door Opener."

35. Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 205; Stephen L. Sass, "The Iowa No-Fault Dissolution of Marriage Law in Action," *South Dakota Law Review* 18 (1973), 629.

36. Jack W. Peters, "Iowa Reform of Marriage Termination," *Drake Law Review* 20 (1970-1971), 212.

37. Quoted in Sass, "Iowa No-Fault Dissolution of Marriage Law," 637, 629. Costs of a divorce ranged from a \$300 attorney fee for those who did not qualify for legal aid to court costs of \$14 to \$17 for those who could qualify for legal aid.

tween 1963 and 1982, the number of divorces in Iowa more than doubled.<sup>38</sup>

So-called “easy” divorce seriously affected a housewife’s financial security. Iowa legislator Minnette Doderer recalled her frustration upon realizing that no-fault divorce eliminated women’s ability to offer resistance or bargain in divorce proceedings. One constituent explained to Doderer that, when she was married, her family had three cars and five kids. After her divorce, however, “he has a business, and he has three cars, and I have five kids.”<sup>39</sup> This displaced homemaker experienced for herself the newly recognized feminization of poverty as she realized that her former class status had depended on the presence of a wage-earning husband. Between 1969 and 1979, more than 5,000 new female-headed families fell below the poverty line in Iowa.<sup>40</sup>

Housewives’ increasing financial and social vulnerability underscored the need for The Door Opener. As founder Shirley Sandage explained in a 1979 speech, “When the Cinderella dream of living happily everafter [*sic*] in a vine covered cottage ends in an abrupt divorce, the change can be devastating.”<sup>41</sup>

THE DOOR OPENER was the pet project of friends and colleagues Shirley Sandage and Margaret Garrity. Born in 1927 in Cerro Gordo County, Iowa, and raised in a white, working-class family, Sandage had seemingly followed a conventional path. She married, mothered her three sons, and volunteered her time leading the local chapters of the League of Women Voters and Church Women United.<sup>42</sup> Sandage had discovered feminism as a young pregnant mother; as she read Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Sandage realized, “My God, she’s talking about me.”<sup>43</sup>

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38. *The Feminization of Poverty . . . Is this Happening in Iowa?*, 171.

39. Louise R. Noun, *More Strong-Minded Women: Iowa Feminists Tell Their Stories* (Ames, 1992), 166.

40. *The Feminization of Poverty . . . Is this Happening in Iowa?*, 171.

41. Sandage, “The Door Wasn’t Locked; Only Slammed.”

42. “Church Women Elect,” undated clipping, box 1, Sandage Papers.

43. Shirley Sandage, quoted in Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York, 2011), 134.



*Shirley Sandage, co-founder of The Door Opener.*

Yet Sandage's first significant forays into political activism had not been in the feminist movement. Through her work with Church Women United and the Iowa Council of Churches in the 1960s, Sandage learned about the plight of migrant farmworkers in the Mason City area.<sup>44</sup> Shocked by the poverty they faced, Sandage was especially concerned about the children, who had few educational opportunities.

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44. "Interview with Shirley Sandage: History of Iowa's Migrant Action Program: Migrant Research Project," interview by Scott Sandage, 8/13/1984, Sandage Papers. Sandage's path was not unique. Many women became active in campaigns for racial and gender equality through religious groups. See, for example, Caryn E. Neumann, "Enabled by the Holy Spirit: Church Women United and the Development of Ecumenical Christian Feminism," in *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Urbana, IL, 2008), 113–35.

In working with migrants on various projects involving job training, day care, education, health, and research, Sandage formulated some of the language and strategies that she later employed on behalf of displaced homemakers. The Migrant Action Project (MAP) prompted Sandage to think about the ways that titles might serve as metaphors for change. In her 1967 report, MAP became "a word with a new meaning. Where it used to signify the long road, it now stands for new hope, opportunity and escape."<sup>45</sup> Nearly a decade later, the metaphor of The Door Opener would similarly transform opening doors from an act of male chivalry to a means of female empowerment. The concept of displacement also figured prominently in Sandage's work with migrant families. In her 1969 book, *Child of Hope*, Sandage wrote of migrant farmworkers "being displaced by mechanization," and appealed to readers to help and to "ACCEPT DISPLACED AMERICAN BRETHREN."<sup>46</sup>

MAP had become a reality in part because Sandage's work with migrant farmworkers coincided with America's War on Poverty. Seeking funds, Sandage applied to the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) for help. The head of the OEO's migrant division was Margaret Garrity.<sup>47</sup> Garrity helped Sandage secure funding for the project and became an important friend and mentor.

Nearly a decade older than Sandage, Garrity had built an impressive resume, evidence of her passion for helping others and her experience with large bureaucratic offices. After dropping out of college following her father's death, Garrity took a job in a county welfare office. There, she became concerned about the discrimination faced by poor African Americans. A position as race relations secretary of the U.S. Catholic Conference brought her to Washington, D.C. There she worked for the President's Committee on Government Contracts (PCGC), a

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45. MAP Annual Report, 1967, Sandage Papers. For more on Sandage, MAP, and other migrant assistance programs in Iowa, see Anne B. W. Effland, "The Emergence of Federal Assistance Programs for Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in Post-World War II America" (Ph.D. diss., Iowa State University, 1991), 217-66.

46. Shirley M. Sandage, *Child of Hope* (South Brunswick, NJ, 1969), 20, 95.

47. Sandage, interview with Scott Sandage.



Margaret Garrity, co-founder of *The Door Opener*.

group charged with overseeing government compliance with the clause in employment contracts prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin. The group lacked enforcement power but reviewed and documented up to 5,000 cases of discrimination per year. In 1957 she began serving as director of the PCGC's Midwest regional office in Chicago. In 1960 Vice President Richard Nixon appointed Garrity executive director of the committee. She returned to Chicago to become regional director of the State Services Division of the Bureau of Labor Standards, where she became interested in the concerns of Mexican Americans. When Sandage first encountered her, Garrity was heading the migrant division of the OEO.<sup>48</sup>

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48. "Job Bias Head Named," *New York Times*, 6/5/1960; "Interview with Sandage about Margaret Garrity," interview by Scott Sandage, IWA; Older Wom-



Sandage and Garrity quickly became friends as well as allies. Their varied experiences made them an effective team, blending compassion and expertise. A colleague at The Door Opener remembered Garrity, the experienced bureaucrat, as “a sweet-heart” and Sandage, the former housewife, as an “intelligent” and “courageous” woman who “knew how to work the system.”<sup>49</sup> Together, the pair cooperated on several projects, beginning with the program to provide education and job training to migrant workers and their families. Sandage began splitting time between Iowa and Washington, D.C., to work with Garrity at the OEO. The two eventually formed their own firm, and they were hired to investigate hazardous waste in Iowa. Sandage later recalled, “We became very aware that, as women, we were not always taken seriously in our dealings with corporations.” Sandage and Garrity turned male chauvinism to their own advantage, discovering that industry leaders would freely tell the seemingly powerless women “anything we wanted to know.” Another experience further reinforced their understandings of sexism, especially the difficulties faced by “a woman alone”: realtors and loan officers repeatedly hampered Garrity’s efforts to purchase a house in Iowa, insisting that a single woman ought to live in an apartment.<sup>50</sup>

Eager to start a new project and with their experiences with sexism fresh in their minds, the pair decided in the mid-1970s to open a multipurpose women’s center. It would be the first stop for women experiencing anything from unemployment to domestic assault. Sandage and Garrity navigated bureaucracies and a few suspicious community leaders and cultivated the support of local women’s groups. Members of the nominating committee that proposed membership for The Door Opener’s board of directors included women from the North Iowa Women’s Political Caucus, the American Association of University Women, and the YWCA. Other members represented working and professional women and women prominent in education and busi-

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en’s League, “Margaret Garrity Dies,” 1983, box 4, Sandage Papers; Tom Wicker, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream* (New York, 1991), 180.

49. Krukow interview.

50. Sandage, interview with Scott Sandage; Dianne Rose, “Centers Help Women Find New Roles in Life,” *Sioux City Journal*, 10/22/1980.

ness. A dozen local leaders, including three men, served on the board of directors, chaired by Helen Bottorff, a local realtor. Sandage and Garrity called in the help of other allies, many of whom were well known, including Betty Jean "Beje" Clark, a Republican elected to the Iowa House of Representatives in 1976. Governor Robert Ray's office helped them secure CETA funding.<sup>51</sup>

FROM THE BEGINNING, *The Door Opener* evoked strong reactions. Sandage later recalled that more than a hundred people attended the center's first organizational meeting. "There was so much interest," she explained, that "the women refused to go home when the meeting ended." The local newspaper published a laudatory description of the meeting, pronouncing it a "success" and repeating the temporary chairperson's report of an "enthusiastic response." Several months later, after the official opening of the agency, the paper's editor remained supportive, encouraging readers to attend an open house. "You can look at the place, talk to the staff, and ask your questions. I think you'll find they have some good answers."<sup>52</sup> People did indeed have questions about the center, and not all of them were friendly.

The existence of *The Door Opener* surely troubled at least some of the spouses of the center's potential clientele, but public criticism centered on less personal concerns. One frustrated individual vented anonymously in a newspaper's "hotline opinions" column, arguing that the only doors being opened by the new center were for its three staff employees: "And what a plush office they do have to sit around and do nothing in all day."<sup>53</sup> Such critics resented the implication that local women faced problems like sexual harassment or displacement. They argued that the center was an unnecessary drain on public funds. Another cynic offered a more cutting attack: "This pro-

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51. "Door Opener First Meeting Is Successful," *Globe-Gazette*, 1/24/1977; Barbara Keeler, "Door Opener Office Waiting for Women to Open Door," undated newspaper clipping, box 2, Sandage Papers.

52. "Door Opener May Be National Model," undated newspaper clipping in scrapbook, box 18, Sandage Papers; "Door Opener First Meeting Is Successful"; editor's weekly column, *Globe-Gazette*, 9/14/1977.

53. "Hotline Opinions," 7/26/1977, newspaper clipping in scrapbook, box 18, Sandage Papers.

gram will be most beneficial to three people, namely, Shirley Sandage and her staff of two, who weas[e]led out another federal grant to fund this fiasco under the banner of do gooders.”<sup>54</sup> Helping women was apparently a noble enough purpose that these critics decided not to attack it on those grounds. Instead, they argued that the center was not needed and that it relied on funds distributed by an ill-advised federal program. Despite these claims, The Door Opener never lacked clients.

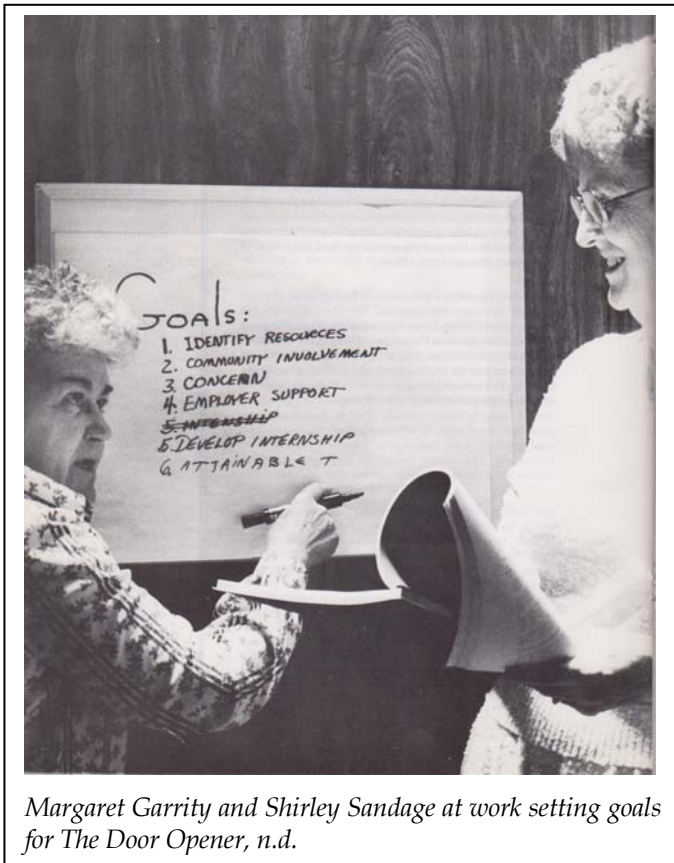
Nationally, detractors often declared displaced homemaker services a waste of money that would only be spent on white, middle-class women. Movement activists insisted that displaced homemaker centers must be “for all classes of displaced homemakers. . . . The common experience of being ‘displaced’ in middle life brings women from different backgrounds together in their common struggle to be self-supporting.” They argued that race and class status were irrelevant, insisting, “You can be just as hungry if you are white and middle class, if you don’t have any money.” They emphasized that so long as women continued to be unwaged homemakers, class had a gendered element. As one displaced homemaker in Iowa explained, she had gone from being “Miss Middle-Class American” to a “Welfare Mother” in a matter of just two weeks.<sup>55</sup> In fact, most displaced homemaker centers, including The Door Opener, did include and serve less privileged women.

The Door Opener sought to draw from the best components of the War on Poverty – namely, the funds that made local programs possible – while addressing some of its shortcomings. In the proposal that would lead to the formation of The Door Opener, Sandage and Garrity underscored “the problem of duplicative eligibility for programs and thus duplicate funding of certain individuals but no funding i.e. service for other individuals.” What was needed was “better coordination of all special programs through the development of inter-locking goals

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54. Ibid.

55. “Questions Most Frequently Asked about the Displaced Homemakers Center,” undated, Sommers Papers; Unsigned carbon copy of a letter (possibly written by Tish Sommers) to Susan Wrigert, 10/15/1975, Sommers Papers; Unidentified displaced homemaker’s testimony, reprinted in *The Feminization of Poverty . . . Is This Happening in Iowa?*, 193, 194.



*Margaret Garrity and Shirley Sandage at work setting goals for The Door Opener, n.d.*

and objectives” in such a way that money would be channeled more equitably and would benefit rural as well as urban areas.<sup>56</sup> “When my first husband walked out and then filed for bankruptcy, they came and cleaned out my house. I had nothing,” explained Judy Tuthill, a displaced homemaker and mother of four who received assistance at The Door Opener. “I called every agency and they all said, ‘We can’t do anything for you.’

56. “Draft of a Proposal for Establishing the NIAD Center for Human Development,” undated, box 6, Sandage Papers. Although the War on Poverty was usually understood as primarily an urban program, various historians are exploring its importance in rural areas. This point is underscored by several of the essays in Orleck and Hazirjian, eds., *War on Poverty*.

It took six months to get ADC assistance. They are nice, but to them you are just a Social Security number." With The Door Opener's help, Tuthill developed a plan for her future that included becoming a VISTA volunteer with a monthly stipend.<sup>57</sup>

The Door Opener navigated a complicated terrain in which even some of its supporters might be hesitant about the role of government in antipoverty campaigns. In particular, many statements of support focused on the ways the agency's clientele differed from the "welfare queens" debated in contemporary presidential campaigns. The overtones of such arguments surfaced in one Iowa newspaper writer's assurances that displaced homemakers had problems that "were just as serious as those borne by women in inner city tenements." Other defenders of The Door Opener were more explicit in their condemnation of welfare recipients. As one of the agency's supporters put it, the center was "a lot better than what I call the biggest rip-off of all, ADC." ADC, or Aid to Dependent Children—later called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—was a federal program that provided financial assistance to poor families. The people helped by welfare, this person maintained, "collect ADC and child support besides. [They] sit in bars and drink the taxpayers' money." The Door Opener, on the other hand, promised to "keep some of the less fortunate ones on their feet." Indeed, displaced homemakers themselves often insisted that they did not wish to be among those receiving welfare. They defined their status as deserving poor for whom welfare represented an unsavory last resort, not an opportunity to play the system. "Welfare is no fun," one client of The Door Opener declared.<sup>58</sup> These arguments drew a firm line between two distinct images of female poverty—recidivist poor mothers who supposedly preferred to live on handouts, and the temporary poverty of a displaced homemaker who only wanted help restoring her middle-class respectability. The complicated reactions The Door Opener and other displaced homemaker centers

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57. Judy Tuthill, quoted in Hollobaugh, "N. Iowa Project."

58. Jerry Collun, "'The Door Opener' Here Is Pilot Plan for the U.S.," 1/25/1979, newspaper clipping in scrapbook, box 18, Sandage Papers; "Hotline Opinions," 7/26/1977.

elicited help to explain the difficulties all activists faced in forging cross-class alliances.<sup>59</sup>

IOWANS' PERSPECTIVES on feminism also affected their understandings of the center. The emergence of The Door Opener coincided with important developments in the feminist movement in Iowa. In 1972 the Iowa legislature had been quick to ratify the federal Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), but efforts to rescind—or unratify—the controversial amendment began soon after.<sup>60</sup> An umbrella organization called The Iowa ERA Coalition launched a coordinated campaign for a state version of the amendment.<sup>61</sup> By 1978, the year The Door Opener began its pilot program for displaced homemakers, the state was embroiled in a debate about feminism and the role of women.

Some Iowans opposed equal rights legislation in part because they thought that it conflicted with their belief in the importance of female homemaking. In articulating the value of homemaking, they often described feminism as a threat to the family and to the nation. Opponents of the amendment sometimes overlooked wage earning as a necessary component of many women's lives. Kathryn Cutcher, a leading opponent of the ERA from Sioux City, believed that the women's movement hurt families because selfish working mothers ignored the needs of their children. "I could see how they were getting new furniture and new drapes," Cutcher argued, "but there were their children with no one around; the children paid for it."<sup>62</sup> Such arguments obscured the plight of women—including displaced homemakers—whose very survival necessitated employment. The debate over the amendment tended to center on the

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59. See, for example, Martha F. Davis, "Welfare Rights and Women's Rights in the 1960s," in *Integrating the Sixties: The Origin, Structures, and Legitimacy of Public Policy in a Turbulent Decade*, ed. Brian Balogh (University Park, PA, 1996), 144–65.

60. Paid ads in local newspapers urged readers to sign petitions asking Iowa legislators to rescind ratification of the federal Equal Rights Amendment. *IWPC Newsletter*, 5/1/1974, box 2, Margaret "Peg" Anderson Papers, IWA. In 1977 Senator Eugene Hill and 13 other legislators introduced a bill to rescind the ERA. *Caucus Comment*, April 1977, box 2, Anderson Papers.

61. *Caucus Comment*, September/October 1978, box 2, Anderson Papers.

62. Michael Wegner, "Iowa Poll: Our Attitudes Slowly Change," *Des Moines Register*, 8/5/1979.

actions of middle-class women who were able to choose freely between waged employment and homemaking. Displaced homemakers, meanwhile, demonstrated that trading the occupation of housewife for wage earning could be obligatory rather than chosen.

Class divisions and beliefs about sexual equality shaped rural Iowans' understandings of feminism and the displaced homemaker center. In her anthropological study of women in rural northwestern Iowa, which she calls "Open Country," Deborah Fink notes that in the 1970s and early 1980s "women were not permitted to promote structural changes that empowered them as women."<sup>63</sup> While some affluent Open Country women worked to promote the state ERA and, later, Roxanne Conlin's 1982 gubernatorial bid, they found little support in their communities. For women anxious about their grocery bills, the complaints of privileged middle-class white women about the monotony of housework did not resonate. Furthermore, class divisions prevented some women from joining the cause because they felt snubbed by the more affluent feminists.<sup>64</sup> In her study of Farm Bureau women in Iowa, however, Jenny Barker Devine has found that through the mid-1960s Iowa farm women engaged in "social feminisms" that "celebrated feminine ideals" and viewed "their daily labor as inherently political," but did so without challenging male authority.<sup>65</sup>

That feminist legacy suggests a philosophical basis for rural Iowans to embrace the displaced homemaker center, which emphasized the value of homemakers. Yet some of the same opposition that resisted the federal and state ERA fueled distrust of displaced homemaker centers. Anti-ERA leaders warned that the centers were "nothing but indoctrination & training centers for women's lib" used by feminists "to push ERA, abortion, Federal child care, lesbian privileges, etc." — all at taxpayer expense.<sup>66</sup>

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63. Fink, *Open Country Iowa*, 223.

64. *Ibid.*, 222–27.

65. Jenny Barker Devine, "'The Secret to a Successful Farm Organization': Township Farm Bureau Women's Clubs in Iowa, 1945–1970," *Annals of Iowa* 69 (2010), 425, 420.

66. Phyllis Schlafly, *Eagle Forum Newsletter*, August 1977. ERA proponents widely credit Illinoisan Phyllis Schlafly with defeating the Iowa ERA in 1980.

The emergence of displaced homemaker activism in Iowa offered the potential to redefine feminism and feminist concerns. Yet for many Iowans that potential was never realized.

Although the founders of The Door Opener had feminist connections, advocates of the northern Iowa center often felt obligated to distance the center from feminism. When the center opened, a local newspaper clarified that it was "not a militant feminist type of organization." Helen Bottorff, who chaired the organization's board of directors, explained, "We're not as concerned about the feminist movement as we are with helping women." Shirley Sandage reassured the media that issues of *Good Housekeeping* would be made available in the waiting room alongside copies of *Ms.* magazine. Euphesenia Foster, head of the U.S. Department of Labor's regional Women's Bureau in Kansas City, offered a distinction between the work of the center and feminist agendas that might have confounded some Iowa feminists. The center, she avowed in a northern Iowa newspaper, "has nothing to do with feminism or women's lib." Instead, "It has to do with equality and survival. There is a great need to put women in touch with vital information concerning them, with all the options for employment there are and more." Joyce Krukow, an intern with The Door Opener who eventually served on its board, recently recalled that The Door Opener was not "necessarily a feminist organization. I think they were just there to support women." Nor did Krukow categorize herself or the staff generally as feminist, remarking, "I don't think we ever thought of that word; we were just there to help women and their children." Furthermore, although she now understands The Door Opener's work as "activist," she could not recall that they "ever used that word."<sup>67</sup>

DESPITE THE PRESSURES to avoid the image of a consciousness-raising second-wave feminist organization, the movement's leaders often viewed job placement as neither the only nor the

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See, for example, Peg Anderson, letter dated November 10, 1980, "Campaign Handbook, July–Nov. 1980," box 2, Iowa ERA Coalition Records, IWA.

67. Keeler, "Door Opener Office Waiting for Women to Open Door"; Diane Cobb, "Sound Philosophy Becomes Year-Old Program," *Globe-Gazette*, 6/21/1978; Krukow interview.



most critical purpose of the center. The Door Opener's staff believed that counseling displaced homemakers through the events that had displaced them in the first place—particularly death and divorce—would prepare women to start the process of finding work. From July 1977 through March 1979, 222 of The Door Opener's clients had received job training, but more than twice that number had "received appropriate and complete counseling" that helped "the client to understand and overcome social and emotional problems." Such counseling took place in support groups and individual sessions, often sub-contracted with private psychologists, the North Iowa Mental Health Service, or the North Iowa Chemical Dependency. Associate director Margaret Garrity explained, "No matter what services we give women, it seems they always talk about the emotional support and self-confidence they get from us. Even when we spend money to get them education or training, they don't think about that." The goal was not simply a paycheck, but a promise of a better life.

One woman's case history, profiled for The Door Opener's annual report, details how "Kathy," an unemployed divorced mother of two, received job training that eventually led to full-time employment. Yet even after Kathy was earning a "reasonable wage," The Door Opener and the woman looked beyond this "immediate goal," continuing to work together in pursuit of Kathy's dream of starting her own business. Nevertheless, employment help was an important part of displaced homemakers' experiences with the center. For example, for 1981-82 The Door Opener reported that 124 of the 510 displaced homemakers who sought help found full-time jobs, and nearly a hundred more found part-time work or enrolled in a training program.<sup>68</sup>

In dealing with the employment concerns of displaced homemakers, The Door Opener was particularly concerned with reimagining the gendered division of labor. Displaced homemaker advocates were part of a broader trend among

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68. "Why We Are Opening New Doors for Women," undated, box 2, Sandage Papers; The Door Opener, Annual report for July 1, 1981-June 30, 1982; "Door Opener Helps Area Women Start New," May 1981, newspaper clipping in scrapbook, box 18, Sandage Papers; "What It's All About: Kathy" in The Door Opener, Annual report for July 1, 1981-June 30, 1982. Kathy is a pseudonym.

individuals as well as feminist and antipoverty activists promoting women's entry into nontraditional fields.<sup>69</sup> Securing traditionally male jobs was the most obvious way for female heads of household to earn enough wages to survive economically without a male breadwinner. As Sandage explained in a 1980 speech, "As your mother may have told you, it may be as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor one. At The Door Opener this is translated to mean it may be just as easy to find satisfaction in a good paying job as a low paying job—probably easier."<sup>70</sup> Gendered stereotypes about labor were deeply ingrained; many leading newspapers retained sex-segregated help wanted sections well into the 1970s.<sup>71</sup> The Door Opener had to convince traditionalist displaced homemakers and employers that women could work in conventionally male fields without abandoning their femininity. The agency did so by focusing on the presence of transferrable skills.

Under the concept of transferrable skills, housewives could label their time spent comparison shopping for groceries or preparing state and federal tax forms as "financial management" experience. Vegetable gardening might be categorized as experience working in "horticulture." Displaced homemaker advocates suggested parallels between housework and waged labor that echoed the Rosie the Riveter recruitment campaigns of the World War II era. They explained that a homemaker whose hobby involved using a CB radio could be a good candidate for working as a vehicle dispatcher, air traffic controller, or disc jockey. A homemaker who did tailoring could work in a job that required reading blueprints because a dress pattern resembled a blueprint. Eventually, The Door Opener employed a computerized system that used data from 21 questions to gen-

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69. Nancy MacLean, "The Hidden History of Affirmative Action: Working Women's Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class," *Feminist Studies* 25 (1999), 32-52.

70. Shirley Sandage, "You Can Get There From Here," speech for the You Can Do It Workshop, sponsored by Buchanan County Extension Service, Independence, Iowa, 4/22/1980, box 3, Sandage Papers.

71. Nicholas Pedriana and Amanda Abraham, "Now You See Them, Now You Don't: The Legal Field and Newspaper Desegregation of Sex-Segregated Help Wanted Ads 1965-75," *Law & Social Inquiry* 31 (2006), 905-38.

erate job possibilities from nearly 300 job classifications. Staff explained that “women frequently do not receive recognition for the life experience and the skills and knowledge developed in the process of living [because] . . . they use different terminologies to describe the same competencies.” This strategy, calculated to improve the self-esteem of a woman who regarded herself as “just a housewife,” also helped activists to argue that women’s labor merited the same pay as work performed by men.<sup>72</sup>

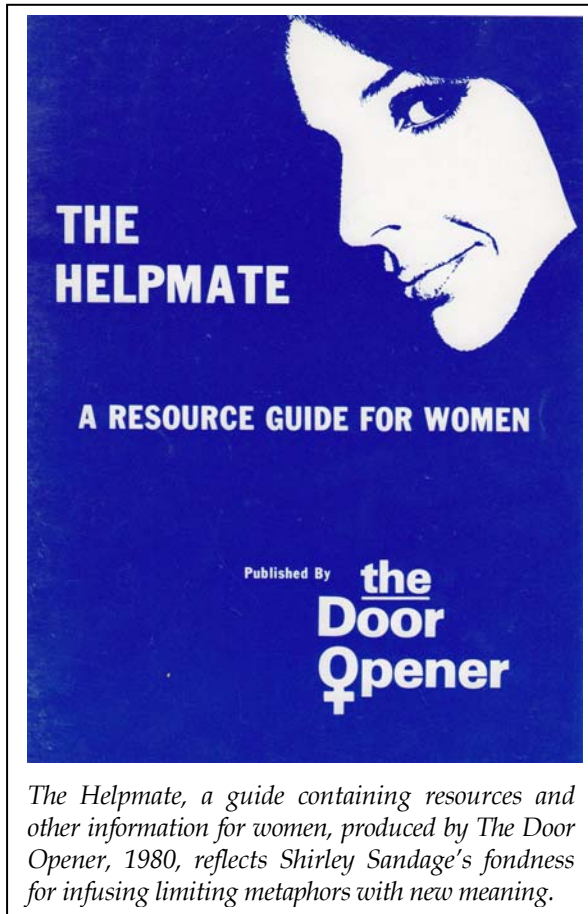
When many housewives explained their contributions, they tended to do so in ways that emphasized their work as help-meets rather than as sustainers of the family.<sup>73</sup> Even farm wives, who frequently shared in much of the labor of running a farm—from driving a tractor to bookkeeping—tended to embrace this view. Often husbands and other family members took on a similarly narrow understanding of the importance of women’s labor. One Iowa farmer refused to allow his daughter-in-law to participate in discussions about the family farm even though she had cosigned all the farm’s loans.<sup>74</sup> Many displaced homemakers lacked self-confidence in general (after all, some had just been deserted by their husbands for younger women), especially when it came to their employability. Displaced homemakers’ need for self-esteem influenced the center’s efforts to help them find jobs. The worksheets provided by The Door Opener to help women list their previous experience had housewife-affirming titles such as “Yes, I Do Have Skills” or “A New Appreciation of the Old You.” Activists strategically met two of the most important needs of displaced homemakers by offering both improved self-esteem and hope for employment. “You may not

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72. “Homemaking Work Experience,” undated, box 2, Sandage Papers; Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana, IL, 1987), 61; “Door Opener Expands Services,” *Globe-Gazette*, 6/19/1980; “The Door Opener”; The Door Opener, Annual report for July 1, 1979–June 30, 1980; Nancy C. Baker, *New Lives for Former Wives: Displaced Homemakers* (Garden City, NY, 1980), 201.

73. Many farm women saw little division between their farm and their home duties because they occurred in the same place. See Sarah Elbert, “The Farmer Takes a Wife: Women in America’s Farming Families,” in *Women, Households, and the Economy*, ed. Lourdes Benería and Catharine R. Stimpson (New Brunswick, NJ, 1987), 180–85.

74. Fink, *Open Country Iowa*, 208, 240.



*The Helpmate, a guide containing resources and other information for women, produced by The Door Opener, 1980, reflects Shirley Sandage's fondness for infusing limiting metaphors with new meaning.*

have perfected your skill and you may not have been paid to do them," one skills assessment exercise read. "But the important thing is that you have already developed some of the skills that these jobs require."<sup>75</sup>

Ironically, when displaced homemaker advocates explained that voluntarism and homemaking had value on the job market, they were simultaneously bolstering a social system in which wages were a measure of worth. Indeed, groups that promoted

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75. "Yes, I Do Have Skills," undated, box 2, Sandage Papers; The Door Opener, "Curriculum for Jobs Club," *ibid.*; "A Women's Way: Skills Recognition: A New Appreciation of the Old You," *ibid.*; The Door Opener, "Skills Transfer Project," *ibid.*

the importance of housewives frequently did so by attaching replacement value to their work.<sup>76</sup> These were concerns held by the women's movement more generally, where the importance of financial remuneration as an indicator of status in that era was evident in the protests against the 59 cents that women made for every dollar men made.<sup>77</sup> They were also arguments made by activists in the welfare rights movement, most prominently in the 1960s, who attempted to dignify childrearing and housework as legitimate work.<sup>78</sup>

Projects developed by The Door Opener similarly emphasized displaced homemakers' domestic experiences in a feminist effort to increase women's incomes. One project, a business called Clean and Green, evolved directly from the skills and experiences of homemaking. A career assessment workshop sponsored by The Door Opener found that many local women had experience painting, hanging wallpaper, and cleaning—experience that could be organized into a profit-making business. With a CETA grant arranged by The Door Opener, women received training from volunteer business people, attorneys, insurance representatives, and a full-time project manager who helped the participants learn marketing techniques. By 1978, Clean and Green operated as a privately owned corporation with contracts to clean homes and provide landscaping services

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76. Gerda Lerner cites a study finding that “the aggregate value of earnings forgone by housewives due to their unpaid domestic labor [is] . . . a sizable portion of the Gross National Product, if it were included in it.” See Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York, 1979), 137. Several groups in the 1970s advocated wages for housework to, as Sylvia Federici put it, “at least recogni[ze] that you are a worker.” See Sylvia Federici, “Wages Against Housework,” in *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon (New York, 2000).

77. Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago, 1986), 36–44, demonstrates that in the late 1970s the issue of equal pay for equal work became one of the central arguments for the federal Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Mansbridge argues that the ERA likely would not have changed the wage gap, but nevertheless feminists across the country donned buttons that read “59¢” to call attention to the discrepancy between women's wages and men's wages.

78. Premilla Nadasen, “Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights,” in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ, 2010), 168–92; Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana, IL, 2008), 30–59.

for homes, rental properties, and buildings under construction. In fact, there was enough demand for their services to sustain a newly formed branch operating outside of Cerro Gordo County as well as the original company in the Mason City area. These companies also posted new positions with The Door Opener so new clients could apply to work for the firm. By 1980, the company's president, Audry Warren, reported that it was a "thriving commercial and residential cleaning company" with hopes for further expansion. Its success created momentum for several other entrepreneurial projects.<sup>79</sup>

In rural America, where many displaced homemakers were former farm women, it made sense for The Door Opener to emphasize job opportunities that drew on farm experience. One business, the Mobile Agricultural Company Services (MAC) Corporation, effectively made use of the aptitudes of displaced farm wives. The company offered soil testing and pest monitoring. The project began in 1979 under another CETA special project grant. The Door Opener worked with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Labor's Women's Bureau, and Iowa State University to research the viability of such a company and to establish the training requirements for the women who would participate in it. The company executed contracts with local grain elevators, which provided information about the land. The company then mapped the land and conducted the actual testing, sending soil samples to laboratories for analysis. With training from Iowa Lakes Community College, the company began testing grain moisture levels in order to ensure work during the cold winter months.<sup>80</sup>

Although The Door Opener, especially project coordinator Fran McCarty, did much to facilitate the development and training of the MAC Corporation, it operated totally independently of The Door Opener. The corporation was owned by its members, only half of whom held a high school diploma. Five of the seven women were divorced or separated; one was a single

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79. The Door Opener, Annual report for July 1, 1979–June 30, 1980; Audry Warren to Shirley Sandage, 10/31/1980, box 2, Sandage Papers.

80. "A Report on Agricultural Services Job Creation Project: A Project of The Door Opener," 1980, box 2, Sandage Papers; The Door Opener, Annual report for July 1, 1979–June 30, 1980.

mother of three. While the work differed from the tasks performed by most housewives—even those living on farms—working for MAC built on displaced homemakers' previous experiences. Laura Lane, a contributing editor for *Farm Journal* and an enthusiastic supporter of the company, described how she had been "exhilarated" by the "women's increasing sense of self-worth." Furthermore, the company offered women a career with opportunities for promotion. The women involved in the business explained that they had been attracted to the program because they wanted the independence, flexible schedule, and job security they associated with owning their own business. They also wanted to "gain respect—self respect and respect of others." By the end of its first year, the business already had eight elevator contracts covering more than 17,000 acres. The company's president, Betsy King, recounted how the company had "done better than most people thought possible"—especially considering the unfavorable weather and the increasingly distressing economy.<sup>81</sup>

Because The Door Opener served displaced homemakers while remaining a multipurpose women's center, it could pilot projects that centers devoted exclusively to displaced homemakers might not have tackled. One of The Door Opener's more successful projects endeavored to expose young women to traditionally male fields of employment. Doing so not only helped to remove the stigma of women working in supposedly male fields, but also promised to prevent the tragedy of becoming a displaced homemaker, especially as the economy became more difficult. Between 1978 and 1981, The Door Opener worked with school districts to provide job-shadowing opportunities to female junior and senior high school students. The program allowed the young women to explore careers as auto mechanics, laboratory technicians, postal clerks, gas station attendants, law enforcement officers, lawyers, truck drivers, taxidermists, and morticians. With \$165,000 of federal funding from the U.S. Department of Labor, the Non-Sexist Vocational Acquaintanceship Project (NSVAP) enrolled more than a hundred

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81. "Report on Agricultural Services Job Creation Project, 1980"; Laura Lane to Shirley Sandage, 3/3/1982, box 2, Sandage Papers; Betsy King to Shirley Sandage, 11/3/1980, box 2, Sandage Papers.

young women per year and placed them in shadowing programs with a wide range of employers. The center pitched the program as a preferable alternative to assistance programs, and one that served a deserving poor: "The breaking of these attitudinal barriers to women's entry into the skilled trades . . . will ultimately be the only effective way of reducing the number of women heads-of-households who are poor and receiving AFDC." While the program promoted gender equality in the waged workforce, explaining the project in terms of shrinking welfare rolls accommodated community skepticism about both The Door Opener and federal poverty programs generally.<sup>82</sup>

Whereas the 1970s had been, in general, a decade of prosperity in Iowa, 1980 marked the beginning of the farm crisis and an economic downturn that took legislators and state officials by surprise.<sup>83</sup> The Door Opener reported that the rising unemployment of the early 1980s compounded the limitations that "traditional values and social mores" placed on women's career options.<sup>84</sup> To combat this, the agency developed the Start on Success program in 1982 as one way to expand women's opportunities. The program was funded in part by a \$7,000 "challenge" grant from the Dayton-Hudson Foundation requiring The Door Opener to raise additional funds that eventually came from a wide variety of private and public sources, including nearly \$10,000 from the U.S. Department of Labor. The program advertised itself as an opportunity for "an individualized career . . . as your own boss!" that would match women's existing skills with "unmet community needs." Entrepreneurship offered a promising way to move women from work in the home to non-exploitive waged work. In an area with a high rate of unemployment, creating new jobs was an attractive alternative to forcing former housewives to compete in an especially tight job market. It also kept men from feeling threatened by female jobseekers.

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82. "The Door Opener"; "'Shadows' Learning of Possible Careers," *Globe-Gazette*, 11/20/1978; Annual report for the July 1, 1979–June 30, 1980; The Door Opener (NIAD Center for Human Development), *Non-Sexist Vocational Acquaintanceship Program (NSVAP): A How-to-do-it Manual* (Mason City, 1980), box 2, Sandage Papers.

83. Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 309, 313; Friedberger, *Shake-out*.

84. The Door Opener, Annual report for July 1, 1981–June 30, 1982.



Furthermore, unlike some other entrepreneurship programs, this one included special efforts to demystify business terminology and emphasize the transferability of home management skills to managing a business. An early meeting for the project attracted nearly a hundred women on a rainy evening.<sup>85</sup>

The image of “housewives and mothers . . . attempting to give inflation a swift kick by starting their own businesses” attracted media attention. The recession in Iowa was forcing more and more women to earn or earn more in order to keep their families afloat. Yet again, several of the proposed businesses built on skills acquired as married women. One woman envisioned a “dirty jobs” agency through which she could hire herself out to perform household chores like scrubbing toilets and cleaning ovens. A homemaker from a farm wanted to do custom agricultural work like plowing. By the end of the program, participants had proposed more than 20 new low-overhead businesses ranging from custom sewing to pet grooming and boarding. The women were guided through the process of developing their proposals by the president of the Iowa Small Business Employers in Mason City. When the project started, women owned only about 3 percent of the 60,000 businesses in the state. One month after the program ended, 15 new woman-owned businesses were in operation in the area, ranging from a florist shop to a business offering custom clothing for handicapped people. Start on Success was considered such a success that it became the model for a U.S. Department of Labor guide published in 1985, *From Homemaking to Entrepreneurship: A Readiness Training Program*.<sup>86</sup>

FROM ITS FOUNDING in 1977, The Door Opener had navigated suspicions about second-wave feminism and federal funding. Conditions were not improving, however. In the same vote

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85. Ibid.; Advertisement in *Globe-Gazette*, 8/6/1982, box 18, Sandage Papers; Advertisement in *Mason City Shoppers News*, 8/31/1982, *ibid.*; U.S. Department of Labor, *From Homemaking to Entrepreneurship: A Readiness Training Program* (Washington, DC, 1985), Sandage Papers; Sherry Ricchiardi, “Mason City’s ‘Cottage’ Idea,” *Des Moines Register*, 10/17/1982.

86. Ricchiardi, “Mason City’s ‘Cottage’ Idea”; U.S. Department of Labor, *From Homemaking to Entrepreneurship*.

that rejected the Iowa ERA in 1980, the majority of Iowans voted to elect a president who opposed feminist legislation. Ronald Reagan had opened his post-nomination campaign with a speech about states' rights in which he told his audience, "I believe in people doing as much as they can at the private level."<sup>87</sup> Although the center had thrived by using private money to more flexibly address the needs of Iowa women, it relied primarily on public money. The Door Opener had long cobbled funding together from a variety of public sources, including the Iowa Department of Social Services, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the federal VISTA program.

As the declining economy and changed ideology of the early 1980s forced private sources to make tough decisions, The Door Opener, like many other antipoverty programs, suffered. As early as February 1981, finances had become such a problem that The Door Opener publicly admitted its worries. The agency hoped to raise some money with local fundraisers, but it clearly required more to maintain its services. Beginning in 1981, agency representatives visited 117 pastors from a list of 227 area churches, contacting additional churches by mail or telephone, to appeal for contributions.

These efforts yielded little relief, however, and previous sources of money looked less and less likely to deliver. President Reagan's proposed budget compounded the problem. Director Shirley Sandage told a group of fellow displaced homemaker program directors in Waco, Texas, that the president's budget demanded an "inequality of sacrifice" from American women. By 1982, despite the increasing numbers of individuals seeking help, The Door Opener operated on a drastically reduced budget. The Iowa Department of Social Services was providing only about a quarter of its previous allocations for services to displaced homemakers. In 1982 the Algona satellite office closed, although the Department of Public Instruction funded the local Iowa Lakes Community College to offer some services once provided by The Door Opener. To help cover the fiscal shortfall, the agency requested money from the counties.

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87. Lewis L. Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans* (New York, 2003), 419.

Administrators again pressed the issue in numerical terms that focused on welfare recipients. "If only 10 of the persons are kept off [of welfare]," a spokeswoman insisted, the "savings would be \$88,000, more than is being asked of the [individual] counties."<sup>88</sup>

In October 1982, Shirley Sandage and Margaret Garrity announced their resignations. Garrity was retiring, and Sandage decided to accept a longstanding offer to become executive director of the Older Women's League, a national organization founded in Des Moines in 1980 by Sandage and other leaders in the displaced homemakers movement that initially focused primarily on access to health care insurance and equity in Social Security and pensions. Sandage's explanation for her resignation suited the political rhetoric that had shaped so much of the discussion about the agency. "The time has come for the community to accept the responsibility," she explained.<sup>89</sup>

For the most part, the community was either unable or unwilling to accept her challenge. After six years, The Door Opener's financial problems forced the center to cease its employment and education counseling for nearly 1,000 displaced homemakers and women "in transition." The center eliminated several positions, including those of its new director, Susan A. Vee, the bookkeeper, the secretary, and a counselor. Anne Duffe, who had served as a program coordinator and counselor for the past several months, took on the role of acting center director while also doing part-time counseling. The Door Opener's budget of \$136,000 had shrunk by more than \$100,000. Sympathetic landlords allowed The Door Opener to stay rent-free so that it could continue to provide its crisis line and domestic abuse and sexual assault services. (The Door Opener's legacy of services

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88. Jane McClure, "Door Opener Future Jeopardized by Cuts in Social Service Money," *Globe-Gazette*, 2/23/1981; Elise Gibson, "Budget Would 'Devastate' Women," [Waco?] *Tribune-Herald*, 6/8/1982, newspaper clipping in scrapbook, box 18, Sandage Papers; The Door Opener, Annual report for July 1, 1981-June 30, 1982; Gary Grimmond, "Door Opener Help Center Asks County for \$35,000," *Globe-Gazette*, 1/13/1982.

89. "Coming of Age: The First Report of the Older Women's League," box 14, Sommers Papers; Gary Grimmond, "Door Opener Leaders to Resign," *Globe-Gazette*, 10/18/1982. Shirley Sandage corresponded with two scholars, Patricia Huckle and Kathleen Kautzer, about corrections to their work on the Older Women's League. See box 6, Sandage Papers.

for domestic abuse and sexual assault lives on in the Crisis Intervention Service, which continues to operate today.) As The Door Opener's displaced homemaker services came to an end, the new director explained, "The Door Opener name conjures up suspicion and ill feelings of some sort. It stands there on the corner reminding the community of problems in its midst. Unfortunately, the public doesn't want to be reminded of those problems."<sup>90</sup>

For six years, however, The Door Opener had succeeded in making women's problems impossible to ignore. The very act of identifying displaced homemakers as a community issue revealed how the gendered, allegedly private work of homemaking was—and is—simultaneously honored and ignored in American culture. As movement activists pointed out, no amount of Mother's Day celebration made up for housewives' institutionalized vulnerability under American law and culture. The Door Opener destabilized this cultural pretense. Older celebrations of domesticity had worked to justify women's exclusion from public policy measures on the reckoning that individual families should reward homemaking on a private basis. Instead, The Door Opener celebrated homemaking skills in order to direct women away from poorly compensated, traditionally female work. In doing so, it walked the narrow line between feminist identification and feminist practice, between government money and government programs.

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90. Paul Holley, "Door Opener Forced to Cut Education, Job Aid Services," *Globe-Gazette*, 4/7/1983.