Pro-Choice Republican

Documenting Constance Cook's Life and Work

By Melissa Whitworth

Connie Cook: A Documentary will preview at Cinemapolis on April 12.

As a pro-choice Republican Assemblywoman in the 1970s—one of only three women in the Assembly when she was elected in 1962—Connie Cook found herself in a difficult but not a lonely place: Cook knew that without compromise, nothing would ever get done; no bills would pass and her struggle for women's equality would fail at the first step. At the time politicians on both sides of the house praised her for her measured, practical, and determined approach to the business of lawmaking.

That was how, in 1970, she passed a controversial bill in Albany that decriminalized abortion (three years before Roe v. Wade) and shocked the nation. A new documentary that spans Cook's life's work shows that she was a visionary: advocating for women's reproductive rights long before the debate divided the country.

Sue Perlgut and Carol Kammen (Photo: Sheryl Sinkow)

Sue Perlgut, the film's co-director and producer, unearthed hours of never-before-seen footage during her research. In one grainy black-and-white scene, shot on the house floor on April 9, 1970, Assemblyman George Michaels gives a dramatic speech asking to change his vote. The Assembly had been locked in a 74-74 tie; with Michaels' change, the bill passed.

"I fully appreciate that this is the termination of my political career, Mr. Speaker," Michaels says, "but what is the use of getting elected or reelected if you don't stand for something? I therefore request Mr. Speaker, to change my negative vote to an affirmative vote."

It is one of the most satisfying moments of the film. But Michaels' prediction was quite true.

"I was getting a bit of a beating for introducing this bill," Cook says in an interview after the vote passed. "To push it, to put your callings to the test, that is not a popular thing to do if it is an issue like this.

"The life of a politician is not easy and that is why they get so cynical sometimes and find it hard to follow the right course."

"Cook persevered in the face of much sexism in the 1940s, '50s and '60s," said Perlgut, "and led the life she wanted to lead." Cook graduated in the top ten of her class at Cornell's law school. In 1943, she began her career as one of only two women working at the Wall Street law firm Shearman & Sterling. She became accustomed to being the only woman, representing women's causes, in the room.

So why is Cook's story being told now? Perlgut collaborated with Cook's daughter Cathy Cook, who provided much of the archival material and background. They discussed the idea for a film at a memorial for Connie after her death in 2009.

Ithaca's current Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton helped obtain funds for the film, along with local foundations and more than 100 individual donors.

"I thought it was very important that the story of Assemblywoman Connie Cook be told," Lifton said. "She represented this Assembly district and led the fight for reproductive rights in New York State in the late '60s, a history that many have forgotten or never knew. In the midst of a nationwide battle to restrict women's reproductive rights, this film is a timely reminder of Connie Cook's heroic fight to save the lives of thousands of New York women."

At the time of the vote, many accused Cook of advocating for "abortion on demand," but she argued that abortion was happening anyway, legal or not, and that criminalizing it only drove abortion underground.

Leslie Danks Burke, of Planned Parenthood of the Southern Finger Lakes, said, "Connie Cook led a majority in 1970, and her legacy remains the majority view: most people support women's health care. Many are watching New York State's refusal to codify Roe v. Wade with growing dread."

The Reproductive Services Bill, which safeguards abortion rights in New York and would codify Roe v. Wade for the state, passed in the Assembly on March 25. It is expected that the bill will never make it to the State Senate floor.

"Connie impacted our lives in as many ways as the second-wave feminist movement did," Perlgut said. "She did all she did as a Republican and did it within the system—where she managed to make enormous changes that we live with today. Even with all the benefits we as women have today, she is a reminder that women had to fight for the rights we have now and in fact are in danger of losing some of them. We need more Connie Cooks, now, more than ever." •