

QUEENMAKERS

The victories of these women...signify the presence of a new type of politician and a different breed of political supporter.

by Ellen Sherberg

When Bella Abzug spoke at the JCCA on Halloween night, 1971, she changed the face of Missouri politics. It wasn't a radical change, by any means, but in those early days of the feminist movement, the fiery New Yorker's speech signaled a charge to the women in the audience—many of whom were products of the civil rights and peace movements—that wives, mothers and working women who cared about the future belonged in politics.

In the seven years since that Halloween speech, Mrs. Abzug has lost elections for mayor of New York City and U.S. Senator from New York state. Yet many of the women who were at the JCCA the night she spoke have gone on to see women candidates elected to the Missouri House, the state Senate, and for the first time in history, to the St. Louis County Council and the magistrate court.

With Susan Block's election as magistrate and the impressive reelection pluralities chalked up by state representative Sue Shear and county council member Betty Van Uum last November, the woman's campaign has claimed its place in state politics. The victories of these women, as well as that of state senator Harriett Woods, have more in common than the fact that the candidates

themselves (sometimes) wear skirts. They signify the presence of a new type of politician and a different breed of political supporter.

Low on money, high on volunteer energy, each of these campaigns has been modeled after Sue Shear's original effort in 1972. Many of the women who encouraged Shear to run and worked on her campaign have gone on to be considered queenmakers—women who get other women elected. Unlike their male counterparts, the political kingmakers, the names of these women are not generally known for their political connections, family ties or moneyed backgrounds. They're organizers and workers and, most of all, one male politician observed, "They're thorough as hell. They work day and night like it was their mother who was the candidate."

That their campaigns have all been run in the West County corridor is more than a geographic coincidence. Political organizations in that area are generally more liberal, less controlled by a strong machine and, frankly, more vulnerable to takeover by an upstart group of women.

When the first group of queenmakers-to-be met in 1971, they were a campaign in search of a candidate. They decided

they were looking for a district without an incumbent; preferably one in West County where, they suspected, a woman would be better received than in other areas, and where many of the liberal housewives and working women who had joined the fledgling Women's Political Caucus lived; they wanted a candidate with some political experience who was willing to commit herself to an uphill campaign; they wanted a feminist with credibility in chauvinist circles. After putting together this list of unlikely qualifications for office, they began to interview candidates. The result was the political birth of (now three-term legislative veteran) Sue Shear.

Shear became a queenmaker in her own right in 1973 when she took Betty Van Uum literally by the hand and introduced her to her own supporters and friendly audiences—particularly Jewish women's groups who felt somewhat uncomfortable with Van Uum's anti-abortion attitudes. Two years later Van Uum returned the favor and shared the volunteer lists and contributors from her campaign with Harriett Woods' state senate campaign staff. Last November, when a family emergency called Susan Block out of town in the middle of her magistrate's campaign, Van Uum

The Winners:



Susan Block



Sue Shear



Harriett Woods



Betty Van Uum

Richard Benkof

stepped in and took over the organization of her friend's media advertisements, even though she herself was in the middle of a tough reelection campaign.

(Block is an example of queenmaker turned queen. She was one of the prime movers behind the Shear and Van Uum initial efforts as well as the first chairperson of the local Women's Political Caucus.) And Woods, one of the most widely respected members of the group, has offered counsel and solace more than once to other candidates in times of need.

"It's not that we're less catty than male politicians," one of the candidates remarked, "it's just that we really are friends and we were friends before we were politicians."

The women's campaigns have not always been successful. In 1974 Connie Pruitt, a Republican backed by the core group of women workers, was defeated in a state representative's race in Florissant. The election was the same year as Van Uum's first race and the women strategists say they now realize it's difficult to run two first timers at once because volunteer loyalties and energies are divided, and volunteers are the core of the women's campaigns.

One characteristic all the campaigns share is the ability to draw volunteer support from outside the candidate's own district. Women who originally volunteered for Sue Shear's 1972 campaign, for example, reappear like election groundhogs every two years to work for a female candidate.

Another limitation the women campaigners have realized is that while they're often effective queenmakers, they can't seem to elect a king. They have supported and tried to advise men sympathetic to the feminist movement, such as former state representative Jerry Welch who lost to incumbent state senator Joe Frappier, an arch-foe of the ERA. These efforts, however, have failed. "We can't seem to successfully transfer our techniques without running the show ourselves," said one queenmaker. "There's no substitute for the dedication to the cause of getting women elected when it comes to running a campaign."

The grassroots efforts depend heavily on canvassing (both by the candidate and her supporters), coffees where the candidate shakes hands and meets women likely to support her, and postcard

follow-ups, which demand a lot of time and labor.

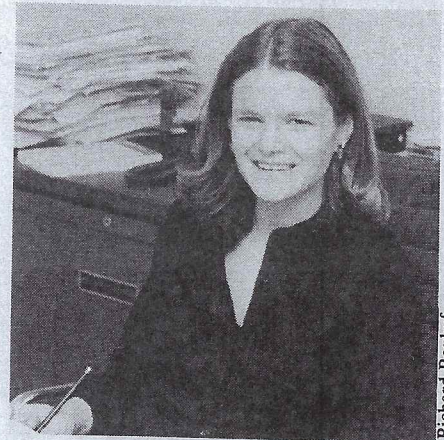
The heavy reliance on volunteer woman-hours is matched only by the amount of time each candidate contributes on her own behalf. Ask queenmakers what makes the campaigns successful and the unanimous response is: the candidates themselves. That they're qualified and willing is no accident. Since most have had experience on each other's campaigns, they're aware of the demands on their lives during a campaign. Those devoting themselves to the campaign are careful to support people they believe can do the job, once elected.

Campaign staffs too have been known to regenerate themselves; veteran volunteers such as Vivian Eveloff, Ellen Walters, Marny Meserve and Bev Bishop have helped train queenmakers-to-be such as Leslie Edwards and Doris Frank (who managed the most recent Van Uum campaign) and Sharon Gornstein, who contributed to the Block race.

If you're a woman who wants to run for office or a man who dreams your daughter will grow up to be president or you want some solid political advice, here are the women to see:

Sally Barker, 32, downtown attorney, veteran strategist known for her political savvy. Sue Shear's first campaign coordinator, Barker is still the adviser candidates turn to for advice on how to seek various endorsements and is known for her strong insight on key issues. Yet, as one of the candidates she worked for recalls, "Sally never considered herself above doing the garbage work. She would write the canvassing manual, instruct volunteers on how to use it, pick up a copy and start knocking on doors herself." Many of the techniques that Barker developed on the first Shear campaign, i.e. the endorsement cards, the canvassing protocol, have served as prototypes for all the women's campaigns that followed. A political science major in college, Barker had some campaign experience before she attended the Abzug Halloween Night Crusade; she admittedly prefers the machinations of the campaign to the limelight and has little desire to be a candidate. Her goal? "I want to be the first great woman political boss."

Marcia Mellitz, 34, plans to put her recently acquired M.B.A. degree to work this year. Yet another fan in the stands during Bella's *shpiel*, she participated in the civil rights and antiwar movements of the sixties, became active in the Women's Political Caucus, at one point chairing the organization. She is known for her scientific, businesslike approach to campaign strategy and has an uncanny knack for targeting areas where a candidate should devote her efforts. That knack, say those who have followed Mellitz' advice, is not based on emotion but on use of statistics to set priorities plus a keen sense of timing. Mellitz not only works for candidates, she actively recruits them and has taken many women considering a campaign under her wing for a brief lesson in political realities. (After one session with Mellitz and some of her campaign cohorts, a veteran Republican committeewoman said she had learned more in the couple of hours they spent together than in all her years with the Republican party in Missouri.) Mellitz says she has no interest in being a candidate herself; her next project is one likely to embarrass male officeholders: she plans to gather information for a women's talent bank so that government officials will no longer be able to excuse their scarcity of female appointees with the lame-brain logic that "we just couldn't find a qualified female for the job."

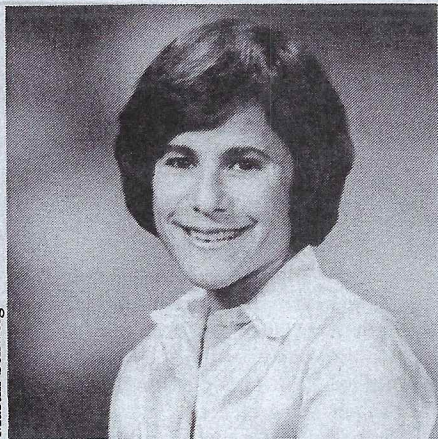


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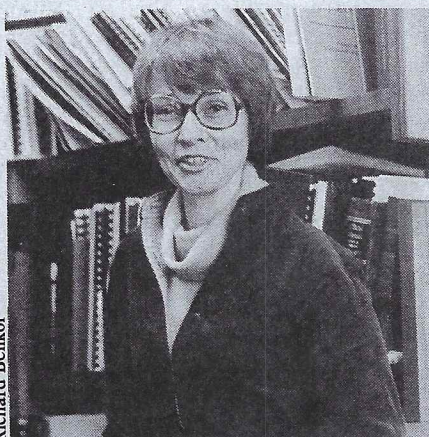
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Martin Schweig



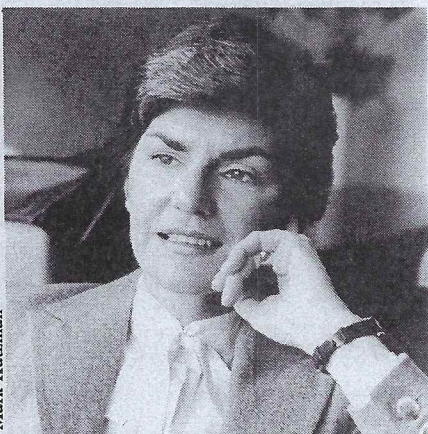
Jody Newman, 34, wide range of volunteer experience in and out of politics. Although she quickly became Harriett Woods' campaign manager, she is one of the few queenmakers who was not specifically looking for a women's candidate. She has worked for Senator Jacob Javits in Washington, D.C., researched issues in Jack Schramm's unsuccessful bid for lieutenant governor, lobbied for day-care reforms in Missouri and was "looking for the best candidate" in 1978 when a friend introduced her to Harriett Woods. She quickly became known for her organizing skills (she ran the campaign on a 9-to-5 businesslike basis) and her efficiency, not to mention economy ("the average gift was under \$10 and we raised more than \$10,000"). In whatever effort she undertakes Newman is said to epitomize the "professional volunteer"; her current project involves creating the Magic House, a participatory museum for children of all ages. Only in its sophisticated appeal to immaturity does the Magic House resemble politics, but Newman says she likes "doing what interests me most at the time," and that doesn't rule out running for office herself one day.

Richard Benkof



Jane North, 38, county council administrative assistant, she went to Bella Abzug's now-infamous speech with her neighbor Betty Van Uum. As North recalls, "Bella kept saying women are just as good as men in politics and a lot more honest and sincere, and should run for office. When we were leaving Betty said, 'I can do that.' I said, 'I'm not halfway interested in trying, but I'm willing to help you.'" Together the two worked to get women elected as McGovern delegates for the 1972 convention; together they volunteered for Sue Shear's campaign—in 1974. North and Susan Block comanaged Van Uum's campaign for the county council. North is known for her ability to learn fast and train others just as quickly; she's also highly regarded as an organizer. Asked if she would consider running for office, she adamantly replied, "Absolutely not. It's amazing that there are people that strong who are willing to put up with that much abuse."

Mark Katzman



Kathleen Newman, 43, Clayton Township committeewoman and a feminist committeewoman, at that. She became involved in politics as part of the antiwar movement and the 1968 effort to elect peace delegates to the Democratic convention, yet she credits the civil rights movement with creating her awareness about conditions for women. In 1970 she ran a futile campaign against R.J. "Bus" King, then minority leader of the Missouri House. The campaign, she says, gave her an understanding of what candidates go through. Newman is known as the political insider on women's campaigns and she admits she's been critical of the Women's Political Caucus for not having "focused enough attention on local township and club politics. Regular activity on the local level," she says, "not only increases political chances, but broadens your views and gives you an understanding of the give and take of politics." She says she's leaving the door open to be a candidate on her own again.



Mary Maledon, 48, court clerk, organizer known for her persistence when it comes to dealing with volunteers. Another member of the Abzug audience, she began her political career stuffing envelopes and canvassing for Sue Shear, went on to organize coffee for Betty Van Uum, volunteered on Harriet Woods' campaign, and recently served as campaign manager for Susan Block, during which time she "developed a bad case of telephone ear." Her touch with volunteers involves recruiting people with a loyalty to her as well as to the candidate, and once Maledon recruits you consider your free hours numbered. If she's got your phone number, you can plan signing on for the duration. Yet rather than being pushy and obnoxious, Maledon is described as a "soft sell organizer." She admits she would like to be a state representative one day but quickly adds "I couldn't go through all that a candidate has to and ask people to vote for me." ❀