

**Laurell Ritchie**  
**Doris Anderson Memorial, May 12, 2007**

It's a true privilege to say a few words about Doris Anderson's role in the Canadian women's movement and in particular the National Action Committee on the Status of Women. I hope I do justice to at least some of the many things other NAC activists and leaders would want said about Doris.

If she was here today I'm sure Doris would do that deep throated chortle and drawl out, "I think that's *hilarious*. I think that's a *riot* ... honouring me on Mother's Day weekend."

Doris influenced my life very early on. In grade six I was assigned to argue the pro side of a debate on women's right to abortion. This was the beginning of the 1960s when abortion was a criminal act and never mentioned in polite company. I took the long hike to the Downsview Library to do my research. There was a single file with a single article. It was from a magazine called *Chatelaine*. The terrible embarrassment of the librarian who showed me the file, the thin file alongside other very thick files, and the doctor who had to write the article under a pseudonym told me that somewhere there was a very brave person making sure this information got published. (As a former editor of a Grade 4 class newsletter I recognized guts when I saw them.) I went on to win the debate and continued to pore over *Chatelaine* whenever I saw a copy. Some saw it as mainstream. I saw it as quietly seditious ... more or less as I came to see Doris Anderson herself.

Years later, in 1980, Doris came to NAC's collective attention when she made the principled decision to resign from the government's Advisory Council on the Status of Women to protest the cancellation of the women's constitutional conference. That too took guts. Doris was always extraordinarily principled on the issues that mattered most.

Within a year she had been convinced by others to take a run at presiding over the independent women's movement, specifically NAC, the umbrella organization formed in 1973 to represent women's groups and equality-seeking organizations across the country. She was president from 1982 to 1984. By the time she stepped down there were more than 500 affiliated organizations.

Doris led the organization during a time when R.E.A.L. Women was forming to oppose abortion, child care, and equality rights more generally. But it was also a time when politicians were starting to stumble all over themselves to support a change in the *Indian Act* so that women and their children would no longer lose their status if they married non-status Indians, a cause that NAC had championed from the mid-1970s when Jeanette Lavell first challenged the *Act*.

This was also the era when issues like free trade were coming to the fore. What some may not know is that Doris played a role in making sure women's voices were heard in that debate. In yet another of her capacities with *Policy Options* magazine, Doris asked political economist and NAC officer Marjorie Cohen to research the 1984 Macdonald Commission and write an op-ed about the impacts of free trade on women. Marjorie had written about free trade before but credits Doris with first sparking her interest in the specific impacts on women. Doris also arranged for me to speak to this same issue at a *Policy Options* forum and another NAC activist, Jennifer Keck, to go to Ottawa with her to speak to the Commission hearings. Doris was always encouraging people to think beyond what they assumed was their potential. The rest as they say is history. We went on to ensure that women's voices were heard in the public debate and NAC played a pivotal role in initiating the coalition which would oppose free trade.

While Doris respected NAC's strengths, like its very active committee structure, she also tried to overhaul the organization and in particular to relocate its office to Ottawa, a task she only partly succeeded in. Doris was always focused on NAC's job of lobbying the government and opposition parties of the day.

Doris could be tough but she was also a calming influence and often a peacemaker, a critical role in a rambunctious organization like NAC that was trying to practice democracy the best way we knew how.

She remained active as Immediate Past President in subsequent years – which lasted longer than most because the next president, Chaviva Hosek, was not able to take on that role having chosen the parliamentary path.

So Doris was actually around for quite a while as a leader in the organization. She knew us well, our strengths and our weaknesses. I recall one annual meeting that was being torn asunder by a debate that arose when a number of NAC groups wanted to conduct an action which would raise the profile

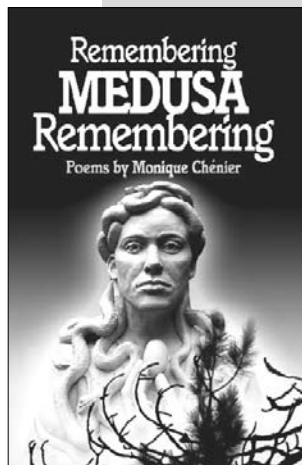
of violence against women. The action involved a particularly offensive *Hustler* magazine issue in the cigar shop of the Chateau Laurier where we were meeting. Other groups opposed the action. Doris herself had worked on issues of pornography but she also knew the importance of the other economic and social issues to be debated. She quietly invited some key players on both sides to a wine and cheese reception that she “just happened” to be having in her suite. And she asked for a copy of the magazine to be brought to her. Once the invitees were all gathered, she took the magazine, turned it this way and that for a better view and declared that it was definitely not her taste in S & M. But then she asked the delegates exactly how they proposed to make sure this did not become *the* media story about the annual meeting. It was simple, this little reception idea of hers. But it was just what was needed to start a rational discussion.

Doris had many dimensions. Reading through *Rebel Daughter* again in the wee hours this week and laughing out loud at her wry wit, I recalled another time drinking scotch with Doris (it wasn't always wine) until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. in the tiny student dorm she'd been assigned at Carleton University where NAC normally held its annual meetings. She knew as a union organizer I'd want to hear about her days at Eaton's as a copy writer when she joined in the campaign to unionize the store and signed up co-workers to the cause. And then we traded stories about growing up short of cash in homes that were also boarding houses. She had a profound respect and curiosity about almost everybody and everything.

Doris remained deeply committed to what she saw as an extraordinary women's movement in this country, one that women elsewhere in the world envied, as she wrote about in her book *The Unfinished Revolution*.

She quietly hosted meetings in her apartment in 2004 and 2005 with a handful of activists to debate different ways of igniting that movement again so we could move forward and debate income security, work and family, child care, immigration, the security state, violence against women, and democracy – and then act on those issues. She did not think it had to be called NAC or look exactly like NAC. But she did know how much it was needed again ... perhaps more than ever. That was what she still wanted to debate while she was lugging around that damned oxygen tank. That remains her challenge to all of us.

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