

**11TH-HOUR LOBBYISTS**

# Fighters for Equal Rights Amendment

**BY BELLA STUMBO**

*Times Staff Writer*

SACRAMENTO—They're a curious lot—a band of women who spend their days patrolling the corridors of the State Capitol, hiding in doorways, camping out in offices, hanging around outside men's rooms, popping up at luncheons, springing through closing elevator doors, infiltrating committee hearings and pestering secretaries relentlessly.

They take insults, snubbings, apathy, ridicule and condescension as a matter of course. They wear blisters on their feet and holes in their shoes. And, though they get paid nothing and work almost full-time, they never give up.

Because eventually, they're certain, it will all pay off. Every time they corner a California senator, whether it's for five seconds or 30 minutes, they move a step closer to achieving their goal—which is to save the Equal Rights Amendment, proposed constitutional guarantee to women of total equality under the law, from its imminent death in the Senate Rules Committee, where it has been locked up solid since April, by a 3-2 vote.

Numbering anywhere from 6 to 15 on any given day, they represent, collectively, a loose-knit group of some 75 statewide organizations, total membership 500,000, called the California Coalition for ERA.

Individually, they fit no particular pattern. Some of the regulars are:

—Anita Miller, a slim, mild Sacramento mother of two teen-aged daughters and president of the state chapter of the American Assn. of University Women, an optimist who says, "Well, there have been issues that seemed doomed before, too."

### Would Bill of Rights Pass?

—Corinne Geeting, a tall, stately member of the Sacramento Community Commission for Women, who has felt her dignity occasionally compromised because "some of the Senators humor us—they pat us on the shoulder and call us 'girls' and act like the subject of ERA is some kind of a silly woman's joke."

—Jean Panzer, a jolly version of a favorite aunt, dressed in pink, representing the California Church Council and certain that "the Bill of Rights probably couldn't even pass this legislature."

—Susan Wallace and Cheriell Jensen, both young mothers, working women who travel to Sacramento as often as they can from the San Francisco area, where they represent the Southbay National Organization for Women.

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Plus a few men from time to time, husbands, friends and interested local attorneys. Most notably, Don Green, a young Common Cause lobbyist, and Coleman Blease of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Marshaling the whole effort is a dark serious-faced woman named Ida Casillas, aide to Assemblyman Walter Karabian (D-Los Angeles), original ERA sponsor in the legislature who has donated Ms. Casillas' services to the lobbying effort almost full time. As general of the troops, her small overcrowded office is headquarters for the campaign which, at the moment, amounts to a last-ditch, 11th-hour drive to get enough Senate signatures on a petition to influence Rules Committee Chairman James Mills (D-San Diego) to release ERA from his committee so that the 40-man Senate can vote on it. Or, perhaps, to sway one of the other two Rules Committee senators opposing ERA, Sens. Steven Teale (D-West Point) and Robert Lagomarsino (R-Ventura).

### Seven Signatures Secured

So far, after nearly a month of hustling, they have seven signatures, which inasmuch as they figure they are a mouse seeking to move the mountain anyway, is not bad.

Those senators are: Mervyn Dymally (D-Los Angeles), chief sponsor of the Senate ratification resolution, George Moscone (D-San Francisco), Anthony Beilenson (D-Beverly Hills), Arlen Gregorio (D-San Mateo), Clair Burgener (R-La Mesa), Nicholas Petris (D-Oakland) and Peter Behr (R-San Raphael).

Still, nobody expects seven names to carry much weight with the Rules Committeemen, who have declared ERA a legislative bag of worms, unfit for Senate consideration—despite the fact that the 92nd Congress, culminating debate that spanned 49 years, approved the amendment by the overwhelming margin of 354-23 in the House (October) and 84-8 in the Senate (March). So far 18 states of the 38 required have ratified.

Indeed, by most judgments, the ERA lobbyists will need three times as many signatures, at least 21 names on their petition, to even faze Sen. Mills, a man who is said to be firm in his opposition to the amendment but who is also said to honor political majorities.

Which is why the hustle around Room 440-F of the Capitol has hit new peaks of frenzy lately. The legislature could end in July and the lobbyists, seven down, still have 14 signatures to go.

On a recent early weekday morning, six of the women already had arrived for duty. They were sitting in a glum-faced semicircle, listening to Ida Casillas deliver a morning pep talk, which was in order because the going, truth to tell, was getting rough.

### **Strange Senate Tradition**

Nobody had gotten a new signature for days and, worse, nobody had even cornered a senator lately

"It can be the most maddening thing in the world," declared Anita Miller. "Most senators tell us they're for ERA, but they don't want to violate some strange Senate tradition by signing a letter that tells a Rules Committee chairman how to do his job." A letter asking the withdrawal of a bill from committee is a tactic that has almost never before been attempted, she added.

Mrs. Miller, who's been lobbying women's legislation around Sacramento for years, knows impatience is futile, but she was impatient anyway.

"It's a simple question of what's more important, their rules or human rights?" she sighed, expecting no answer.

Corinne Geeting sniffed primly. She has been snubbed, ignored and insulted enough times by senators to figure the answer to that is easy.

"Their rules matter more, of course, especially when it comes to ERA. Most senators don't even

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# Equal Rights Amendment Fighters

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understand what we're talking about, assuming they even listen to us."

For every single interview with a senator, they all agreed, it usually takes at least five futile, preliminary efforts.

"They're always in committees, they've got lunches with constituents, they've got planes to catch, anything at all can take priority," said Carolyn Heine, a brisk, no-nonsense member of the governor's California Commission on the Status of Women, a part-time sympathizer.

"I don't mind being snubbed and they can call us anything they like, so long as they sign the letter," declared Mrs. Geeting.

Don Green arrived. He doesn't have as much trouble getting a senator's ear, he said, but he may have more trouble being taken seriously.

## Young Lawyer

"I don't think some senators, deep down, can even believe I'm seriously for ERA," mused Green, a gray-suited, mustachioed young Sacramento lawyer.

"They discuss ERA seriously, of course, but I think the main reason they stand on procedure and refuse to sign the letter is that they don't think ERA is important. They just don't believe that women are really discriminated against in our society."

Or at least, he added, they think that what discrimination there is in employment, education and other areas can probably be eventually eradicated through piecemeal legislation or court case-by-court case under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Fourteenth Amendment (equal protection) or the Fifth Amendment (due process).



ANITA MILLER  
"... it can be maddening."

## Faulty Thinking

That line of thinking, said Green, in accord with every ERA advocate in America, is preposterously faulty. While it's true the courts could in theory extend the existing constitutional protections to women, the courts have, in fact, never shown any willingness to do so, he reiterated.

"We can wait another 200 years for existing guarantees to be applied to women," declared Susan Wallace, a member of the San Francisco area National Organization for Women and a nuclear fuels assistant in San Jose. "Or we can achieve full equality now, in a single fell swoop. The question is do we want women to be totally equal under the laws with men or not?"

Silence fell as they all pondered the question, which, all too often these days, seems like a moot point in the corridors of power in the most populous state of the union.

And, down to the last man, they genuinely can't see why it's come to this.



IDA CASILLAS  
"... we won't give up."

## The Fateful Lady

In the beginning, nobody even knew James Mills was opposed to the single-line Equal Rights Amendment, which reads "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

And they didn't find it out until the fateful day of the Rules Committee hearing on the amendment, wherein Mills denounced it as a bad measure which could possibly open a "Pandora's box" of legal problems. Congress had been hypocritical and reprehensive in submitting it to the states in the first place, declared Mills, a one-time junior high school teacher and father of two daughters.

ERA advocates, essentially, say it's just not so. The amendment merely would eradicate in a single move all legal distinctions based on sex, they say—either by eliminating such laws altogether or by extending them to men, too—thus insuring women of absolute equality in count-



CHERIELL JENSEN  
"... women are uniting."

less areas, ranging from property laws to employment and education.

ERA critics, on the other hand, say that in the course of wiping out all legal distinctions which discriminate unfairly against women ERA also will subject women to the draft, threaten child support and alimony laws, and, most controversially, abolish certain restrictive labor laws, such as hours worked and weights lifted, which now benefit low-skill female workers.

ERA, critics say, is a white, professional woman's liberty bill. In California, the chief organized opposition to ERA has come from the AFL-CIO, although other unions, notably the United Auto Workers, have supported it. And some women members of the AFL-CIO apparently do, too—four of them recently filed suit in Los Angeles against the union for using their dues to lobby against the amendment.

### Protective Laws

According to ERA advocates, those so-called protective laws serve more to keep women in low-paying, lesser positions than to protect them. And, besides, say the advocates, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII, already has invalidated such protective legislation based on sex.

They cite what court opinion there has been under the law so far as evidence that sooner or later all such laws will fall anyway, ERA or no ERA.

Insofar as the draft is concerned, say supporters, it is only fair that women should bear their fair share of responsibility as well as their rights. And just as no unfit man is sent to combat, neither will a frail woman be totting a gun. Fears that child support and alimony will be wiped out, they say, are unfounded. ERA simply will force courts to decide each case individually, instead of automatically favoring the woman. ERA, they say, is a bill for men, as well as women.

And the lobbyists say they'll keep on saying it, as long as the legislature is in session, as long as they have any hope at all.

### Women Uniting

And if there are days when they all feel absolutely demoralized at what seems like a futile effort, those days are rare, they all agreed.

"If Jim Mills isn't doing anything else for women he's at least helping us unite," declared Cheriell Jensen, an attractive, mini-skirted young environmental design consultant from Berkeley. "This is going to be a big election issue because women are going to want to know where their senator was when we needed him."

Already, they say, they are discovering women all over California are uniting in grass roots letter-writing campaigns, telephone marathons, public rallies and picket lines in front of senators' district offices. They have heard, too, that there's a recall movement being planned against Mills in San Diego.

The letters, they say, are most critical right now.

"The more letters flooding senators' offices, the better," declared Ms. Casillas who says that most senators already report a heavy deluge. "But the problem," she shrugged, "is that some of the senators dismiss any mail they get in favor of ERA as coming from bra-burning militants."

And, they all agreed, the issue of ERA is no women's liberation issue. It is an issue of woman's equal-

ity, an issue of basic human rights.

What will they do if they don't get any more signatures on their letter?

All faces fell. Their only recourse then, they say, is to hope some senator will introduce a formal withdrawal motion on the Senate floor—a measure that has never once succeeded in California Senate history.