

Virginia Carter, a Feminist Adviser to Norman Lear, Dies at 87

A physicist who headed a chapter of the National Organization for Women, she took a career detour to be a feminist voice in Mr. Lear's empire of socially aware sitcoms.

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By Richard Sandomir

Virginia Carter, a physicist whose activism for the National Organization for Women led the sitcom impresario Norman Lear to hire her in the early 1970s to be his feminist conscience as he presided over taboo-breaking shows that touched on sensitive social issues, died on Oct. 17 at her home in Redondo Beach, Calif. She was 87.

Her friend Martha Wheelock, a filmmaker, confirmed her death but did not specify a cause.

In 1973, Ms. Carter was at a turning point. Her success at Aerospace Corporation, a nonprofit think tank that advised the Air Force on space programs and satellite systems, was tempered by being underpaid and receiving inadequate credit for her work.

“Out of the depths of my own insecurities, I’d think, ‘Gee whiz, Virginia, you’re not good enough,’” she told The Chicago Tribune in 1978. “And I’d work harder and harder.”

But she had also been the president of the Los Angeles chapter of NOW, building its membership and fighting for feminist issues like the Equal Rights Amendment, which the California State Legislature [ratified](#) in November 1972.

“I began to change, to speak publicly,” she told The Tribune. “And I found people outside of physics.”

One of them was Frances Lear, a feminist activist who was Mr. Lear's wife at the time (the couple divorced in 1985). She suggested that Ms. Carter meet with her husband, who by then was producing sitcoms that sometimes touched on feminist and political themes — “All in the Family” and, to a much greater degree, “Maude.” But Ms. Carter wasn't immediately convinced.

“I had no idea who he was, and I didn't see why I should spend my precious time meeting someone just because his wife thought it would be a good idea,” she said in a 2008 interview with [McGill News](#), an alumni publication of McGill University in Montreal, where she received a bachelor's degree in math and physics in 1958.

But she agreed to meet Mr. Lear, and the encounter changed her life: He hired her to be an adviser with the title of director of creative affairs, installed her in an office next to his in the Century City neighborhood of Los Angeles and nearly doubled her salary.

In his 2014 autobiography, “Even This I Get to Experience,” Mr. Lear wrote that Ms. Carter “realized that she’d rocketed to the glass ceiling in science and when I met her in the early 1970s, she was thinking about working in another field.”

Even in accepting the job, though, she hedged a bit, taking a year’s leave of absence from Aerospace rather than resigning — “in case this was some crazy dream,” she said.

But she took to the new job quickly, bringing her feminist perspective to Mr. Lear’s growing sitcom empire, which also came to include “Sanford and Son,” “The Jeffersons,” “Good Times” and “Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman.”

Ms. Carter would sit in on his meetings and offer suggestions about scripts.

“I can change one sentence in a TV script and thousands of viewers will receive the impact,” she told The Los Angeles Times in 1974. “I see all the scripts, so statements that perpetuate conventional ideas about women’s image just don’t get by.”

In an episode of “Good Times,” America’s first sitcom featuring a two-parent Black family, Thelma Evans (played by Bern Nadette Stanis), the teenage daughter in the household, asks her father, James (John Amos, [who died in August](#)), if she should be a nurse, a ballet dancer or a teacher. Ms. Carter suggested that James Evans tell his daughter that she was bright enough to be a doctor.

“I’m still awed by this power,” said Ms. Carter, who eventually rose to a senior vice president position at Mr. Lear’s Tandem and TAT Productions.

She also drew on her own life, like her recent diagnosis of breast cancer, suggesting and inspiring a plotline for an episode of “All in the Family,” in which Edith Bunker ([Jean Stapleton](#)), the saintly wife of the show’s comically bigoted protagonist, Archie Bunker, found a lump in her breast. (What Edith feared was cancer turned out to be benign.)

Ms. Stapleton recalled watching Ms. Carter’s evolution from physics to sitcoms.

“She understood there was a lot to learn and that things might be difficult,” Ms. Stapleton told McGill News. “She took a lot of lip and she handled it well.”

Ms. Carter was also Mr. Lear’s liaison to activists who wanted their concerns reflected in his shows. Ms. Carter recalled one occasion when she was lobbied by the Rev. David Poindexter, who ran Population Communications International (now PCI Media), a nonprofit that promotes family planning in countries facing rapid population growth. As a result, in another episode of “All in the Family,” Archie’s son-in-law (Rob Reiner) got a vasectomy.

“David was messianic about overpopulation,” Ms. Carter told The New York Times in a 2018 interview for [Mr. Poindexter’s obituary](#).

Virginia Louise Carter was born on Nov. 18, 1936, in Arvida, Quebec. Her father, Thomas, was a senior electrical engineer at the Aluminum Company of Canada. Her mother, Jean (Dunlap) Carter, who was born in Japan to missionary parents, ran the home.

Her parents wanted her to be a nurse, but in enrolling at McGill, Ms. Carter chose to study math and physics. (She also played on the women's basketball team.) Despite her degree, however, the only job she could find out of college was as a clerk at Bell Telephone.

"I couldn't get a job worth a peanut," she said in [an interview](#) on a University of Southern California website in 2014. "All the guys in my class had wonderful science job offers, and I was a woman and therefore I was to be a clerk."

She moved to Los Angeles, where, upon earning a master's degree in physics in 1963 at U.S.C., her job prospects improved. By then she had begun working at the Douglas Aircraft Company (which later merged with McDonnell Aircraft to form McDonnell Douglas) and joined Aerospace about a year later, becoming the only female physicist on its technical staff.

She designed and developed density gauges for Air Force spacecraft and conducted research on high atmospheric conditions. But her feminist consciousness was also being raised. In one of her projects, a complex satellite experiment, the results "were reported by the head of my laboratory without ever mentioning my name," she recalled in an interview in 2013 with Ms. Wheelock, her filmmaker friend, for the [Veteran Feminists of America](#), a nonprofit dedicated to preserving the history of the feminist movement.

"In a way," she added, "that didn't surprise me because I was becoming acutely aware of the persistent discrimination against women as they struggled against what appeared to be failure in their chosen fields."

Out of her frustration, she joined the Los Angeles chapter of NOW in the late 1960s. "It was the most incredible relief to be among feminists," she told Ms. Wheelock. She soon became the chapter's president.

Ms. Carter spent about a dozen years with Mr. Lear, and became the head of his company's movie division, producing TV movies as well as "Afterschool Specials" for ABC, one of which earned her a Daytime Emmy nomination for writing. She shared a Primetime Emmy as executive producer of "[The Wave](#)," a 1981 TV film in which a high school teacher gives a lesson in fascism by creating a Nazi-like movement in his class. It [also won a Peabody Award](#).

In 1982, Ms. Carter was executive producer of "[Eleanor, First Lady of the World](#)," a TV movie about Eleanor Roosevelt (played by Ms. Stapleton) in the years after the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Ms. Carter eventually left television to help run J.O. Crystal, a synthetic ruby manufacturer, with her partner Judith Osmer, who started the company. Ms. Osmer and Ms. Carter met at Aerospace, where Ms. Osmer was a chemist.

“There were only five women in the whole company that did science,” Ms. Carter told the newspaper The Daily Breeze, of Torrance, Calif. “It was hard not to know each other.”

Ms. Osmer is her only known survivor.