

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

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DORIS THOM

1920-2017

City: Janesville

County: Rock

Doris Thom, who helped open higher-paying jobs to women in Wisconsin, was the first woman to hold leadership positions in her local labor unions.

Doris Schumacher was born in 1920 in Janesville, Wisconsin. Her father worked for the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad and was active in a labor union. After he died in a work-related accident, all Doris's mother was offered by her husband's employer was a free railroad pass—but she insisted that the company pay to support her family. Doris was inspired by her mother's successful struggle, because not many women at that time were able to fight big companies to get what they needed.

That inspiration continued throughout Doris's life. "My mother was a strong woman," she recalled years later; "apparently that's where I get it." Doris excelled at sports, but could not go to college because there were no athletic scholarships for women. In 1938, she married Hank Thom and took his last name. The two worked together to support their young family and save for their children's educations.

Doris Thom worked for Gilman Engineering in Janesville during World War II. She was not only a member of the Gilman labor union but also the first woman elected as the union's recording secretary and the first woman on its executive board. After her employer fired her because she was pregnant—a common practice in those times—Thom focused on raising her children and working seasonal jobs. She was able to go back to full-time work in 1955 at the General Motors Fisher Body Plant in Janesville.

Thom achieved important "firsts" for women at General Motors. In the 1960s, when she wasn't allowed to transfer from the all-female cushion department to a job in the all-male, higher-paying trim department, she filed a grievance through the Wisconsin Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC). Her grievance was successful, and eventually all of the plant's jobs were opened to women. Thom also became the first female committee member in United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 95, serving as recording secretary from 1961 to 1968.

Thom's activism in the feminist and labor movements continued through the rest of her life and included service on the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women (1971-1975). In 2001 she received the Catherine Conroy Award, which honors Wisconsin women who have worked for women's rights and labor rights. Thom died on November 15, 2017.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/doris-thom