

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

THEIR STORIES OUR LEGACY

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GENE COHEN BOYER

1925-2003

City: Beaver Dam, Milwaukee

County: Dodge, Milwaukee

Gene Cohen Boyer was an activist for women's rights, a successful businesswoman, and a founding member of multiple feminist organizations.

Boyer, born Gene Cohen in 1925, grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in Milwaukee. She learned business skills at a young age from her father, who managed a number of shoe stores, and went on to study journalism at UW-Madison.

In 1945, Gene married Burt Boyer. The couple opened a furniture store in Beaver Dam and ran it successfully for 32 years. Although she was an equal partner in the business, Gene was excluded from the local chamber of commerce because she was a woman. That experience moved her to become an activist for women's rights. Over the years she helped to start and run many feminist organizations, including the Wisconsin Women's Network, the Wisconsin Business Women's Coalition, the Jewish Women's Coalition, the National Organization for Women (NOW), Wisconsin's branch of NOW, and the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund. She advocated for such causes as the Equal Rights Amendment, sexual assault reform, marital property reform, reproductive rights, sex education, and ending violence against women.

Boyer was most passionate about women's economic equality. In the early 1980s she sold the furniture store and started a consulting company that focused on helping women in business. She advised women to "get in by the rules and play by the rules," but then "change the rules."

Boyer received many awards for her activism. In 1985, she was named National Women-in-Business Advocate of the Year by the Reagan administration. She served on the Planning Committee on the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1994-1995, and in 1997 she was named Wisconsin Stateswoman of the Year by the Wisconsin Women's Network. She died in 2003 at the age of 78.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/gene-cohen-boyer