Lessons from the Second Wave

What the next Minnesota women’s movement can learn from the last one
A Minnesota first -- but she was not alone.

Rosalie Wahl typified a generation of women who yearned for more opportunity -- and did something about it.
The girl from Birch Creek

Rosalie was:
* Born Sara Rosalie Erwin on Aug. 27, 1924 in Gordon, KS
* Separated from her father and older sisters after her mother died in 1928
* Raised by her maternal grandparents, Harry and Effie Patterson of Birch Creek
* Witness to a tragedy at age eight that would mold her ideas about justice and family obligation
War and tragedy shaped her

- Rosalie graduated from high school in 1942 and enrolled at the University of Kansas that fall.
- A year later, engaged to be married, she returned to Birch Creek as a teacher.
- Fiancé Eldon Peck died in an air force training accident in Nov. 1943.
“Yeasty days”

- Rosalie returned to the University of Kansas as a sociology major.
- She became a Quaker, edited the student newspaper, headed the YWCA as it created the first racially integrated housing on campus.
- She met Ross Wahl in the fall of 1945. They married the following summer.
- Caught up in utopian vision for an intentional community, the Wahls moved to Circle Pines in February 1949.
The imperative to educate four children and a desire for fuller participation in civic life landed Rosalie at William Mitchell College of Law in 1962. While there, she had her fifth child, Jenny. She graduated from law school in 1967 -- one of two women in her class -- and went to work as an appellate-level public defender.
In 1972, Rosalie returned to William Mitchell to found the school’s first criminal law clinic, a practicum for students. She became a nationally renown leader in the clinical legal education movement.
A movement arrives
Women on the bench?

The Minnesota Women Lawyers was founded in 1972 with the aim of securing the appointment of women to the state’s judiciary. Minnesota had one female district court judge that year, Suzanne Sedgwick of Hennepin County, who attained office by election. A handful of women had served as municipal judges, but no governor had appointed a woman to a district court post.
Gov. Rudy Perpich vowed to open doors for women -- and one of the first he opened was to the state Supreme Court. He appointed Rosalie Wahl to the high court in June 1977.

“Now I know it is possible to soar....” -- Wahl’s acceptance address
Rosalie had to stand for election in 1978. Three men challenged her in the primary, two sitting judges and one former DFL attorney general. They openly questioned her qualifications. The nastiness caused a backlash in Rosalie’s favor. She won with 57 percent of the vote.
Accelerating the wave

- 17 years on the court
- 529 opinions
- Advocate for justice “from the bottom up”
- 1989 Gender Fairness Task Force
- 1993 Racial Bias Task Force
- The face of justice in Minnesota
The Second Wave crests

- Rosalie retired in 1994 from the first state Supreme Court in the nation to have a female majority.
- By the 1990s, one-third of the members of the Minnesota Legislature are women.
- More than half of the students at Minnesota law and medical schools are women.
- By the 1990s, Minnesota boasts the highest share of women in the workforce in the nation.
And yet …

….little changed in the workplace for most women:

• A majority of low-income workers are female.
• A majority of workers without paid sick leave are female.
• A minority of workers, male and female, have paid parenting leave.
• Caregiving is a risky activity for many women employees.
The Minnesota Women’s Economic Security Act was the most significant bill of its kind in the country in 2014. Among its provisions:

• Unpaid parental leave after birth or adoption expanded from six to 12 weeks.
• Larger employers required to provide reasonable accommodation to pregnant workers.
• Stepped-up enforcement of equal pay laws.
• “Gag rules” banned for employees discussing their compensation.
• Employees allowed to use sick leave to care for sick grandchild or parent-in-law.
It takes a movement

What the Third Wave might learn from the Second, and from Rosalie Wahl:

• Sisterhood matters.
• Optimism is an act of will -- and it matters.
• It takes work to sustain idealism.
• Putting women in leadership posts is necessary but not sufficient to affect change.
• Organize!
Rosalie Wahl
1924-2013