

## Women have long been a force at SPJ

### PATRICIA GALLAGHER NEWBERRY

**S**ince the days of Nellie Bly — and likely before — women have been a force in journalism.

They lead newsrooms. They win Pulitzer Prizes. They fill pages and screens with high-quality, can't-miss coverage. And in my world — journalism higher ed — they fill far more classroom seats than their male counterparts.

So, too, have women been a force in SPJ.

In the 110-year history of this organization, both student and pro chapters have been led by able SPJ women. So too with our boards, committees and communities.

But, like the industry it pulls from, women were not always welcome in SPJ.

SPJ was, in fact, created as an honorary fraternity — that is, a male-only brotherhood — in 1909 at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana.

“The philosophy of the founders that Sigma Delta Chi was an organization of men bound together ‘in a true fraternity spirit’ dominated the thinking of their thousands of heirs for more than 50 years,” Bert N. Bostrom wrote in “Talent, Truth and Energy,” a history of SPJ from 1959-84.

That true spirit started to wear thin by the 1960s, as women pushed against other long-standing barriers to entry. Bostrom laid out the battle that led SPJ to welcome women in 1969.

National leaders wanted more members. Women, they observed, made up a quarter to a third of newsroom staffs. In 1964, San Diego chapter secretary Kenneth C. Reiley wrote that “honorable, ethical and dedicated journalists ... should not be discriminated against just because they wear short pants.”

Not exactly a ringing endorsement, but it set events in motion.

By 1965, Reiley, now on the national membership committee, tried twice, without success, to get the committee to vote in women. That November, he coauthored a resolution at the national conference in Los Angeles, instructing the board to admit women by the next year's conference in Pittsburgh. Once named membership chair, Reiley faced plenty of pushback.

Among his critics was one George Wolpert — who'd gotten SPJ's highest member honor, the Wells Key, in 1962.

“The danger of becoming social is imminent if we admit women,” Wolpert wrote in a letter to all members. Admitting women, he argued, would cause SPJ to lose its virility, dilute its strength and sacrifice its distinctions.

Women in Communications (then called Theta Sigma Phi) sided with Wolpert, concerned about losing their members to SPJ.

Mid-1966 the board voted 9-2 against changing bylaws to admit women. Come Pittsburgh, that November, convention delegates followed suit, voting one try down 96-47 and a second measure down 49-47.

The pro-women contingent couldn't even get a resolution to delegates in 1967. In 1968 they attempted a referendum, mailing a ballot to all 179 chapters to vote on whether to add women. That failed, too, 67-35.

At the 1968 convention in Atlanta, delegates kicked the issue to 1969, voting that delegates at the next year's convention in San Diego should take it up again.

By May 1969 the board had finally come around, voting unanimously to admit women. A month later, confronted by picketers, then-President William B. Arthur went public: “My single platform for this year is to see that women are admitted to SDX.”

Wolpert, meantime, remained convinced women would be the ruin of SPJ, arguing they “are sojourners on the way to matrimony, motherhood and matriarchy.”

On Nov. 15, 1969, after a two-hour debate, delegates in San Diego finally admitted women by voice vote, estimated at 75% in favor and 25% against.

Wolpert was not gracious in defeat. He sent Arthur a Barbie doll, dressed in a low-cut outfit. His note: “To Bill Arthur: The man who became confused ... and allowed a weak resolution to become a constitutional amendment and tear to shambles a great he-man Society.”

But women journalists were not confused. They flocked to SPJ — with 470 signing on by April 1970 and 1,100 by July.

Within the decade, the board seated its first female president, with Jean Otto's 1979-80 term. Ten more followed: Carolyn Carlson, 1989-90; Georgiana Vines, 1992-93; Wendy Myers, 1998-99; Kyle Niederpruem, 1999-2000; Christine Tatum, 2006-07; Hagit Limor, 2010-11; Dana Neuts, 2014-15; Lynn Walsh, 2016-17; Rebecca Baker, 2017-18; and J. Alex Tarquinio, 2018-19. I am pleased to serve as No.12.

As for Wolpert, he remained on the wrong side of history. In 1983 — the year I got a journalism degree and started my years in newspapers — he reaffirmed his distaste for women in SPJ in a letter to Bostrom. He died five days after mailing it. ✍️



**Patricia Gallagher Newberry,**

2019-20 national SPJ president, is area coordinator and associate lecturer in the journalism program at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Connect on Twitter:  
[@pattinewberry](https://twitter.com/pattinewberry)

Email:  
[pattinewberryspj@gmail.com](mailto:pattinewberryspj@gmail.com)