The Greater Pittsburgh Area Chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) provided leadership in the late 1960s as women struggled for equal rights. Wilma Scott Heide, a behavioral scientist and activist, founded the Pittsburgh chapter in September 1967. By the start of 1968, the Pittsburgh chapter had grown to 40 members, with another 40 on its mailing list. Over the next 12 months, chapter members acquired leadership skills and developed an effective grassroots organization.

The growth of the chapter created an aura of symbolic capital for Heide. She was elected to the NOW Board and appointed chair of the membership committee at the annual conference in December 1967. NOW also accepted her invitation to hold its next board meeting in Pittsburgh, headquartered at the Hotel Webster Hall in Oakland on January 27-28, 1968.

Employment Discrimination

Cindy Hill was developing a legal case against the Chartiers Valley School District when Wilma Scott Heide recruited her to become a founding member of the Greater Pittsburgh Area Chapter of NOW. Hill, a high school music teacher who had reached her salary ceiling, requested a sabbatical from her teaching job to earn a master’s degree. She completed the degree, but was fired by the school district after having a baby while on sabbatical. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette ran a front-page story about the public hearing with a photo of Hill and her baby. While her case galvanized support among feminists locally, she also gained encouragement at the state and national level. Wilma Scott Heide arranged for Hill to attend the annual NOW conference where she addressed a national audience. Betty Friedan, NOW’s president, held a news conference to announce the organization’s support of the case and the Pennsylvania State Education Association provided financial assistance for legal counsel.

In August 1968, County Court Judge Benjamin Lencher ruled that Chartiers Valley School District must reinstate Hill for the fall term. Her experience became symbolic of the conditions surrounding women’s employment in Pittsburgh.

Discrimination in Public Accommodations

In the 1960s, it was common for restaurants to have separate dining areas for women and men. Men’s dining rooms or grilles were a symbol of male bonding. Following the leadership of blacks “sitting in” at segregated dining counters, women likewise began demanding equal treatment. Members of Pittsburgh NOW identified the Stouffer’s restaurant in Oakland as a target for their grievance in part because Wilma Scott Heide worked nearby. Male diners were escorted to a private dining room, but women had to wait to be seated in a public area. Chapter members developed multiple tactics to protest the practice. First, Heide met with the manager of the Stouffer’s who explained the policy came from higher management and “that sometimes women were allowed but generally they preferred not to sit in the men’s section because of the possibility of bad
Next, NOW wrote to the manager of the Stouffer’s chain protesting a males-only dining room. He replied that the practice “was tradition and that some women preferred this.”

Outraged NOW members staged a “sit in” at the Stouffer’s Men’s Grille in Oakland to draw attention to what they believed to be a blatant example of separate and unequal treatment. Heide chose the date for the sit-in to coincide with the campaign to have sex discrimination in public accommodations banned in Pittsburgh.

The *Pittsburgh Press* provided the visibility they sought for their cause by running an article with a photo of NOW members “sitting in” at the Stouffer’s restaurant. The article quoted Heide, who said that “most working women have less time for lunch than men and I don’t see why they have to wait in line to be seated when men are shuffled to a reserved room [in] just one of the many indignities women have to accept.”

One NOW member remarked, “Anyone who doubts relevance of this action to NOW’s goals need only think of black people’s indignation at their traditional exclusion from public accommodations labeled ‘white only.’”

**Pittsburgh Anti-Discrimination Ordinance**

Pittsburgh already had a strong anti-discrimination ordinance at the start of 1968 that outlawed discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations on many criteria—but not sex. Wilma Scott Heide began a campaign to have gender made a protected category. Heide, Thelma Isaacs, and two other NOW members met with David Washington, executive director of the Pittsburgh Commission on Human Relations, to initiate action to amend the ordinance. She also met with Florence Reizenstein, a member of the Commission on Human Relations. Not only was Reizenstein supportive of the idea, she urged NOW to
request hearings with the city. Heide intended to do so, but encouraged NOW members to do their homework before requesting a hearing. They needed to know what kinds of information the commission wanted in order to evaluate their request, and they also needed to solicit support from other organizations.

They observed City Council meetings and successfully recruited the YWCA, the ACLU, and the Allegheny County Council for Civil Rights to join Pittsburgh NOW in petitioning to add sex to the ordinance. After six months, the Pittsburgh Commission on Human Relations finally scheduled hearings. The Pittsburgh chapter had two and one-half hours to make its case. NOW chose to rely on its members’ expertise. Gerald Gardner, a mathematician, presented data on occupational segregation by sex and resulting pay differentials. Sandra Bem, a psychologist, testified on the psychological impact of sex discrimination. Wilma Scott Heide took a different approach. After speaking for nearly an hour, she appealed to the commission members’ commitment to human rights:

“Most working women have less time for lunch than men and I don’t see why they have to wait in line to be seated when men are shuffled to a reserved room [in] just one of the many indignities women have to accept.”

Members of the Pittsburgh Commission on Human Relations were persuaded by the testimony they heard and submitted an amendment to the Pittsburgh City Council requiring fair practices in employment, housing, and public accommodations for persons of both sexes. It would take another six months before the amended ordinance was signed into law, but Wilma Scott Heide and NOW members began planning issue campaigns to challenge sex discrimination in Pittsburgh. Together they established the Greater Pittsburgh Area NOW chapter as the leading organization in the struggle for women’s equality in Pittsburgh.

Patricia Ulbrich, Ph.D., is director of In Sisterhood: the Women’s Movement in Pittsburgh©, an oral history project. For more information about the project go to http://insisterhood.info or contact her at pat@insisterhood.info.

5 Vince Gagetta, “Her ‘Mistake’-A Baby: Teacher Says Battle was Real ‘Education.’” Pittsburgh-Post Gazette, 19 August 1968, 1.
9 Interview, Joann Evangardner, 2008.
12 City of Pittsburgh, Ordinance No. 75 Sections 2(A)(1) (2) and Section 2(B). University of Pittsburgh Archive Service Center: JoAnn Evangardner and Gerald H.F. Gardner Papers. AIS.2001.09, Box 25, Folder 22.
15 Heide announced at the chapter meeting on April 16 that the Commission on Human Relations was too busy to schedule a hearing. It is likely the social turmoil in Pittsburgh following Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death raised issues that demanded the commission’s immediate attention.