

# TODAY'S WOMAN



**KIM HIRSH**

ABOUT WOMEN

## Former coaches know persistence pays dividends

"Remember this?" Lea Dickson says to her friend, Barbara Hall, as she pulls out an old newspaper photo of a about a dozen girls in basketball uniforms lined up on school bleachers, with Hall, their coach, in the back.

"Oh my God," Hall says, her voice softening at the memory. "My first team."

"That's what started it all."

The year was 1973, and Dickson and Hall, physical education teachers in Stratford, began coaching that school system's first girls' sports teams. Dickson took on basketball and softball at Bunnell High, and Hall coached basketball and swimming at Stratford High.

The teams excelled: Dickson's softball players went undefeated, and Hall's basketball team won the league championship. But something wasn't right.

Dickson and Hall were being paid about \$250 a season for each girls' sport. The pay for coaches of the boys' teams? About \$750.

"I felt devalued and I just wasn't used to that," says Hall. "I could never get used to that."

When a young New Haven attorney named Susan Meredith visited Bunnell, Hall and Dickson told her their story. Meredith had recently helped set up an organization called the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund. She told the coaches they had a clear-cut case of discrimination.

The result of that talk was a four-year legal battle in which Dickson and Hall — both untenured teachers — would end up filing complaints against or suing every one of their bosses: the schools' principals, the athletic director, the superintendent of schools and the Board of Education.

Like their teams, they were organized, persistent and tough. And they won.

A judge ordered the school system to pay each woman about \$1,500 in back pay, and to restructure its sports program to make sure girls' teams had facilities, equipment and other services equal to the boys' teams.

Dickson *et. al.* vs. the Stratford Board of Education, one of the earliest cases of its kind in the country, sparked an upgrading of girls' sports teams throughout the state.

The case was among the first victories for CWEALF, a pioneer among women's legal rights organizations nationwide. The group, which opened at Yale's Dwight Hall in 1973 with a \$37,000 grant from the New Haven Foundation, would go on to win many, many other battles.

Because of lawsuits or complaints by CWEALF: a New Haven bus company hired the first female municipal bus driver in the area in 1975; the New Haven fire and police departments were forced to change job requirements considered discriminatory, thereby opening the way for women police and firefighters; and the Chesire Board of Education eliminated a clause in its teachers' contract that awarded health benefits to a woman only if she could prove she was a "head of household."

CWEALF even pressured this newspaper to change its classified page, which until 1976 still listed jobs in columns titled "female" (secretaries and house cleaners) and "male" (everything else).

CWEALF, which now focuses on changing public policy and educating the community, is celebrating its 20th anniversary at 6 p.m. Saturday in the Carousal at Lighthouse Point in New Haven. (For tickets, call 247-6090.)

Dickson and Hall, who still teach but don't coach, say the lawsuit changed their lives by giving them more confidence and motivation to get involved in their schools and communities. They spoke of an education award and appointments to local boards.

"Well, now we sound like we're tooting our own horns," Dickson said.

"Why not?" Hall responded. "The guys do it all the time."

She said that when students today ask her whether you can really make a difference, she tells them about Dickson *et. al.* vs. the Stratford Board of Education.



Lea Dickson, left, and Barbara Hall.