



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: MAINE RELAY 711

Lois Galgay Reckitt

38 Myrtle Avenue

South Portland, ME 04106

Cell Phone: (207) 712-2474

Lois.Reckitt@legislature.maine.gov

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Testimony of Rep. Lois Galgay Reckitt introducing

LD 1412, Resolution, Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of Maine Establishing That All Maine Residents Have Equal Rights Under the Law

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary

Good morning, Senator Carney, Representative Moonen and esteemed colleagues on the Judiciary Committee. My name is Lois Galgay Reckitt, and I am the Representative for House District 122, which is the ocean end of South Portland. I stand before you today as the proud and persistent sponsor of **LD 1412, Resolution, Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of Maine Establishing That All Maine Residents Have Equal Rights Under the Law.**

I am asking you to take a journey with me this morning. It is the story, much abbreviated, of how I ended up before you today – in this state, in this room – asking you to open your hearts – to help me take the remaining steps with joy in my heart.

It was a miracle, unfortunately seldom seen these days. I grew up poor, but my father worked three jobs and my mom took in sewing. I spent my childhood summers in a \$40/week tiny cottage beside a tidal river in Goose Rocks Beach. When I was 7 years old, I told my mother I wanted to move to Maine. She suggested I wait until I grew up. I taught swimming standing in the ocean as soon as I was old enough. I learned to love the ocean. I learned to love Maine.

At age 23, with a degree in marine ecology, I married a Coastguardsman stationed in South Portland and moved to Maine. That same year, 1968, I began my first “real” job teaching Marine Biology, Marine Botany and Food Science at what was then called Southern Maine Vocational Technical Institute. It was one of my favorite jobs – even though that year there were only 11 women students on campus and three women faculty, two of us part-time.

The next year I did a stereotypical “whither thou goest” and moved to Chicago. Thankfully, we returned six months later, and in 1971, we bought the house I have lived in to this day. Unfortunately, by that time, job prospects for women were even more scarce – and I needed to work. So, having taught swimming throughout my teen years, I took a job as swimming director at the YWCA in Portland. I stayed there nine years.

One night in 1971, a woman named Wilma Scott Heide, newly elected president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), came to speak at what was then the University of Maine at Portland-Gorham. That night changed the entire course of my life. During Wilma's speech, she totally transposed gender roles – and it was shocking to the ears. During discussion, she explained that as far as she could tell, the only sex-specific jobs were as follows: only women could be wet nurses – and only men could be sperm donors. Aside from those roles, all else was interchangeable. Wilma had just come from the U.S. Congress, where she participated in protests that finally released the Equal Rights Amendment to the states for ratification after nearly 50 years of efforts. It had been introduced in Congress every year since the year of my mother's birth, 1923.

The next night, a small group of us met at the YWCA and founded the first chapter of NOW in Maine, Southern Maine NOW. At the founding meeting I agreed to be the treasurer of the chapter – little did I know the path on which that would propel my life. After my stint as treasurer, in 1971 I became president, in 1973 state coordinator. In the latter role, I helped lead the efforts for ratification in Maine – unsuccessfully in 1973, successfully in 1974. In 1976, I was elected to the national board, where I served as a volunteer for more than a decade. I lobbied in South Carolina, picketed the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, marched in Springfield, Illinois, in a borrowed 1890s bathing suit, and picketed the Freedom Train in Portland, Maine.

Although NOW's primary focus was equality for women, nearly all of us believed in intersectionality before it was characterized by that term. Our vision was equality for all – but as the largest group “left out” by the US Constitution, despite Abigail Adams' lobbying of her husband John to “Remember the Ladies” in the writing of our federal Constitution, we aimed to fix that grievous error by passing the Equal Rights Amendment.

When the arbitrary deadline for federal ratification passed, many did – and still do – continue to fight for federal ratification.

When federal ratification stalled, states began to introduce initiatives to strengthen and protect the position of and possibilities for women. These initiatives vary in their words and occasionally in their scope.

As most of you are aware, I was chosen by the voters of part of South Portland to represent them here in Augusta in the election of 2016.

For three terms in the 128th, 129th and 130th Legislatures, I have introduced and fought for constitutional equality for Maine women – but because we need a two-thirds vote in both the House and Senate, I have never reached the next step – a vote by the citizens of Maine. To my recollection, only one Republican, Senator Kim Rosen of Bucksport, has ever answered the call to “Let the People Vote.”

I pride myself on being a very determined person. Deserting my core beliefs, like equality, is not in my playbook. Last November I watched as the state of Nevada took a novel approach and sent a broader articulation of constitutional equality to Nevada voters. Voters there subsequently ratified that state's proposed equality amendment by a significant margin.

I am a patient and persistent legislator, and I am not averse to new ways of advocating important ideas. I thank the Nevada Legislature for showing me a new way.

So – this year’s proposal for constitutional equality in Maine is broader, more inclusive and more appropriate for the diverse citizenry that now comprises Maine. This proposal before you seeks to make constitutional what this Legislature has already made, over the years, statutory reality through the work of the Maine Human Rights Commission.

LD 1412 represents a straightforward yet strong concept that can ensure that the winds of change cannot easily be dismissed. Equal rights in Maine will encompass all our citizens. We will prohibit the denial or abridgment by the State or any political subdivision of the State of equal rights based on the actual or perceived race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, physical or mental disability, ancestry or national origin of an individual.

This is my final term in the Maine House. Let it end with a vote for justice and equality – and make more permanent what has been accepted by the populace and the Legislature as appropriate. I ask this committee to send LD 1412 to a vote – and I urge you and all the members of the House and Senate to “Let the People Speak.”