

Women who brought 'The Dinner Party' to Chicago reflect on 30th anniversary of iconic work

By **Barbara Brotman**, Tribune reporter

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"That was our bookstore and gift shop," [Hedy Ratner](#) said, pointing to Sandmeyer's Bookstore. "Which wasn't a bookstore then."

"It was a warehouse," said Ann Armstrong.

The whole building was, recalled the women standing in front of the Franklin Building, at 720 S. Dearborn St. in Printers Row.

But for five months in 1981, it was something else: the Chicago exhibition space for "The Dinner Party," the iconic feminist artwork by Judy Chicago.

The women were members of the committee that brought it here. It took them two years, cost nearly \$350,000 and involved 1,300 volunteers. They had to find a location, rehab it to house the huge installation, raise money, negotiate contracts, produce exhibition material, deal with labor unions, sell tickets and hire security.

"We had to create it from scratch," said Ratner, 70, co-president of the Women's Business Development Center, who was the project's fundraising chair.

They did it. And made a profit.

On Thursday night, at a dinner party of their own in the Franklin Building, they will celebrate the 30th anniversary of the exhibit and Thursday's launch of a website they made to tell how they did it.

"The Dinner Party," now on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, is an enormous triangular banquet table with 39 place settings representing women the artist felt had been left out of history. It sits atop a tile floor with the names of another 999 overlooked women.

Thirty years ago, with its strong feminist message and its images based on female genitalia, the artwork was controversial. After its opening exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, it went into storage.

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Chicago, read an article in the Tribune about it

"When I think about it, I wonder how we did it," said Jean Hunt, 80, founder of the Chicago Area Women's History Council, who was the project's director. "I don't know that I would do it again. I don't know how any of us had the nerve, the guts, the willingness to do this. But we did it."

When former members of the steering committee went to the Brooklyn Museum a few years ago to see "The Dinner Party," however, they were dismayed. The exhibition "doesn't mention us," said Bette Cerf Hill, 74, an artist and the founder of the Printers Row Book Fair (now the Chicago Tribune Printers Row Lit Fest), who was the site chair.

"The whole exhibit is about women being written out of history, and here we were being written out of history," Ratner said.

Through her publicist, Judy Chicago said "it is not customary in the art world for people who help with exhibitions to receive public credit," but that she herself did so. The flyleaf of her book "The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation" lists people who helped exhibit and preserve the piece, including grass-roots groups in the cities that mobilized to show it. Among those credited are Hunt, Roslyn Group founder Diann DeWeese Smith and Royal Faubion, the developer who donated the site.

The Chicago group decided to save its own history. With a grant from the fund they started at the Chicago Foundation for Women with the exhibition's \$27,000 in profits, they made a radio segment for the Women's Media Group's "The Feminist Lens" program on WFMT and built a website (DinnerPartyProjectChicago.org).

They tell how members of the Roslyn Group incorporated as the Roslyn Group for Arts and Letters and mounted the exhibit. The committee met every Tuesday night for two years. "They wanted to put women back in history, where they deserve to be," said Zoe Keithley, 76, a steering committee member who is now a writer in California. "It was righting a wrong."

Only a few of the women were paid for their work, and then not much. Their reward came when 70,000 people showed up to see "The Dinner Party," some in below-zero weather — so many that the run was extended five weeks.

"We would have busloads of people coming in from out of town, from Milwaukee, from Iowa," Hunt said.

A male art teacher who was a friend of Hill's chartered a bus from southern Illinois. He told Hill later that he didn't understand why some of the women in the group were crying on the way home.

"This was the absolute height, in a sense, of the women's movement," said Hunt, a retired teacher of history in the City Colleges of Chicago.

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... remained friends. They hope the story of "The

"Young women today, many of them ... don't want to be called feminists," said Ann Armstrong, 69, the project's fundraiser. She hopes the story of the feminists who brought "The Dinner Party" to Chicago encourages them to think otherwise.

The 30th anniversary, said Hunt, "has a sort of poignant aspect to it, in the sense that all of us have real and true concerns about the future of this country."

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