

Award: Lifetime Achievement Award
Recipient: Esther Patt
Presenter: Claudia Lennhoff

Good evening everyone. I'm Claudia Lennhoff and I'm the Executive Director of Health Care Consumers.

It is my pleasure and honor this evening to present the Lifetime Achievement Award. This is not an award that we give very frequently. The Lifetime Achievement Award recognizes an individual who has dedicated his or her life to the pursuit of social justice, and in doing so, has made concrete improvements in people's lives and our community and society. Tonight, we recognize Esther Patt with the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Esther is an incredible presence in our community. She is one of the first activists I met almost 20 years ago when I first became involved with Health Care Consumers. I knew immediately that she was someone whose side I wanted to be on – not just because she was right, but because she is formidable. If you know Esther Patt, you know that she is a force to be reckoned with – she is fast-talking, hard-working, whip-smart, tenacious, and unrelenting. Esther is always on the side of the people; on the side of justice.

Many of you may know Esther as the leader of the Champaign-Urbana Tenant Union, a past member of the Urbana City Council, past president and current steering committee member of the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, past president of the local chapter of the National Organization for Women, and former Board Member of Health Care Consumers. Esther served on our Board for 10 of our most formative years, including the years when we organized to create the Champaign County Public Health Department. More recently, Esther served on the Board of PACE, and was involved in the local Campaign for Comprehensive Education. Esther is currently involved with East Central IL Safe Schools Alliance, which promotes safety for and supports LGBT youth.

You wouldn't know by looking at her, but Esther has dedicated almost 40 years of her life working for social justice, civil rights, and civil liberties. She got started with a bang in 1976 when she joined the Equal Rights

Amendment Coalition, became a volunteer at the Champaign-Urbana Tenant Union and helped create the Abortion Rights Coalition to fight the cut-off of Medicaid coverage of abortions.

In 1979, Esther began working at the Tenant Union on a full-time basis, and only recently retired from that job – kind of. She still works at the C-U Tenant Union every week, so we get to see her in our shared office in downtown Champaign.

Esther's social justice work includes serving on the Urbana City Council for over 11 years, from 1994 to 2005.

Just prior to becoming a City Council Member -- after years of work and with the invaluable help of Marya Ryan, the Tenant Union won passage of a comprehensive Landlord-Tenant ordinance in Urbana. Urbana tenants have greater rights and protections because of this ordinance.

Esther's accomplishments while on the City Council, include:

- Changing the City's building code to require all new apartment buildings to be constructed in compliance with fair housing standards for people with disabilities.
- Preserving the Human Rights Ordinance's non-discrimination protection for people who use Section 8 or other housing vouchers to subsidize their rent (the City of Champaign could take a page out of Esther's book).
- Winning relocation assistance for 76 mobile home owners who were displaced by redevelopment of Lincoln Mobile Home Park. (While Esther was dissatisfied with the final relocation program, 85% of the households received more money for relocation than they would have received if she hadn't fought successfully for a relocation plan).
- Expanding the U-Cycle recycling program to people living in apartment buildings.

In preparing for the presentation of this award, I asked Esther what issues are nearest and dearest to her heart. Here is what Esther had to say:

“I've spent my life working to compel people to embrace the notion that tenants are people too. And nearest and dearest to my heart is the struggle to compel people to embrace the notion that no woman is a free and equal member of American society if the government interferes with her decision about how to address a problem pregnancy. Overall, I am motivated by the desire to end injustice.”

Our community, and people who have never met Esther and may never know her name, are better off than they otherwise would have been because of the work of this fiery, stubborn, brilliant, fast-talking, amazing woman who has dedicated her life to working for social justice.

Esther, tonight we recognize you, and thank you, for almost 40 years of activism and social justice work by recognizing you with the Health Care Consumers Lifetime Achievement Award. We can't wait to see what you do with the next few decades. Please join me in congratulating and thanking Esther Patt.