

LEARNING GROWING SERVING

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I retired in 2015. This momentous decision awakened memories and created much introspection over the life I have lived, the choices I have made, and the paths I have chosen. And it is all surrounded by the women's movement: gains made, understanding granted, recognition of the problem, and my progression through it all; my understanding of who I was and am, my contributions toward the general good, and the influences of the greatest significance.

“A Woman's Nation Pushes Back from the Brink,” the newest Shriver Report, nicely sums up the societal, economic, and business status of women today. While women have made great strides forward, many still find themselves tottering on the brink. Contributing factors such as pay inequality, gender bias, job discrimination, pregnancy discrimination, the glass ceiling, and pre-established gender roles have resulted in a general sense of economic insecurity and the loss of an untapped pool of workforce potential for our communities, employers, and nation, as women find themselves struggling to keep their heads above water.

When I think back to my adolescence, I do not remember ever feeling that I could not do or be anything I wanted. I was lucky enough to have parents who assumed I would continue my education in college and obtain a degree. My mom was a college-educated woman; she graduated early from high school and went right into Queens College as a sixteen-year-old. I don't think she ever ques-

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tioned her life's path at the time because she was too busy being a "good girl" and searching for approval from her parents. She chose to marry and have children, and entered the teaching profession when family finances required. My dad was never able to achieve a formal education and, I think, was upset by the fact that he could not support his family on his paycheck alone. He was always adamant about his role as the family protector and "the boss" of the house (a role that brought us into conflict as I grew older!). It always seemed to be an issue my mom would try to work around, and I think it limited her professional growth. She was so smart and such a wonderful teacher that she could have been an administrator, a professor, or a teacher trainer. Lost opportunities and potential! I watched and listened but, at the time, only skimmed the surface of the implications of my dad's role. What did I care if he needed to see himself as the "head of the household?"

I, too, was searching for approval from others from an early age. "Be a good girl, Susan." I think girls were, and sadly, still are, raised to be the pleasers, the mediators, the givers. The problem, as I see it now, is that, though able to access a college education (a huge gift from my parents), I was really not "free" to achieve anything other than the expected. I went to a Catholic co-educational college preparatory high school, where I never broke the rules and never even laughed when others dared to. My choices seemed to me to be limited to college or the novitiate of the Sisters of Charity, which some of my classmates chose. I won a Regents Scholarship and the World History Medal for highest GPA, and was an A student, but not a thinking student!

I was living within the established societal bubble, as were many of my contemporaries. I had been conditioned by life to see "women's roles" as my only possibility. I was going to be a teacher, like my mother, or a nurse, like my aunt. I was going to get married and have a family. I was not going to go into business or be a mathematician or a scientist. The sad thing is that I never looked for a different possibility, because I was happy with my choices. I knew I was smart, and assumed I would be independent and capable of support-

ing myself—if I had to. The paradigm didn't shift for me until much later in adulthood. I never considered breaking the rules or stepping away from the norm. I was a good girl. Women today are still being constrained by this paradigm, though to a somewhat lesser degree. It has started to shift slowly within our society, but we have not yet arrived at complete change.

My college years welcomed the nascent women's movement, and I began to listen to Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug. I was not, however, ready to burn my bra or move out of my comfort zone, having wrapped up my future in a pretty package. Graduation, teaching, maybe marriage, children. Looking back now, what would, or should, I have done differently, if anything? I walked in peace marches and in Kent State protests, I boycotted classes and went to rallies, but I never truly stuck my neck out or put my future on the line. I never dug beneath the surface of the platitudinous language I was using. I was a "good girl." But I was not a thinker or an activist or an organizer while in school. That would come later, as I began to see the world through others' eyes.

Teaching at that time was still a woman's career. As more men entered the field, changes began to take place. I was teaching in a small town, and was somewhat removed from the controversy pitting the New York State Teachers Association against the United Federation of Teachers. Our local association stayed connected to the National Education Association, but I remember Albert Shanker and Tom Hobart clashing, as their groups merged for the benefit of both sides. My mom, though, was in the thick of it: walking on picket lines in support of fair wages, longevity, and job stability, and debating with relatives and school board members ("those horses' asses!") about teaching and learning. I saw teachers making poverty wages while educating the children of the very people who didn't see the value in what their local schools were doing. I saw teachers whose jobs were dependent on serendipity and personal likes and dislikes. In those early years, I saw many women in the classroom. The very few men were mostly at the high-school level or in the administrative offices.

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When I began working at a child care center, I saw working families of many races and ethnicities struggling to make ends meet while trying to place their kids in a safe learning environment. I saw moms and dads working day in and day out to create homes for their children. I understood then that families were not always comprised of married couples with kids, and that there was room to accommodate a great deal of diversity in the world. I saw firsthand what poverty does to growing minds and bodies, to communities, and to individual dreams and aspirations. I learned that sometimes it takes more than hard work to eke out a living, and that following the rules does not always result in multiple graces and a happy life. I was finally beginning to understand the “why” behind the demonstrations and the protests. This was reaffirmed on an almost daily basis during the years I spent at the Head Start Program. There I met strong men and women raising their children in less-than-ideal circumstances but giving them strength, resolve, and hope for the future. These parents held minimum-wage jobs (sometimes two or three) and worked long hours but still had a sense of common community. They taught me a lot about the unlocking of human potential made possible by proactive government programs, but even more importantly, they taught me about the loss of human potential when rules and regulations erect a wall that is impossible to climb.

The fact that women today have a more significant role in our society is due to the sacrifice and hard work of those women who endured the struggle to move it forward. Yet, there is still much to be done. After a late awakening, it was my turn to help make the workplace better for women. I have interacted with many women over the years, and have been able to put human faces to the statistics, and embrace their stories in solidarity with them. I have seen the determination and the struggle in women’s faces; the despair and resolve; the successes and failures; and the human cost of bad public policy and misdirected resources. My purpose is to strengthen the resolve of all women; to offer them a pathway forward, regardless of their background or income; to better their work environment; to help them be more productive employees; and to use their talents and strengths

to achieve a fairer workplace and work-life balance. In retirement, I keep that sense of purpose. It will continue to be relevant in all I do.

I was lucky that my life path took me out of the self-imposed boundaries I had unconsciously created and opened my eyes to other possibilities for women. I realized that my own nuclear two-parent family had moved from a societal norm to only one of many family structures. Career, single parenthood, self-support, and independence became part of the paradigm for younger women. But the workplace was, and is, slow to respond to changing societal mores. Flexible work schedules, pay equality, paid family and sick leave, healthcare, pregnancy accommodations, and access to quality child care could address some of the work-life stress in many women's lives and mitigate some of the issues limiting women's access to well-paying, stable jobs. Yet, little attention has been paid to institutionalizing these types of policies in order to foster a reasonable work-life balance.

The research has been done, statistics gathered, countless articles written. Coalitions have been formed and resources committed. Yet, women are still on the brink, in many instances living paycheck to paycheck due to circumstances beyond their control. Leaders in government and corporate America have been slow to respond to the crisis facing working women and working families across the United States. The human cost to individuals, families, communities, and businesses when women's job opportunities are limited by outdated workplace policies, non-equitable wages, and government's failure to mandate necessary social change has been studied again and again. Yet, as a case in point, after two years of advocacy work, the Women's Equality Agenda Coalition in New York State has yet to be passed by the legislature.

Today, working women often find themselves single-parenting with no child support, and a choice between a minimum-wage job and public assistance. They often live far from family but want to join the workforce to support themselves and their children. It is a sad fact that women represent nearly two-thirds of minimum-wage workers. Twenty-two percent of minimum-wage workers are women of color. A woman working full-time and year-round at the federal

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minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour earns just \$14,500—more than \$4,000 below the poverty line for a family of three. In addition, women are typically paid only 77 cents for every dollar paid to their male counterparts. In other words, there is still a 23-cent wage gap. This gap is even wider for women of color: black women working full-time, year-round, make only 64 cents, and Hispanic women only 54 cents, for every dollar paid to their white, non-Hispanic male counterparts. Increasing the minimum wage to \$10.10 per hour would boost annual earnings by \$5,700, to \$20,200, enough to pull a family of three out of poverty. More than 15 million women would get a raise, including more than one in five working mothers. A mother with two children working full-time at the minimum wage would earn just enough, instead of falling more than \$4,000 below the poverty line.

The cost of accessible high-quality child care enters the conversation at this point. This family of three with an income of \$20,200 is earning just above the poverty level. If the two children are three and four years old, the cost of high-quality licensed child care can run as high as \$11,700 annually in New York State, which is unsustainable with the family's budget.

The women who have accessed WDI's Child Care Subsidy Facilitated Enrollment Program are real examples of the need to pay a wage that can support a family. These women are often faced with the difficult choice of paying for quality child care or paying for their food, rent, and/or utilities. They are often forced to choose between lower-quality child care and quitting their jobs to stay home with their children. This makes no sense! The cost of a publicly funded child care subsidy is less than the cost of public assistance in most cases. An increase in the minimum wage, paired with publicly funded child care subsidies, would be good for families, children, communities, and businesses. It is short-sighted to let current budget restrictions impact the future. The availability of quality child care dramatically impacts a woman's access to work, job development, and career advancement.

I hope that I have lived a good life and made a difference in the

lives of the many children and adults whose paths I have directly or indirectly crossed. I no longer believe that being a “good girl” helped me achieve anything. I grew, personally and professionally, by speaking about things that were important to me; by working together with others to accomplish necessary changes in my community, school district, state, and country; by advancing my career as I advanced myself. My loud mouth and soft approach have helped me be a strong advocate. I found a way to achieve personal satisfaction in both my work and home-life. My children are good people who were never told to be “good.” They just were. It is a matter of pride that their dad and I raised three ethical, moral adults with a solid foundation of tolerance, a strong sense of family, and a deep gratitude for all they have been given. They are stronger in their convictions than I was at their age, and far less reluctant to stick their necks out for their beliefs.

It is my hope that all working women today, regardless of background or income, will find their own path forward: one which allows them to strengthen their self-knowledge and resolve; which offers opportunities to better their work environment; and which allows them to use their talents to achieve a fairer and more productive workplace for all.