

2009 – Seven Who Stretch the Possible

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 21 Leaders 2009

Sharon Katz, Defender of the Vilified

For over a dozen years Sharon Katz has volunteered her legal expertise to women who live in the margins of society, especially those in prison and undocumented immigrants.

"I want to put my effort and energy into the forsaken issues, the less sympathetic constituencies," says Katz, a

partner for 26 years at New York law firm Davis Polk and Wardwell. "It is  Sharon Katz where I can make the biggest difference."

Through her work with the nonprofit Incarcerated Mothers Law Project in New York, Katz says she has met many women who have simply made bad choices after growing up with little guidance or help.

"Women in prison are very isolated, somewhat vilified, and there are very few people that seem willing to go into the prisons and work with them," Katz says. "But having paid the price doesn't mean they have to be denied access to their children or access to an opportunity for the future."

These women have few resources and much of her work is translating court vocabulary so they can be informed of their options. She has helped dozens of jailed women reunite with their children or arrange visits and helped them handle divorces or child support.

"I noticed that many women who are in prison are being charged by the state with child support, and do not know about it," she says. "When they leave jail, they are indebted with \$30,000, and there is no way they will be able to pay this off."

People simply want to be treated fairly and with respect, Katz says, and that has informed her work. Through the Sanctuary for Families, a New York nonprofit that helps victims of domestic violence, she has helped undocumented women apply for U-visas, which grants them special permission to apply for legal status.

Katz and other lawyers at her firm helped the organization process 100 applications in a six-month period. But so far, even though the government is authorized to issue 10,000 U-visas each year, Katz says only one woman has received one.

"Most of the cases are domestic violence-related," she says. "It is very hard to say why it is taking so much time; a lot of women are in limbo right now. Patience is my best advice for them."

Meanwhile, though, she has attracted more of her firm's associates to both of the pro bono programs. She says there is no shortage of work. "It is very rewarding to see that other people are actually getting involved."

–*Iulia Anghelescu*

Lilly Ledbetter, Flag-Bearer for Fair Pay

Lilly Ledbetter's crusade for fair pay has taken her from her mailbox at  Lilly Ledbetter a Gadsden, Ala., tire plant to the steps of the Supreme Court and to the stage at the Democratic National Convention. Through it all she stood up for one single idea: Men and women who do the same job should earn the same wage.

Ledbetter describes the night in 1998 when she realized she was paid less than three men doing the same supervisor job at the Goodyear Tire and Rubber plant where she worked. She had an inkling that something wasn't right, but when she found an anonymous note slipped into her mailbox, she learned the hard truth. The men's pay was 20 percent higher.

"The first names, the black and white numbers, were deflating to my ego, my integrity, my self-worth," she says. "I felt so humiliated."

On her next day off, Ledbetter drove to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission office in her area to file a suit, which lasted nine years. Although the initial ruling awarded substantial damages—\$3.8 million reduced to \$360,000 by the judge—the verdict was appealed. In May 2007 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against her.

The 5-4 majority ruled that the law required Ledbetter to file her case within 180 days of the time when the discriminatory act occurred, even though she was unaware of it until nearly two decades later.

A dissenting Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg called for legislation to undo the court's "parsimonious reading" of wage bias laws.

Ledbetter scoffs at the need to limit the numbers of women suing their employers by such a strict time limit for filing an official complaint. "I would much rather have had my earnings when I should have, been paid more fairly and built up my retirement," she says. "It was never about the money. It was about the right thing to do."

The disappointment could have stopped her but Ledbetter continues to fight. The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act to change the law to more of what Justice Ginsburg had in mind became the first bill signed by President Barack Obama after he took office. Even though the bill was blocked by Senate Republicans in 2008, Obama took up the cause as a candidate, mentioning Ledbetter in a debate and inviting her to give a speech at his party's national convention.

Her time in the spotlight has honored her tremendously, Ledbetter says, even though it has exposed her to other sad stories of women suffering pay discrimination.

"If I can get this law changed back it will be a great legacy to leave," she says. "I hope people will say, 'She made a difference.'"

—Sarah Seltzer

Patrick C. Lynch, Prosecutor Dedicated to Protection

 Patrick C. Lynch

In early 2007, Rhode Island Attorney General Patrick C. Lynch prosecuted the brutal murder of Lindsay Ann Burke, a 23-year-old woman who was killed in 2005 by an abusive former partner. After the conviction, Lindsay's mother, Ann, asked Lynch what else she could do to make sure that what happened to her daughter did not happen to other young women.

Burke and Lynch wanted a proactive way to stop dating violence before it started. They believed it was the best way to memorialize Lindsay.

The two soon identified an area where prevention programs were lacking: curriculums for middle and high school students that directly addressed dating and relationship violence. In a 2006 federal study, one in 11 adolescents reported being a victim of physical dating abuse.

"In our state wonderful programs existed but there were also tremendous voids," says Lynch. "While we educate kids about drugs and alcohol, which we should, we're failing generations of young women by not providing them the education we should."

Lynch, who was first elected in 2002, had experience "on the front lines" as a prosecutor with many domestic violence cases and had also worked with advocates for women over the years.

On behalf of the Burke family, Lynch pushed for passage of the Lindsay Ann Burke Act, which mandates dating violence education in health classes throughout Rhode Island's public education system. The bill passed the state's General Assembly in 2007 and became law.

Lynch has taken the cause up with his peers around the country. As president of the National Association of Attorneys General, he ushered through in June 2008 a unanimous resolution that all 50 states endeavor to enact similar laws. Already, some other attorneys general are looking to Rhode Island as a model for what their states can do.

"We're making a push to alert people to the opportunity that's before us to really turn back the tide," he says.

Lynch says the attention surrounding the introduction and passage of the Burke Act has already helped raise awareness that relationship violence can not only affect anyone, but that recognizing the signs can help save the lives of young women.

"There's a tendency for us publicly to assume that it's something that affects someone else, an older couple," he says. "But stats and the cases we see prove that young people are being subjected far more often than you'd want to imagine."

—Sarah Seltzer

Rabbi Diana S. Manber, Finder of the Words for Clergy

Six weeks after she began serving as a rabbi, Diana S. Manber was  Rabbi Diana Manber confronted with the problem of domestic abuse from a member of her Atlanta synagogue.

Even though 90 percent of people will turn to clergy first for help with family and personal difficulties, Manber says no one taught her how to handle domestic violence during five years of rabbinical school.

The battered woman, a congregant of the 1,600-family congregation, came to her seeking marital advice, telling her, "I don't know what I am doing wrong," Manber recalls.

The request for advice reminded her of the time when she felt her own rabbi had failed to help her despite being in a unique position to influence events. Manber was a child witness to domestic violence in her family home. Her mother divorced when she was 19 and was able to create a safe new home for Manber and her sister.

Manber recalls seeking answers from her rabbi in her early 20s. "Where were you?" she asked her rabbi, whom she adored. "He told me that he always suspected that something was terribly wrong but that he did not know what to say, how to ask the questions. I cried, because this is a man who was never at a loss for words."

After that early experience counseling the young wife, Manber decided that "I did not know how to speak" was not a valid excuse for rabbis to look away.

In 2001, she embarked on a journey to study, read, learn and sit with every available advocate involved with fighting domestic violence. On the morning of Yom Kippur in 2002, the sacred Day of Atonement for Jews, she told her family's story from the pulpit.

Manber now sits on the Board of Directors and chairs the Jewish Women's Caucus at the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. She is also the director of Dayenu, the domestic violence initiative of the New York Board of Rabbis, named for the Hebrew word for "enough." The organization works with clergy and congregational leaders of all faiths to prevent violence and bring the issue to the surface.

"The assumption is that those who are faithful will not do such a thing," Manber says. "It has to start with me. If I cannot make that difference in the world, then I am doing something wrong with my commitment in life."

—Julia Anghelescu

Anika Rahman, Campaigner for Reproductive Health

Anika Rahman says her life and destiny were shaped by three female power figures from her Bangladeshi childhood: her grandmother, her aunt and her mother. "They were three extremely strong and intelligent women, university educated, who did not receive the respect they deserved in society."

Her parents divorced when she was 6, at a time when divorce was neither culturally acceptable nor tolerated. Her mother suffered society's scorn while her father remarried, free from disrespect. Social justice and equal rights became part of Rahman's DNA after that, leading to her life's work.

"Women's health and equality is an essential social justice issue," says Rahman, who in July 2004 became the president of Americans for UNFPA, a New York-based nonprofit advocacy organization that supports UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund. "One of the fundamental differences between men and women is that we can reproduce, men cannot. Any struggle to advance women's rights must deal with this basic difference."

The U.N. Population Fund, funded by over 180 governments, promotes the rights of women and provides women's health care and family planning programs in over 150 nations around the world. At Americans for UNFPA, Rahman focuses on increasing U.S. awareness and support of the U.N. agency's global strategies and has built a base of private U.S. donors to support its work.

In 1983 Rahman came to the United States to attend Princeton. She went on to Columbia Law School, specializing in women's rights law. Four years into a Wall Street job, she decided she wanted a deeper purpose to her work; one that evoked her childhood passions for justice for women.

She became the founding director of the International Program at the Center for Reproductive Rights, a legal advocacy nonprofit that promotes and defends women's reproductive rights worldwide. Rahman pushed for framing reproductive rights as a human rights issue and worked with women's legal groups around the world to raise the profile of women's health concerns.

Over the past eight years, the Bush administration has refused to release nearly \$300 million in funds allocated by congress for the U.N. Population Fund. The Bush administration claims the fund supports coercive abortions in China—despite reports to the contrary by the State Department. While vigorously denying the allegation, Rahman's organization has led the by-and-large successful battle to find alternative sources of funding.

She says her next goal is to achieve greater gender equity by increasing U.S. engagement in the promotion of the health and rights of women in over 150 countries.

"A woman who has access to reproductive health care and can exercise her rights has won the power to control her body and the right to be free from coercion," Rahman says.

—Julia Anghelescu

Dr. Linda Randolph, Healer With a Mission

Growing up, Dr. Linda Randolph didn't intend to put so much of  Dr. Linda Randolph her professional focus on women's health. But as a perinatologist treating babies in neonatal intensive care, she saw firsthand how the nation's health care system was denying women—especially women of color—comprehensive care.

As director of New York state's Office of Public Health in the 1980s, Randolph was alarmed at the numbers of infants exposed to crack cocaine in utero. To help these infants, she realized she—and the rest of medical providers—needed to pay more attention to mothers, and to women, at all phases of their life cycles.

"This country seemed to be only interested in women's health as it related to children and not in terms of women's preventive health and primary health care in general," she says. "I was linking the two and recognizing that women's health was significantly important in terms of the woman herself and in terms of family health."

So began her long journey to bridge the gap in health care services for women, particularly minority women.

One of Randolph's first projects was to create a series of health care books for women teaching them how to live healthy lives and have healthy futures.

She also served on an advisory committee at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention where she created programs for low-income women to access preventive care and screening for cervical and breast cancer. She also successfully pushed for more money for early treatment programs to help low-income women diagnosed with cancer.

One of her proudest accomplishments is persuading the New York state government to fund perinatal network systems where health care providers and advocates mapped out a strategy to help narrow disparities in health care for women of color. The networks offer services ranging from prevention to direct care to social supports and education.

Randolph has since undertaken another collaborative effort, this time in Washington, D.C. She is now director of the Developing Families Center, a small nonprofit network that focuses on using advanced practice nurses, community health nurses, breastfeeding peer counselors, family service workers and trained early childhood teachers to provide comprehensive services to young families, largely African American, living in nearby low-income communities.

The results are a startling improvement in maternal and infant health, including a dramatic drop in the number of premature and Caesarean section births.

"My general orientation is that we've 'medicalized' birth," she says. "I'm interested in attempting to give birth back to families with the appropriate supports and professional care but with much more of their involvement and less technology."

–Allison Stevens

Cathi Rodgveller, Guider of Girl Techies

Cathi Rodgveller has been a teacher and counselor for 26 years, a  Cathi Rodgveller career path that led her in 1999 to create IGNITE, Inspiring Girls Now in Technology Evolution. She connects female high school students to professional women in careers that require technological or engineering skills, and the teens learn how those skills lead to better paying jobs in almost any area of interest.

Rodgveller has a specific measure of achievement: "Success is when girls become so empowered that they want to help other girls," she says.

Her sensitivity to the broad spectrum of need among pre-teen and teen girls was awakened while she worked at a New York youth center. Many girls there had experienced sexual abuse. She soon realized no one was helping them.

Rodgveller created a peer-based discussion program to address those difficulties. Support groups sprang up in the school; next male teachers began helping boys learn about sexual abuse. "Eventually," she says, "sexual harassment was eradicated because everybody recognized it."

In 1998, she moved to Seattle and became the city school district's nontraditional career coordinator for 14 middle and high schools in the public school district. She received a federal sex equity grant to help create IGNITE and ensure that female students enter male-dominated careers such as construction, technology and engineering.

"I knew I had the capacity and the passion to help young women, and I felt that that grant was given to me for a special purpose," she says.

Most high school girls hold negative stereotypes that keep them from pursuing technology programs. Rodgveller makes a point of dispelling those notions. She gathers women in skilled professions—plumbers, electricians, engineers, construction workers and techies—and channels their knowledge toward girls wondering about their own future careers.

Female enrollment in trade courses has risen 40 percent to 50 percent. Eventually, she realized how "incredibly passionate" women in the technology and engineering sectors were and she focused the program on those careers. Today, girls are exposed to them through talks, field trips to Microsoft headquarters, or by shadowing workers on the job.

She now counsels 2,000 female students each year. Since 1999, IGNITE has reached roughly 15,000 young women and been repeatedly awarded for its success, including a presentation before Congress for Rodgveller and 14 volunteers. She also created a handbook to help other school districts create IGNITE chapters.

She says her next step is to create a nonprofit to develop IGNITE so it can be offered to girls in every state in the nation.

—*Iulia Anghelescu*

For more information:

 go to 21 Leaders for the 21st Century 2008 homepage

<http://www.womensenews.org/gala-benefit-dinner-honoring-21-leaders-21st-century-2009>

[Davis Polk and Wardwell: Sharon Katz](http://www.davispolk.com/lawyers/sharon-katz/) (<http://www.davispolk.com/lawyers/sharon-katz/>)

[Lilly Ledbetter's Democratic National Convention speech:](http://www.democrats.org/a/2008/08/lily_ledbetter.php)

(http://www.democrats.org/a/2008/08/lily_ledbetter.php)

[Rhode Island Attorney General's Office](http://www.riag.state.ri.us/) (<http://www.riag.state.ri.us/>)

[Dayenu!](http://www.dayenu.org/) (<http://www.dayenu.org/>)

[Americans for UNFPA](http://www.americansforunfpa.org/) (<http://www.americansforunfpa.org/>)

[IGNITE, Inspiring Girls Now in Technology Evolution](http://www.igniteworldwide.org/) (<http://www.igniteworldwide.org/>)

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