

Solidarity and Support: Recognizing Women's History Month



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Standing on the 94th floor of Chicago's Hancock Building at age 13, I was dazzled by the city's expanse and the possibilities it represented. Most of us were farm kids on our first school trip. We'd never been to a big city let alone a building taller than three stories. The rush of excitement in that horizon-expanding moment has stayed with me.



New ways of seeing, understanding, or thinking opens unforeseen possibilities. I returned from that trip determined to live in Chicago one day. Not only do I now live in Chicago, but I've proudly built a career in a truly global industry while raising three kids. They continually amaze me with their empathy, independence, and enthusiasm for new experiences.

In honor of Women's History Month, I'm sharing stories about women who inspired and challenged me to expand my horizons and think differently. Contrary to the lore that women are unwilling to help each other, many have offered me solidarity and support. Older or younger, stay-at-home, or working, moms or women without children – I have known so many who don't look at work and life as a zero-sum game. They are committed to expanding opportunities for all women, not just themselves.

Before I get to these women, let's recognize that all people play a role in supporting women and each other. My most dedicated mentor was a man. Bob gave me, a kid from a small town with no lawyers in her family, my first legal job in the county Prosecutor's office. He enthusiastically cheered my every professional success and was a trusted sounding board for two decades. As his daughter and I each settled into our professional lives, we walked alongside each other with his support. And when he died, we came together to walk his casket to the grave as the only two female pallbearers that I have ever witnessed before or since. Leave it to her dad to send a posthumous message of faith that we really could do any job a man could do.

And those jobs are as diverse as the way in which women find ways to expand what's possible. Here are some of the women in my life taking them on with courage and the determination to blaze their own trails:

- My running buddy, Kari. She returned to school for her doctorate while juggling a demanding job and a small child at home. Through our early morning runs, often in the dark, we commiserate about the rough stretches, help each other prioritize, and cheer each other's progress along the way.
- My CEO friend, Christina. She boldly pursued her Olympic karate dream while leading a start-up and raising two young boys. We pick up slack for each other and leverage our respective talents for the good of our two families. For my part, I have historically been excellent at ordering take out and hosting Friday night movie nights for the kids while she put in late-night karate training sessions.
- My neighbor, Teri. In response to a condescending comment, she is now an acclaimed cookbook author and influencer. She continues to grow her 400,000 followers. From her, I learned to participate in the power of networks and loose connections by offering and

asking for help in a low-pressure way. She speaks generously about the superpowers of various women, and she puts more positive energy into the world per capita than anyone I've ever met.

- My author friend, Rosemary. She sent her twins to kindergarten then promptly set about writing a book. She edited between rounds of chemotherapy, surgeries, and a busy family schedule. Writing a book is a daunting endeavor, but she relentlessly made the time and it was picked up by a literary agent. She offers me lessons in resilience and perseverance.
- My colleague, Lynette. She is an incredible lawyer, and we had the opportunity to work together for more than 10 years. We have faced tough deals, unreasonable client demands, and high-stakes, complex, dynamic situations. Her husband once noted that we were each fine with being criticized but neither one of us could bear to have the other criticized unfairly.

This list could go on as there are many more that have energized and encouraged me. Throughout my career, I have had female colleagues who have gone above and beyond to support my growth and development. They helped me think about my options differently and dare to take the right next step for me. They often strengthened my ability to persevere when things felt impossible. When I was expecting my first child, three female partners at my law firm reached out. They cut through the usual new-mother / career platitudes to help me make it work. During my lowest personal and professional moments, time and time again, a female colleague offered me a moment of reprieve, suggested a new approach, and gave me encouragement – or once a giant cinnamon roll - to get through the day. And don't get me started on how many times another mom has found a spot in her car for one of my kids.

These women and I have been there for each other because the data is clear. Unconscious bias is prevalent. The wage-gap is real. Harassment happens all too often. Emotional labor at home and work are wildly uneven. Administrative and volunteer work is disproportionately shouldered by women. Men are just more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt (or even heard when they make a point in a meeting). I want to see a female president and priest in my lifetime, and frankly it's disappointing to me that it has not happened already.

I want things to be better for women – effective immediately – and for my daughter, my nieces and their peers, and for the women who will share my sons' orbits. I want less gender-driven disparity and more equal footing as these women navigate their professional and personal lives. Although we have a lot of ground to cover before women are afforded truly equal rights, I also recognize the horizon has broadened and together we can expand it even more. Women have come far in pursuing the opportunities that *they* want, regardless of whether others are taking the same path and without excluding other women. It starts with admitting that they want to try for something new, more or different and then trying to make it happen while supporting other women and their choices too.

Across the facets of their lives, I hope the next generation will share the same solidarity with women that I've enjoyed. May you challenge each other to think expansively about what is possible and experience equal treatment, from and for all humans.

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