

Women Sustaining the American Spirit

Women's History Month Program Remarks of Commissioner Kathleen Q. Abernathy Washington, DC -- March 8, 2002 As prepared for delivery.

I want to begin today by telling you a story. It's about a woman named Jennie Quinn. Jennie never had an easy life. Her father was an alcoholic, who abandoned his family when Jennie was a young child. Her mother worked long hours to support Jennie and her brother.

But from these humble beginnings, Jennie made something of herself. Jennie went to high school on a scholarship, and afterwards went to work at the YWCA, where she worked full-time until retirement. She saved enough money so that she could buy a house for her and her mother, who lived with Jennie until the day she died.

Jennie also had a family of her own. She and her husband had one son, a boy named Michael. They made sure that Michael had all the benefits and advantages they never had growing up.

This is an ordinary success story. It's not one exciting enough for a movie, or for a book. But yet the life of Jennie had the power to shape the lives of others...including my own. Jennie Quinn – my *grandmother* – taught me that I could do anything if I put my mind to it.

My grandmother was a role model for me. She put family first and adored her son, my father. When she had a stroke in her 60s, she learned to walk and talk again. She was very special, and I'm lucky she was a part of my life.

My story is not unique. Mentors can come from a range of places – your home, your workplace, a church or community organization. Moreover, the power of a positive mentoring experience is proven. Comparisons between non-mentored and mentored individuals generally yield consistent results: individuals with mentors report greater career satisfaction, career commitment, career mobility, and more positive job attitudes than individuals without mentors.

The results of mentor/mentee pairs can be extraordinary. Some of the most famous examples are Socrates and Plato, Haydn and Beethoven, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller. Indeed, the roots of mentoring come out of story of mythic proportions. Legend suggests that when Odysseus, the King of Ithaca, went off to fight in the Trojan War, he left behind his trusted friend and adviser, a man by the name of Mentor, to educate and look after his son.

But mentoring need not have extraordinary participants in order to have extraordinary results. That is what I want to talk about today. Specifically, I want to share with you stories of how ordinary women, by serving as mentors, have changed the lives of women in communications, many of whom you may know. I will talk about mentors specifically in three roles: the teacher, the advocate, and the role model.

1. The Teacher

The teacher is one of the highest forms of mentorship. You need not work in a school to be one. No, I am talking about the woman who took time out to give advice, direction, and when needed, suggestions for improvement. These women perpetuate positive action. The tricks of the master are passed on to the next generation.

Monica Desai, one of the lawyers here, says she credits much of her success to a mentor she had as a summer associate in a large law firm.

At first she was intimidated by the experience. Monica would knock meekly at the door of a partner, and timidly present her report to him. Thankfully, that all changed with the good advice of her mentor, a senior associate assigned to look after her that summer. Her mentor told Monica that she should knock on the door with authority. If she knew she was doing good work, she should be confident in her presentation and her recommendations. Now, years later, Monica says she still relies on advice. She says it changed how she thought about herself – both what her contribution is and what it can be in the future.

These types of success stories, of teachers, are not limited to those created by formal work programs. Another example of a teacher/mentee relationship is found in one of my legal interns, Kristy, and her grandmother. In 1959, when professional positions for women were rare, Kristy's grandmother became the first woman to serve as a probate judge in Alabama.

Her grandmother encouraged Kristy to seek out a voice in their community at an early age. In kindergarten, Kristy's grandmother allowed her to assist in a campaign for a man running for state senate, and her grandmother insisted that Kristy speak up and introduce herself to people, instead of shying away as they handed out leaflets. The candidate they were supporting eventually became a U.S. Senator who still seeks the advice of Kristy's grandmother.

2. The Advocate

An additional role a woman mentor can play is advocate. An advocate is the woman who opens doors for the protégé that might otherwise have been closed, an act that may give the mentee the opportunity to prove herself in ways never before possible.

Susanna Zwerling, one of the legal advisors here, shared a story about just that with me. When she was moving to D.C., one of her friends

suggested she call Karen Kornbluh, who worked for Senator Kerry. “Is she from the West Side or go to Girl Scout camp?” Susanna asked as she recalled an old, old friend. That question was soon answered. Not too long after Susanna’s arrival in D.C., a woman approached her at a party and said, “How do I know you? I’m Karen Kornbluh.” They had been girl scouts together in New York in the ‘70s.

Three years later, when Susanna was looking to leave the Justice Department, someone asked her if she knew Karen. Karen had become the head of Legislative Affairs at the FCC and was looking to hire someone. Susanna called Karen, and while she did not go to work for her in the Legislative Affairs office, Karen helped Susanna get a job in the Mass Media Bureau. Six months later, Karen became the Deputy Chief of the Mass Media Bureau, and Susanna began working for her. Susanna said she learned much from those years – Karen brought her into countless projects at the Bureau.

A different advocate story comes from Anna Gomez, deputy bureau chief of the International Bureau. She used to work at a firm in town, where she ran a mentoring program for first year associates. Ironically, that’s part of the way she got to know her own mentor Kathy Wallman. Kathy was impressed by a Hispanic Bar panel Anna helped pull together.

And, when the Cable Bureau was still new, Kathy came to the FCC to be its Deputy Chief. They had received a lot of hiring authority, and were particularly interested in recruiting Hispanic applicants. Kathy thought of Anna, and asked her to help get people to apply. While Kathy was at it, she also offered Anna a job. That’s how Anna came to the FCC. When Kathy became Bureau Chief, she asked Anna to become her legal counsel. Anna went with her. And when Kathy went to the White House, she asked Anna to come be her Deputy Chief of Staff at the National Economic Council. And, of course, she went!

3. The Role Model

Finally, I want to talk about the role model. In this capacity, a mentor is great in not only what she says, but in what she does. The mentor instructs by example.

Kathy Zachem, a partner in a communications law firm, shared with me a story of such a role model: her grandmother. Her grandmother had eight children to raise. But when World War II hit, she, like other women, had to go to work; she took a job at a steel mill. Times were tough, but Kathy's grandmother made it work. After that experience – raising eight children and working at a steel mill – the grandmother told my friend, her granddaughter, that she learned she, or any other woman, could do anything.

A similar lesson was taught to Stacy Robinson, my mass media legal advisor. Stacy says that as long as she could remember, both of her grandmothers were working. In fact, her mother's mother owned her own business – a seamstress shop, where she had a number of women working for her. It was by seeing these examples that Stacy assumed it was normal for all women to be strong individuals and pursue their own goals and dreams. Stacy never thought the world would treat her differently as a woman, because she had never experienced or saw any such differential treatment with respect to women in her own family. If only all women could be so fortunate!

So to conclude, I want to encourage all of you to celebrate the lives of the women before us by becoming a mentor, or a mentee. You can have a profound influence on another woman's life just by taking a little time out of your day.

It's amazing how much you can gain by being a mentor. There are the rewards of personal and professional recognition. And beyond that, mentoring provides opportunities for personal growth for the both the

mentor and mentee. It encourages the mentor to think creatively, analyze best practices, and continue learning. Everyone, no matter what their age or status, has something to teach you.

For those of you thinking about getting a mentor, don't wait for someone to come to you. I suggest you research potential mentors, and then ask to talk with them on some specific points for a set period of time. You want to encourage your mentor to take you under his or her wing. Also, there are mentoring programs you can join, like the Federal Communication Bar Association's mentoring program for young attorneys and lawyers. All you have to do is sign up.

The FCC in particular is a great place for women to learn from one another. In employing women, the Commission is a role model for other parts of the U.S. government, and indeed many businesses as well. Fifty-two percent of FCC employees are female, compared to 45 percent government-wide. Thirty-eight percent of FCC supervisors are female – that's six percentage points higher than the number of female supervisors government-wide and well above the industry average.

The benefits from mentoring can extend from individuals participating to our organization as a whole. Because mentees typically are better informed and more satisfied with their careers, our organization can reap the benefits of better-trained staff and greater productivity. The passing down of insider knowledge from one person to the next creates a solid organizational legacy.

Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I encourage you to be a part of a group of women committed to mentorship. Let's make changes – and act in a way that would make our grandmothers proud.