

Seven Who Break the Barriers of Bias

Run Date: 12/29/08

By WeNews Staff

Profiles of seven outstanding leaders dedicated to improving women's lives: Roxanne Mankin Cason, Malaak Compton-Rock, Nadia Farjood, Paula J. Giddings, Sara Gould, Dusti Garrison Gurule and Nancy Hopkins.

(WOMENSENEWS)--

Roxanne Mankin Cason, Builder of Equity

Roxanne Mankin Cason entered the work force in the late 1960s, when opportunities for most women were limited to fields in nursing, education and social work. But Cason wanted something different: a job in the male-dominated world of investment real estate.



In interview after interview, she was asked why a "nice girl" like her would want a job in the rough-and-tumble world of investments.

After one particularly dispiriting interview, a young man who had just been hired by the company asked her a basic question about capitalization rates, a way to determine value of an income property. She gave him the answer, even though she had just learned that the job he held now was the same one she had been told was not open.

"I walked out of that room, and there was a really deep sadness that I couldn't get that job because I wasn't a guy," she recalls. "It was the first time that it was so there."

She finally landed her first job in investment sales and went on to become a successful real estate developer. On her way up, she donated hours and dollars to causes helping women and girls in the United States and around the world.

In the 1970s, she created and implemented a college course at her alma mater, the University of California, Berkeley, first of its kind in California, she says. It was called Women and Money, the Changing Consciousness of Money Management.

She also founded in San Francisco the third chapter of the International Women's Forum, a select group of high-ranking women who help each other advance in business careers.

In the 1990s, she turned her focus to girls' education, teaming up with Educate Girls Globally, a San Francisco nonprofit, and Save the Children, an international humanitarian organization headquartered in Connecticut and in Washington, D.C. Both have a focus to enroll and retain more girls in school in developing countries. She currently serves on the board of trustees at Save the Children and as its vice chair of the International Education Advisory Board.

Now retired, Cason is chair of the Women's Leadership Board at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, an invitation-only group of women in government, business and the nonprofit sector. As chair, she has expanded the board membership to over 200 global members.

"I try to engage and see myself as a catalyst for systemic change for women and girls," she says. "I align myself with organizations that I think have leverage in order to make a difference."

--Allison Stevens

Malaak Compton-Rock, Lifter of Those With the Least

Malaak Compton-Rock is the founder of several innovative programs for women and children, from New Orleans to Brooklyn to South Africa, combining the savvy she gained while working in the public relations world with a passion for helping others.

Throughout her career she has raised the profile of charitable endeavors, including a stint as a judge on a reality show about charity, "Oprah's Big Give." She also created the Angel Rock Project, a Web site that highlights her favorite charitable and philanthropic projects but also provides visitors who want to help a way to learn about volunteering or connecting to groups that need them.



Malaak Compton-Rock

One of Compton-Rock's first projects, Styleworks, began when legislation to overhaul welfare was pushed by the Clinton administration in 1996. "That was a time when, even if you weren't interested in the economic advancement of women, you knew about 'welfare-to-work.' I was compelled to help in some way," she says.

Styleworks assisted more than 2,000 women prepare for job interviews by giving free makeovers and styling along with interview tips, seminars and mentoring programs. Salons and cosmetic companies donated their services. Alums--many of whom had struggled with abusive partners and spent time in shelters--maintain contact through a book club today.

"It was for the sole purpose of raising their self-esteem right before the job interview," says Compton-Rock. "It also insured that they were able to be chosen based on their experience and not have assumptions made about them because of their appearance."

A more recent focus has been providing aid and micro-loans for HIV-ravaged households in the shantytowns of Diepsloot and Soweto, in South Africa. After visiting the two towns with her husband, comedian Chris Rock, she got a spark of inspiration to connect families there with a youth group in Brooklyn. She also delivered cartons of handbags donated by Liz Claiborne Inc., and the women were able to market them to earn money.

"The majority of these households are led by women, either orphan girl-children or grannies," Compton-Rock says. For three weeks in August, 30 young people on a "Journey for Change" volunteered to fix up houses, monitor the food and health needs of the local families and interact with children of all ages.

The cross-cultural pollination "blew away" the South African families who got involved with the U.S. volunteers, she says. "They were so happy that children who look just like them, but live across the world, cared about them."

Compton-Rock believes in the power of women helping each other: "Women instinctively understand,

when you help a woman you're helping her household, you're helping her kids, her husband if she has one and the entire community."

--Sarah Seltzer

Nadia Farjood, Teen Supporter of Afghans, Iranians

Like her peers, 17-year-old Nadia Farjood spent the autumn of her senior year filling out college applications and taking tests. Unlike many others, she's already left a lasting legacy on her school and on the world.

In her sophomore year Farjood started the Girls Alliance Club at her San Diego high school to create a way for young women to serve other women in the community. It also became a place to talk about everything from body image to gender theory to the feminization of poverty.



Nadia Farjood

"We founded it to help women learn to invest in themselves," she explains.

From an early age, Farjood recognized gender imbalances. When she started reading up on women's issues, she realized it was a worldwide problem. She now wholeheartedly espouses the view that providing women with key economic, political and social opportunities is the way to end a wide array of social ills.

Over several years as president of Girls Alliance and as president of her school's Key Club, Farjood raised money for so many walk-a-thons and fundraising events that it was inevitable she'd start one herself.

After Farjood's grandmother returned from a trip to her native Iran, she described the work of an organization called Omid-e-Mehr, which assists young Iranian and Afghan women, including many who experienced physical or sexual abuse. Sensing a kinship with these girls from across the world, Farjood decided to put together a 5-kilometer walk in San Diego to raise funds for the organization. She persuaded other schools and the wider community to get involved. Even the former queen of Iran sent a donation.

"We raised over \$3,000," says Farjood. "But the greatest impact was the response from others, and the publicity. Girls all over the world called and asked how to make their own walks."

In order to fit all of her work in with a high school senior's schedule, Nadia eschews TV and, often, sleep. But the rewards are worth it, she says.

"After the walk, it was really exciting to know something I started was really helping other people even though it was on the other side of the world," she says. "I got this little package with a poster of all the girls in Omid. At the bottom it says, 'Thank you Nadia.' It's in my room right now."

-- Sarah Seltzer

**Paula J. Giddings, Biographer of Heroes
Ida B. Wells Award Winner**

Paula J. Giddings is a pioneering academic, journalist and thinker whose book "When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America" remains a must-read on race and gender in the United States.

Her new biography turns to a luminary of journalism: "Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching." Released in March 2008 by HarperCollins, it's the definitive biography of Wells, the turn-of-the-century suffragist and civil-rights stalwart who used the press to shine a light on dark aspects of American society and fearlessly condemned the widespread practice of race murders in her newspaper, The Free Speech.



Paula J. Giddings

When Giddings was writing "When and Where I Enter," published in 1984, she was struck particularly by Wells' story. "Ida seemed to be saying, 'Look I need a book of my own.' I said, 'Let me finish this one and I'll get to you,'" she recalls.

Giddings' mother was a major inspiration for her writing. As an African American youngster teased by classmates in a predominantly white school, her mother came to the classroom. "She took a book on racial tolerance and gave a lesson in the class with me there," she recalls. Now, her mother calls Giddings' opuses her "grand-books."

Giddings was born in Yonkers in 1947 into a family with a long history of activism and educational work. After studying at Howard University, Giddings worked in journalism and publishing before her own books vaulted her to series of honorary degrees and visiting professorships. She is currently the Elizabeth A. Woodson 1922 professor of Afro-American studies at Smith College.

She tackled Wells because of her interest in "heroic people and what drives them." The decades-long process of taking the biography from idea to published book was difficult and draining at times. But its completion provided a dose of confidence and pride, as well as rewards: One of her students, afraid to study abroad, told her that if Wells could go solo on an anti-lynching campaign to England, then she could, and would, go to Oxford.

Giddings draws parallels between current reaction to Barack Obama's presidency and Wells' era, when great social progress was being made for African Americans but it came with a brutal backlash. "Her genius was trying to tell the nation that both were happening at the same time," she says. Still, she adds, "I wish she were alive now; she'd just love what's going on."

--Sarah Seltzer

Sara Gould, Activator With Leverage

Sara Gould wants nothing short of change for millions of women.

"We want to bring down the barriers and the special interest group category that women's organizations go into, and make connections to build larger constituencies," says Gould, the president and chief executive officer of the Ms. Foundation for Women. "We want to build the kind of constituencies that can hold our new government and president accountable to the vision he put out."



Sara Gould

Bringing about big changes is nothing new for Gould, who married at 20 and felt the impact of the second wave of the women's movement on her own life. She was exposed to different ways of thinking, left her marriage, went back to school and embarked on a new course.

After studying economic development and earning a master's degree from Harvard in 1977, Gould quickly noticed organizations were not focusing on developing female leaders and made no effort to integrate them in the economic system.

"The words 'women' and 'economic development' were not put in the same sentence; they were almost like an oxymoron," she says.

In 1986, she was hired at the Ms. Foundation to implement a program for women's economic development, bringing together 2,000 isolated organizations to develop a broad understanding of women's economic progress. Out of that process, joint actions began to arise and she pushed further forward her belief that women's groups could move a larger social agenda.

That's the heart of her pioneering strategic framework for the Ms. Foundation, where she became president in 2004. Women's ability to propel social change on a national level is building, Gould says, and is being fostered through connections between groups that have different mandates but are focusing on specific policy changes.

"The direction of the Ms. Foundation is right at the intersection of race, class and gender and everything we do is through that prism," says Gould. "It is most important to build and connect together women's collective power, to bring change on the ground, and to work for progressive policies."

Women's economic wellbeing remains a critical concern in her work. Since starting the Collaborative Fund for Women's Economic Development--a Ms. Foundation program designed to support female entrepreneurship--in 1991, she has leveraged \$12 million to help low-income women find the means to support themselves and their families. And under her guidance, between 2005 and 2008 the Ms. Foundation granted \$18 million to organizations across the United States, with nearly half of those led by women of color.

--*Iulia Anghelescu*

Dusti Garrison Gurule, Grower of Latina Power

Dusti Garrison Gurule says the essence of her work is to increase the participation of Latinas in the American democracy and to raise their political power beyond the polling booth.

As the director of the Denver-based Latina Initiative, her efforts are paying off. The group has become involved in immigration issues and has so far helped more than 1,000 people gain citizenship by offering classes. And in 2008, it helped nearly double the voting turnout among Latinas in Colorado, from 8 percent to 15 percent of all



