

True Believers

Heroes don't have to be perfect, they don't have to be male, and these days, they're certainly not the people we've entrusted with the power to run things. Yet, there are heroic acts being performed daily by ordinary people all around us.

To mark Women's History Month, the Weekly has chosen six women whose belief in an ideal has informed their life work to the benefit of the entire community. We chose them because they aren't afraid to be fierce, unconventional, visionary and persistent. They remind us that there are things that are worth fighting for...

The following profiles were written by Patrick R. McDonald, Susan J. Polese and Robert Nixon. Photographs by Anthony Maddaloni.



Mother and Daughter Team: "It seems so radical," says Doris Sassower, the gray-haired mother of Elena. "But all we're talking about is our democratic values."

Whistleblowers

Elena and Doris Sassower are true believers of the justice system. For them, the law is sacred, holy and incorruptible. When a judge dirties this holiness, he can expect the Sassowers to be all over him. This mother and daughter team do not take judicial misconduct lightly.

"It seems so radical," said Doris Sassower, the gray-haired mother of Elena. "But all we're talking about is our democratic values."

The Sassowers co-founded the Center for Judicial Accountability in 1989. Back then it was known as the Ninth Judicial Committee, which is the judicial district of Westchester County. Along with lawyer Eli Vigliano, the Sassowers looked into an apparent "cross-endorsement" deal between Democrats and Republicans that deprived voters of their constitutional right of election—the major party slates were identical. Doris Sassower then spearheaded a lawsuit to challenge the deal. In 1991, Sassower's law license was indefinitely suspended. Doris, who was the first woman chair of the National Conference of Lawyers and Social Workers as well as the first female member of the New York Bar's Judiciary Committee, claimed political retaliation was the reason for her suspension. Like the people she represented in her practice, Sassower became another whistleblowing victim.

Whistleblowing and fighting the system are nothing new to the Sassowers. Doris' former husband was disbarred after he, as Elena put it, "vigorously challenged" a judge's ruling. Doris, who graduated from New York University Law School in 1956, constantly bumped into blatant sexism as she became a highly-distinguished lawyer. The climate was hostile toward women lawyers in the late 1950s; Sassower decided the only way to practice law was to open her own office. As the daughter of idealistic Jewish immigrants, the experience forever changed her view of America.

"I was a part of the American Dream," Doris said. "But I have seen it in my lifetime turn into the American Nightmare. And I wanted to make it so it wouldn't happen to others as it happened to me."

So now the Sassowers take on judges, who, in New York State, control the disciplining and licensing of lawyers [See The Hack Report on page 6]. This kind of authority tends to make lawyers think twice about reporting judicial misconduct, especially when they hear about Doris Sassower. But the Sassowers plan to provide cover for these people.

"We want to provide a national umbrella of all of the judicial activists and organizations around the country that are merging to deal with a problem that is profound and pervasive," Doris said. "That is the perversion and pollution of our judicial system. They are judges not following the letter of the law...I'm talking about paybacks and return of favors."

Elena performs much of the research work for the center, and she keeps tabs on New York State judges as well as federal judges. She is a graduate of Brown University, but she downplays the importance of attending an Ivy League school.

"That doesn't really matter," Elena said of her degree. "My credential is that I am the daughter of not one but two whistleblowers. And what happens to whistleblowers, inevitably, is their lives are destroyed."

The White Plains-based center has members in 30 states, and it is the only organization in the United States that brings together individuals who have complaints against judges and gives them the opportunity for redress. The work is never easy, and oftentimes the center is ignored by the powers that be, but the Sassowers remain firm in their commitment.

"We know if we don't do it, it won't be done," Elena said.