

# Primewoman®

ARE YOU HAVING THE PRIME OF YOUR LIFE?

Written by Christine Burke

Wednesday, 25 March 2009 07:37

Someone once said, "Passion is the yeast that raises the dough." For centuries, women have been driven by their passions to raise the dough, to stir the pot, and ultimately, to achieve great things. Someone once said, "Passion is the yeast that raises the dough." For centuries, women have been driven by their passions to raise the dough, to stir the pot, and ultimately, to achieve great things. Passion drives us in our communities and in our personal lives. It fuels our enthusiasms. It causes us to raise the bar. Passion is an intrinsic ingredient found in ample quantity in every great female leader.

If you have ever thought to yourself, "I can't do it," read the stories of these four women. If you've ever thought, "One person can't make a difference," then be prepared to be inspired. By their example, these women have demonstrated that, if you find a cause you believe in, and if you believe in yourself, you can do it!

**Women Are Always Leading** Women have always been leaders, even in seemingly male-dominated times. Hatshepsut brought years of peace and prosperity to Egypt during her reign as Pharaoh, the top "male" position in her country. Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked towards a goal of suffrage for women and for acceptance of the Women's Property Act - the right to do business, sign contracts and so on without a man's permission. Mary Ann Shad Cary, a committed teacher and feminist, was the first black woman to edit a newspaper. Rosa Parks, who was arrested for not giving up her bus seat to a white person, became known as the "mother of American civil rights." Golda Meir held many political offices and eventually became the first female prime minister of Israel. For these women, the line between personal and private life was almost non-existent, and most successful women leaders today often operate with similar transparency.

## **Heather G. Suarez, Esq.**

Born and raised in Bayonne, NJ, Heather G. Suarez, Esq. watched her mother persevere to get an education. "Initially, I wanted to follow in my mother's footsteps and be a teacher," says Heather. Her mother went to college for just a year; then stopped to get married, have two children, and eventually returned to college at night for seven years for her undergraduate degree to become a classroom teacher. She next obtained her master's degree in education, then worked for her doctorate in education, and ultimately went into administration. She went into administration and then worked for her doctorate in education. Heather and her mom were in fact, working on their theses at the same time - Heather doing a Henry Rutgers Scholar Thesis at Rutgers College, while her mom was at Rutgers-New Brunswick Graduate School of Education.

By high school, Heather knew that although teaching would be a wonderful profession, she longed for the challenge and drama of the court room, picturing herself performing on behalf of her clients. With her mom a teacher in her school, Heather grew up accustomed to being held to a slightly higher standard. Her dad, the strong, silent type, was tremendously supportive of his wife and daughters, encouraging them to be all that they could be. Heather heeded his encouragement, entering Rutgers College as part of the third class of women.

“It was a fabulous educational experience,” shares Heather. “Rutgers College was, at that time, a school in transition. It was wonderful watching the institution itself adjust to the best and the brightest female students now on campus.” Being a high achiever, she finished college in 3 ½ years, worked, married and headed off to Rutgers Law School in Newark. “Rutgers Law School was ahead of its time, with an entering class of 50% women, not the norm at other law schools then,” explains Heather.

Working for the law firm now known as Walder, Hayden & Brogan, P.A, as a summer associate before her third year of law school, Heather knew they would only hire experienced attorneys who had already passed the bar. “When I was offered a judicial clerkship, I explained to the partners that they would somehow have to live without me if they did not change their mind set and make an offer to a recent graduate who had not yet passed the bar,” recalls Heather. “Grudgingly the partners met, and agreed to hire me, but warned that I had better pass the bar.”

Her hard work paid off and she passed the bar the first time around. Through self reliance and determination, Heather moved from a law clerk at the firm in 1980 to attorney in 1981, becoming the first woman attorney at the firm. The forward thinking firm was willing to be a trendsetter based on what was going on in the legal profession at that time. They created a maternity policy for Heather that she used in 1987 and 1988, and she went on to become the firm’s first female partner and first part time partner in 1989.

This energetic, passionate pioneer of women in the legal world has certainly raised the standards for all women who followed. “In looking back, when my children were growing up, I never missed a day of work because of either of my boys. I worked 9 to 5, Monday through Friday (which is considered part-time in the legal world), which enabled me to discharge my responsibilities without anyone being able to say, “Oh, it’s Wednesday - Heather is not in.”

Being first in these two critical categories, Heather set a fast pace. “I didn’t want anyone to criticize me for being in some way unreliable based on my family obligations,” says Heather. In retrospect, Heather realizes that her goal for perfection set unrealistic benchmarks. “But I did not want to be that first woman attorney who didn’t succeed, which would have made it easier for my firm and other firms not to promote the next woman.”

Driven to succeed for the benefit of all women and still holding herself up to the highest standards, Heather has an exceptionally long list of awards and accomplishments. She speaks of her recognition in April, 2008 by Real Estate New Jersey, an industry publication that profiled 43 of New Jersey’s most prominent real estate attorneys, as one of her proudest moments. “There were not many women included. I was one of a few women recognized, described as having carved out a niche practice among legendary litigators.” Heather felt the recognition among her

peers was especially meaningful.

In May, 2008, Heather was sponsored by her firm to receive honors at the Executive Women of New Jersey, Salute to Policy Makers Awards Dinner. Heather was humbled to be among such talented past honorees as Governor Christine Todd Whitman, Commissioner Susan Bass Levin and Coach C. Vivian Stringer.

As a 1998 panelist on Attorneys & Motherhood in the 21st Century at Seton Hall University Law School, Heather suggested women seek out mentors. “One within their firm so they can understand the culture of their firm as well as a mentor outside their firm to give them a bigger perspective,” says Heather. Recalling her own mentors, Heather acknowledges Joel Sondak, who was a partner in her firm. “He was a wonderful teacher and lawyer who worked closely with me when I had both of my sons. He helped me to reposition my professional focus away from litigation toward real estate, corporate and commercial matters.

“Draw on the experience of women who have already gone down that path – what worked, what didn’t work,” advises Heather today. “And women have to stop apologizing. When men are asked to make a professional appointment, and they have Little League or soccer practice to attend, they simply say “No, I have another appointment.” But women answer apologetically, defending the need to attend the school play or soccer game. We just have to learn to say I have another equally important appointment.”

Heather has always given time to community events such as serving on the board of the Women’s Fund of New Jersey, working with the Parents Guild of Oratory Preparatory School in Summit or donating professional services for Habitat for Humanity. “I represented partner families that invested their sweat equity to become first time homeowners. Those twelve closings were among the most memorable closings I have ever attended.”

After almost 30 years of enthusiastic pursuit of excellence in her professional and personal life, Heather considers herself extremely lucky. “I tell people I have the best job in the world. I love what I do, and I have been able to have it all. I have been able to practice law with highly regarded colleagues and be married to an attorney husband for 30 years. We’ve raised two sons, a junior and senior in college, and I still look forward everyday to coming to work. It doesn’t get any better than that.”