These Women Didn’t Succeed In Spite Of Adversity \x97 But Because Of It

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Body

They didn’t just blaze a trail. They hammered one with their voices, their ideas and their grit. They did it at massive protests and in church basements, on big stages and in dusty fields. Some of the wins are known to history; some of the wins, only to them. They stood on the shoulders of ancestors and pulled along those behind them.

Civil-rights activist Amelia Boynton Robinson marched for voting rights on Bloody Sunday across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. She heard the command: “Charge on them, men.” An officer hit her across the back of the neck with a baton. She made a slight turn, and he hit her again. She fell to the ground. They pumped tear gas over her limp body.

She would recover and pick right back up, helping Black men and women register to vote.

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a Flint, Michigan, pediatrician, wanted to prove the city’s drinking water was contaminated with lead by looking at children’s bloodwork. The state refused to help. So she researched the records at her own hospital, then stood up and told her city the water was poisoned. Officials said she was wrong and accused her of creating “hysteria” before science won.

Now she’s working to make sure those harmed get the care they need.

So many women now face new adversity. The COVID epidemic disproportionately affects women, especially women of color. Women make up 46% of U.S. workers but have taken 54% of job losses during the pandemic. Generations of gender inequities have clustered them into some of the sectors most at risk \x96 food, hospitality, retail.

Women also are predominant on the pandemic’s front lines. The nurses with faces bruised from masks and goggles, the teachers trying to reassure kids from six feet away \x97 they are mostly women. Other women are quitting their jobs, taking leave or cutting back hours to care for kids at home or family who’ve fallen ill. Scholars say women’s progress could be knocked back decades.

When she was 5, Rita Moreno left everything she knew and loved in Puerto Rico to move with her mother to New York. When she first saw the Statue of Liberty, she thought the icon was holding a giant ice cream cone.

“And my mama said, \x91No, no, that’s the torch that she holds so that everybody in the world can see where this wonderful country is, where people can be what they want to be,’” Moreno said.

“That’s what it certainly represented then, especially. The lady has been wounded many, many times since then.”

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She and her mother had to make their way in a new home with a new language and little support.

“Do you have a choice to be courageous?” she said. “I guess you do. The choices are very narrow. You can either sink or swim, and I obviously chose to swim.”

Linguist Jessie “Little Doe” Baird reclaimed the language of her indigenous ancestors. On her journey from struggling single mom to MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” winner, she was at times homeless, hungry.

“I was working two or three jobs at one point to try to make ends meet,” Baird said. “It was really tight, but it was August and there were lots of blueberries. So I took the kids blueberry picking and I had some flour and baking powder. And we had a traditional Wampanoag dessert, ate that for maybe four days, which is called blueberry slump.”

Her daughter thought she had the coolest mom. They got to have dessert for every meal, Baird said, “But we were really just poor, and that’s what I had to give the kids.”

Of course, change-makers are not perfect. They have made mistakes, and many times have learned more from falling short than succeeding. Some early women’s rights leaders were racist and had a troubling pattern of working against the advancement of indigenous, Latina, Black and Asian women. The 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote, but in practice not all were allowed, especially women of color.

She’s too quiet. She’s too loud. She’s too tough. Is she tough enough? She wears too much makeup. She doesn’t even wear makeup. She probably doesn’t want the job, she has kids. She’s young, what if she has kids? She doesn’t have “gravitas.”

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has a good one.

“My name was mentioned as a possible secretary of state,” she said. She was the ambassador to the United Nations under President Bill Clinton at the time. “What happened was, there was somebody who said, \x91Well, a woman can’t be secretary of state, because Arab leaders will not deal with a woman.’

“The Arab ambassadors of the UN got together and said, \x91We’ve had no problems dealing with Ambassador Albright. We wouldn’t have any problem dealing with Secretary Albright.’”

The struggle was personal. The women who blasted new inroads often had to begin by convincing or steamrolling the people closest to them \x96 a father who didn’t believe girls should go to college, a sexist boss, a husband who wanted supper at 6.

Billie Jean King was told by men that women tennis players just didn’t have the same value as men, and therefore, would be paid less. She was shocked.

“I was giving the benefit of the doubt to the men that I knew and cared about,” she said. “And they did not come through. They all said, \x91Go home, take care of your husband,’ or \x91Nobody will want to see you guys play anyway.’”

So she walked away and helped form a tennis tour for women, where they could earn a living and retain their dignity. The men threatened to block them from the big tournaments, like Wimbledon. Didn’t matter. “And today,” she said, “it is the reason women are making money and everybody has a pathway.”

Ruby Bridges entered the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans at 6. She, her mother and four federal marshals marched right through screaming protesters. Signs that said “We don’t want to integrate.” A Black baby doll in a tiny coffin. High school boys singing a new chorus to the Battle Hymn of the Republic, “Glory, glory, segregation, the South will rise again.”

The little girl would face those angry faces every day for months. But when she got to class, her teacher, a white woman, helped her forget.

“She looked exactly like those people outside, but she was different,” said Bridges, now a civil rights advocate and author. “The lesson that I learned is that you can’t look at a person and judge them. That you have to allow yourself an opportunity to really get to know them no matter what they look like.”

Now she teaches that to kids. “None of our babies come into the world knowing anything about disliking someone because of the color of their skin. If they could be taught to be racist, they definitely can be taught not to.”

Tarana Burke started the Me Too Movement because she came to understand the power of empathy. When a girl came to tell Burke, a youth group leader, about her abuse, Burke didn’t know what to say, and sent her to a more experienced leader.

But what if, Burke thought, what if I was brave enough to say “Me too”?

“It was at a time when I was first starting to unpack what it meant to be a survivor,” Burke says, “I didn’t have that language yet to confront this thing that had been ever-present in my life, but I kept putting it away, putting it somewhere, not dealing with it.”

She found the words in 2006, “Me Too,” and began connecting survivors. It later became a global rallying cry. But the movement started with Burke and a 12-year-old brave enough to speak up.

Superstar singer-songwriter Gloria Estefan was napping on her tour bus when a fully loaded 18-wheeler slammed into the back of the bus, pushing it into a flatbed truck ahead. The front was sheared off. Snow fell inside.

“There was a deathly silence after that explosion, and all I could think of was our son who was in the back of the bus,” Estefan said. “So I say to my husband, Emilio, \x91The baby, the baby. Find Nayib.’ In the meantime, I’m trying to get up and I can’t. So I go, \x91Okay. I’ve broken my back.’

“He brought him and sat him next to me. He goes, \x91Mommy, get up. Please get up.’ I go, \x91Don’t worry. Just hold my hand.’

Six months after the accident that left her unable to walk, Estefan saw her body coming back. “I said, \x91Maybe this is the reason that I became famous. I have an opportunity to show people that regardless of things that get thrown at you, it depends on how you deal with what happens.’ So then it became a real challenge for me to be able to get back on stage for all the fans and the people that had said so many prayers.”

On March 1, 1991, in Miami she did just that, launching her Into the Light World Tour, 20 days shy of a year of that accident. Arms raised to the sky, her first song: “Get on Your Feet.”

Dolores Huerta was born 10 years after women got the right to vote. She was arrested in Fresno, California, last year at a protest over pay for workers who take care of the elderly and people with disabilities.

She wasn’t planning on getting arrested, she said. But police had a chokehold on one of the leaders and she got angry and said, take me, too.

Huerta, 89 at the time, was led away in restraints. They hurt, she said.

She co-founded what became the United Farm Workers union with Cesar Chavez. She negotiated contracts between farmworkers and growers. She led the great grape boycott for workers’ rights.

In June 1968, she stood next to Robert Kennedy at the podium at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles after he won the California presidential primary. She beamed as he thanked her for getting out the vote. She flashed a peace sign.

He was fatally shot soon after. Now she is “Zoom campaigning” for Kennedy’s grandson, Joe Kennedy, who is running for U.S. Senate from Massachusetts.

In 2011, President Barack Obama invited Ruby Bridges to the White House, where Norman Rockwell’s famous painting of her was installed. It had been 50 years since she bravely walked into that school in New Orleans.

“Having him open the door and having him walk up to me, that is the moment that it became real. That we do have an African American president,” Bridges said. “And I extended my hand to greet him, and it was so funny. He put his hands on his hips and he said, \x91Are you kidding me? I want a hug.’

“And at that moment, I realized that wasn’t really about he and I. It was about the time. The time in between and all of that hard work, and sacrifice, and protesting, and lives lost that brought these two people together at that moment in this White House.”

Activist and author Helen Zia’s family faced slurs and harassment during the McCarthy era, when anyone from a communist country was suspect. Zia’s parents fled China before communism. In the early \x9180s in Detroit, she fought for justice for Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man beaten to death by autoworkers who thought he was Japanese. The autoworkers blamed Japan, and anyone who looked Asian, for the industry’s struggles.

Today, Zia speaks out against those attacking Asian Americans over COVID-19.

“There is a thread of history that is connecting the dots here,” Zia said.

“No life goes in a straight line. It’s never all good. It’s never all bad. Life goes on like society does in a zigzag. History is like that, too. So, I try to remember, we can always make a difference no matter how difficult things are, no matter how challenging, no matter how steep the hill in front of us looks.”

How do women keep pushing forward in the next 100 years?

The same way they always have. They’ll imagine. They’ll create. They’ll fight. With grit and with sacrifice and with blueberry slump. With not enough sleep and not enough help. With bright days of self-confidence and desperate nights of self-doubt.

With courage.

Bridges has this advice: it is what the marshals told her as they walked into school that very first day, past the screaming mob. It has guided her her entire life.

“Walk straight ahead,” they told her. “Don’t look back.”

Nicole Carroll is editor in chief of USA TODAY.

Graphic

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