

## The Journey of an Activist, Thus Far

By SaraKay Smullens

Activism is my past, present, future. It is impossible for our clients to find hope and direction and achieve potential without addressing the social injustices that impede this promise. Today's vital resurgence of social work activism is an expression of our historic essence -- who we have ever been, and must remain.

I learned that activism is essential to social justice in my hometown, Baltimore, where, during my childhood, Jim Crow and degradation ruled. Because my mother was ill, an African American woman cared for me. Towson, Baltimore's suburban location of my alma mater, Goucher College, upheld all of the shameful practices my beloved Rita endured throughout her lifetime. I was involved actively in civil rights protests and arrests throughout Baltimore. In 1962, following an intensive two year effort, students peacefully ended segregation in Towson through a last resort -- plans to boycott *all* establishments. *The Baltimore Sun* followed our progression during a period when Rita was gravely ill. She lived to know our success.

Many students worked tirelessly for John Kennedy's victory. After his election, I became a regional coordinator for the Young Democrats. The president suggested that I enter a social work program at Catholic University, where I was a first year student when he was assassinated. Soon after, I entered a marriage doomed to fail, and transferred to the University of Pennsylvania.

At Penn, I fell in love with clinical work and saw firsthand that clinical devotion and activism were hand in glove priorities. My field placement was the Society to Protect Children, where a gifted, devoted rainbow coalition demonstrated how to motivate abusive parents toward hope and change.

A pattern developed: I worked to call attention to local injustices. Once there was solid support and leadership, I moved toward something else. Among my involvements: our clinical society, Women's Way, the Philadelphia Chapter of NOW, CHOICE, halting racist I-95 city plans, welcoming fathers into a birthing room, and the Sabbath of Domestic Peace, a coalition to educate clergy of all faiths that prayer alone would not stop a batterer. Today, the abused are offered protection within their houses of worship and faith communities.

While director of family life education at a large family counseling agency, my assistant, Roz Blanton, developed cancer. Like all of our support staff, Roz had no health insurance, a policy "written in stone." I led our Agency's first walk out, leading to change.

Years later, as downtown Philly was finally recovering from economic difficulty, allowing new, innovative restaurants to emerge, our trash day pickup was changed to Friday evenings.

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## Continuation:

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Weekend trash and residue welcomed diners; local synagogue services were disrupted by incessant noise. Dan Rottenberg, editor of *The Welcome Mat* (now *The Philadelphia Weekly*) ran a front-page story, using correspondence with city council members and officials to demonstrate poor judgment compounded by a runaround. Trash day was changed.

In 1975, when divorce could no longer be avoided, I convinced *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that I could write a relevant Sunday column stressing clinical care and social conscience. A brief weekly bio highlighted my profession.

During that period, Pennsylvania was the only state with three horrors, making divorce (under contest) an impossibility: no "no fault" divorce, equitable division of marital property, or alimony. Some of the letters printed about these hardships were read during sessions in Harrisburg, contributing to the reform of our divorce laws. Also printed was contact information of nuns to counsel abused Catholics with nowhere to turn.

In 1979, I remarried. My family grew from three to six, and activism through writing became increasingly important. Two books, including the codification of invisible cycles of emotional abuse and a treatment approach to address it, were published.

During Lynne Abraham's terms as district attorney (1991-2010), I accepted carefully selected domestic violence (pro bono) cases. Burnout had caused devoted social workers to leave their jobs. Six years of research into the causes of personal and professional burnout, and evidence based strategies to address it followed. This research led to a third book.

Contributions to peer review journals, popular press, and blogs continued. This includes an article critical that social workers were not involved in the DSM-5 restructuring, as well as the medical "brain disease" model, which overlooks the complexity of emotional problems. Recently I developed a macro/societal definition of burnout, illustrating how it contributed to the election of Donald Trump.

To be invited to professional meetings as far away as Canada, as well as local gatherings and book clubs to share research and speak of life as a social worker, has been humbling. In May this will be my focus at a full day symposium at Mayo. Always I speak of the privilege and promise of social work and the union of clinical expertise and political activism as the necessary expression of who we are.