

In the Broadway hit musical *Avenue Q*, one of the characters asks “what can I do with a BA in English, how can I every expect to make any difference to the human race with a BA in English”?

That was exactly the question that I asked myself after graduation from college more than 40 years ago.

I was a single parent. I had a diploma in one hand and a baby (Lisa) in the other. I had all the hopes and dreams of any young person, many of those dreams were similar to those that many of you have who are being graduated today but I also had all of the responsibilities of an adult.

**LISA:**

I was that baby that you held in your arms. What did you do next?

**GLORIA:**

I took a job in Gimble Bros. Dept. Store as an assistant buyer but the hours were long and the pay was very little. On top of all of that I was discriminated against on account of my sex because I was told that the male in the same job in the next department was being paid more because men have families to support and they assumed that I did not. Of course, he was a bachelor and I was as single parent but the fact didn't seem to matter to the

policy that was set.

**LISA:**

So what did you do? Did you file a lawsuit.

**GLORIA:**

No, I decided to change careers and become a teacher at an all boys African American public high school in Philadelphia. I also obtained a small grant to attend NYU. After teaching at Ben Franklin High School full time I would take Amtrak to NYU 2 days a week to obtain my MA in English education. Two other nights a week I taught at the Cerebral Paulsey Foundation.

**LISA:**

How many of new students attending this valadictory ceremony here today have also attended NYU while working a job or taking care of a child, or both? Please raise your hands.

**GLORIA:**

Multitasking is something we learn to do. One of my professors at NYU once asked me, “You teach in an all-black high school, so you

obviously care about their rights. Have you ever thought about your own rights?" I asked him what he meant and he said "You know, women's rights."

"What rights don't women have?" I asked. He told me that I's have to find the answer to that question myself. This was disturbing to me. I just didn't know what he was talking about . But I would learn later, the hard way.

Nancy Willard once said "Sometimes the question is more important than the answer." That was true for me at that time.

The question haunted me for many years. I thought that what I experienced as a woman was only happening to me and was an isolated instance.

I didn't realize that millions of other young women were unable to collect their court ordered child support. That millions of mothers also became the victims of violence and were the victims of sexual assault as I was and suffered gender discrimination on the job and unequal pay as I did as an Asst. Buyer in a department store. In other words, at that time I was unaware that there was a pattern and practice of gender discrimination in this nation.

**LISA:**

When did you learn the answers in the question posed top you by your NYU professor.

**GLORIA:**

Not until many years later. When I was finally able to become a lawyer and found a practice with two of my law school class mates. Women began to come to me to seek help and it was only then that I began to see the scope and the frequency of sex and the persuasiveness of sex discrimination, harassment, pregnancy discrimination, economic discrimination, child sexual abuse and violence against women and the long lasting economic emotional and physical damage that is inflicted on women's' lives.

**LISA:**

Is that when you decided to do something about it?

**GLORIA:**

Yes.

**LISA:**

Why?

**GLORIA:**

I learned in college that if I had the opportunity to act, the desire to act and the ability to act and helping others is the only moral choice I could make and that is what I do what I do.

**LISA:**

But what does helping others mean to you?

**GLORIA:**

It means empowerment. It means helping women earn their rights, assert their rights and vindicate their rights. It mean empowering them to improve their condition and status to bring them out of second class citizenship and into equal partnership with men in each and every aspect of life. Legally politically economically and socially.

**LISA:**

Over the years as you practiced law, did you see that other groups were being discriminated against as well?

**GLORIA:**

Yes, persons who are gay or lesbian, bisexual or transgender, persons who are HIV positive or have aids, racial minorities, individuals who were discriminated on account of their age, disability, religion or their ethnic origin also often suffered a denial of their rights.

**LISA:**

How did you help to empower these individuals and/or groups?

**GLORIA:**

By challenging them and working with them to live the wisdom of Mahatma Gandahi who said “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” And to that I would ad that I want to teach them that they have more power to win justice in their lives than they have every realized.

**LISA:**

Specifically, how have you done that?

**GLORIA:**

We have picketed, marched, lobbied and testified for laws to right the wrong. I have sat in and been thrown out.

We have filed and won lawsuits in court, spoken out to create a climate favorable to change in the court of public opinion.

**LISA:**

what are some examples of cases that you have litigated and won?

**GLORIA:**

We have fought back and won a case prohibiting a governmental employer from invading a prospective employee's privacy by asking a woman applying to be a police officer questions about her private sexual activities and also applying a double standard refusing to give her a job as a police officer when it was revealed that she had had an affair with a police officer currently on the force. She had been refused the job while he was permitted to maintain his job. That was a double standard and sex discrimination and by winning that precedent we have been able to protect the privacy and employment opportunities of many other women as well. We also filed the complaint with the U.S. Ethics Committee which opened an investigation into the then U.S. Senator Bob Packwood alleging that he had sexually harassed numerous prospectives and current employees of his and ultimately Sen. Packwood was forced to resign from the Senate as a result of our complaint.

We have filed pregnancy discrimination cases on behalf of an actress, Hunter Tylo, who was terminated from a role on the hit television series “Melrose Place” because she became pregnant and we proved that a woman can be bold, beautiful and pregnant all at the same time and that even the entertainment industry cannot fire a woman because she becomes pregnant.

We also successfully sued the County of Los Angeles for their practice and policy of chaining pregnant inmates to hospital beds and laundry carts as they were about to give birth and deliver their babies. A judge agreed with us and called the practice barbaric and the policy was eliminated.

We were the first in California to announce that we would challenge the constitutionality on the ban on same gender marriage in California. We filed the case on behalf of a lesbian couple and gay couple who were in long term committed loving relationships with their partners. Last year we won a victory in the California Supreme Court and the court agreed with us that such a ban violated the equal protection clause of the California Constitution and that lesbian and gay couples must enjoy the same dignity stated, respect and right to marry as opposite sex couples. This year we have also filed a case with California Supreme Court in which we challenged Proposition 8 which purports to amend the California Constitution to ban same gender marriage once again. We are awaiting the court’s decision in our case which we expect to be handed down within the



next few weeks.

We also represented a young woman who thought she was pregnant and went to an anti-choice pregnancy counseling clinic for “free pregnancy testing and counseling”. She went for the test but in addition to being given a pregnancy test she was required to listen to horrifying and frightening warnings about abortion and view photos of mutilated fetuses. We sued the pregnancy counseling center, South Bay, alleging that they were practicing medicine without a license and engaging in deceptive advertising. We won a preliminary injunction and then a permanent injunction against the clinic and put the clinics out of the pregnancy business and stopped their advertising under the word clinic. Our landmark victory encouraged similar cases to be filed in other states as well and protected women from being lured into the clinics by the hook of a free pregnancy test which had been used on thousands of women at the most vulnerable times of their lives.

We have also represented a holocaust survivor, Mel Mermelstein who saw his mother and sister go into the gas chamber at Auschwitz Berkenau death camp. He saw the smoke and never saw his beloved mother and sister again. A group who claimed Nazi death camps were a hoax and who knew that Mel was a survivor himself of the Nazi death camps sent him a letter offering him \$50,000 if he could prove that “Jews were gassed in gas chambers in Auschwitz”. When Mel offered to prove it they withdrew the offer. To stop the lies and the distortion of history and to make a legal record

for future generations our client decided to sue. We represented him and won the case before an all Christian jury thereby vindicating the memory of Mel's family and the families of the 6 million Jews killed by the Nazi's.

These are just some examples of the many cases that we have filed and won.

**LISA:**

So, once again we ask "What can I do with a BA in English" or a Masters in English Education or any other degree in Liberal Arts or a BS as well?"

**GLORIA:**

I am a lawyer but you don't have to be one to help win change. At Rose Park's funeral on November 2, 2005, U.S. Senator Barack Obama reminded us that Ms. Parks had "held no public office, she wasn't a wealthy woman, didn't appear in the society pages. And yet, when the history of his county is written, it is this small, quiet woman whose name will be remembered long after the names of senators and president have been forgotten."

That is because she was, as Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm

called her, “a heroic warrior for equality.” You, too, can be a “heroic warrior for equality,” even if you are not rich or famous. You, too, can make the choice to make a difference. U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton reminded us that we, too, can have a “Rose Parks moment.” I would urge you to have a “Rose Parks moment”: every day. Challenge yourself and challenge others to stand up for what is right,

More than anything, in the face of adversity and injustice, I want you to overcome your fear and be fearless, find your voice and not be voiceless, exert your power and not be powerless. I want you to be able to fight back and win justice for yourself, your children, your family, and your community. When you are feeling pessimistic or even hopeless, remember the words of Susan B. Anthony: “Failure is impossible.” There is no defeat in standing up for what is right and fighting injustice. As suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt once said, “Whenever a just cause reaches its flood tide. . . whatever stands in the way must fall before its overwhelming power.

Speak up, fight back, and seek positive change. Others will follow your lead and , ultimately, you’ll come out a winner.