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Profile

A True Trailblazer: Gloria Allred Has Fought for Justice and Furthered Feminism

Gloria Allred, a 2020 Lifetime Achievement Award winner, didn't wait for society to catch up to feminism. She helped lead it there.

By **Lizzy McLellan** | November 24, 2020 at 03:38 PM



Gloria Allred, of Allred, Maroko & Goldberg. Courtesy photo

Editor's note: Gloria Allred and her fellow Lifetime Achievement honorees will be celebrated at The American Lawyer Industry Awards virtual event on January 14. [Register to attend the event.](#)

Gloria Allred didn't officially start her legal career until she was in her 30s. She spent most of her 20s as a teacher in her hometown of Philadelphia and then in Los Angeles, in schools with mostly Black students where she saw the way inequality can hold people back. "In many ways," she says, "I'm still a teacher, as well as a student." But Allred is also a litigator and an advocate—for her clients, of course, but also, and unabashedly so, for the larger social causes those clients represent.

She's now done it for 44 years, all at the same firm where she hung a shingle with classmates Michael Maroko and Nathan Goldberg, fresh out of Loyola Law School. Nearly from the start, she was speaking publicly for women's rights on behalf of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women, and her firm was taking on civil rights clients, even if they couldn't pay.

"If we waited until we thought we could afford it, we might never decide we could afford it," Allred says.

The firm made waves for suing a store over its designated boys and girls toy aisles, and for representing same-sex couples, including Robin Tyler and Diane Olson, who sued the state of California in pursuit of the right to marry and became the first lesbian couple to marry in Los Angeles.

“These pro bono cases, a lot of them have been filed for the main purpose of creating a dialogue,” Maroko says. “People need to have that issue in front of them and talk about it at home and argue in order to broaden their thinking.”

Allred is perhaps best known for speaking out against famous men accused of violent crimes against women. She represented four women who testified at Bill Cosby’s criminal trial, and more of his accusers who came forward. She represented three women at the trial of Harvey Weinstein. Both men are now in prison.

She wasn’t the prosecutor in those cases, but her role was no less important. Without the support of a lawyer, Allred says, many victims are too intimidated to speak with law enforcement, let alone testify in court.

“They were able to see support not only in the prosecutorial desk, but also in the audience,” says Kristen Gibbons Feden, one of the lawyers who prosecuted Cosby in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. Feden now represents victims of sexual abuse in private practice at plaintiffs firm Saltz Mongeluzzi & Bendesky.

For some of her clients, Allred’s support simply helped them to speak publicly about their allegations in the court of public opinion, even when no legal recourse was available. Feden says Allred’s “steadfastness” in representing Cosby’s victims “helped to highlight the predatory nature of Cosby.” That helped strengthen support for Andrea Constand, the victim whose allegations resulted in criminal charges, and for the other accusers who testified, Feden says.

Allred declines to identify how much of her work is pro bono, but, she says, “it’s obvious that many of my clients wouldn’t be able to afford representation.”

Many of them never filed civil lawsuits, often because their claims were barred by statutes of limitations. With Allred by their side, they have worked to dismantle those, too.

In 2017, in the short window between Cosby’s mistrial and retrial, the #MeToo movement snowballed, becoming a force for greater change as women all over the world shared their stories of sexual harassment, assault and abuse. Maroko calls the movement “a validation of what Gloria’s been doing for more than 40 years.”

Four decades ago, being a feminist wasn’t always popular, even among women. But Allred wasn’t concerned with being popular.

“I decided when I began to be a public figure, speaking out about women’s rights, I was going to own the word,” Allred says.

Over time, more people followed suit. Goldberg says when he is with Allred, women frequently approach them to thank her for her work. Fathers of young girls have done the same, Allred says. And, she points out, within the last decade, Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to publicly refer to himself as a feminist.

Asked about the evolution of the word, Allred says, “I think the legal system had very little to do with it.”

“To change laws, to change systems, we also have to change hearts and minds,” she says. Some have suggested that Allred made a career of taking down powerful men, but it’s only a sliver of the work she has made a living—and a name—doing. Much of her work takes place behind the scenes in mediation, or in cases that involve no celebrity defendants or high-profile plaintiffs. While some people want to speak in the court of public opinion or bring criminal charges, others want to hold wrongdoers accountable while maintaining privacy. Still others want to bring about legislative change.

“Women can be inspired by the courage of other women and see that they can fight back and win,” Allred says. “We are a law firm. We also are very involved in the movement to win change. It all happens at the same time.”

Perhaps another way to describe her work is that she has often made unpopular arguments on behalf of people with very little power. And she has done so persistently and vocally, earning along the way credit as a trailblazer for arguments that eventually became popular opinion. “To a large extent, we were pioneers, and I give full credit to Gloria for that,” Goldberg says. “She was the motivating force for us to take on those fights.”

She was “a lightning rod,” Goldberg says, criticized by many for her views. But over the decades, he says, the tides turned and criticism was replaced with respect.

While acknowledging that much has changed, the 79-year-old Allred says she has no plans to retire anytime soon.

“I am interested in working until my last day on Earth,” Allred says. “If there is a great beyond, I am interested in continuing to do my work from there.”

There’s still work to do, of course. Younger generations of women have higher expectations today than their mothers and grandmothers had, and so they’re more often disappointed by inequality and ready to make change. Allred plans to support them just as she has the generations of women before them.

“I never knew when I started that 44 years later we would still have so many battles to fight,” Allred says.