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We Can Do It! (and We *Have*): Ten Life Lessons from History's Most Accomplished, Inspiring, Wonderful Women

The past few weeks have been full of news that may have overshadowed one important fact about March: It's Women's History Month. Roxanne Rivera makes sure it doesn't go unnoticed by celebrating ten wonderful women—and the lessons they can teach us all.

Albuquerque, NM (March 2008)—The month of March 2008 has certainly been a doozy. Stories about the financial crises (scary!), political scandals (shocking!), and the never-ending presidential campaign race (frankly, a little exhausting) have dominated the news. Good news, if there is any, seems to be lost in the shuffle. According to Roxanne Rivera, now is the perfect time to counteract all the bad news and controversy by celebrating something quite positive. March is Women's History Month, she points out, and we could all benefit from reflecting on the many valuable, timely, and relevant lessons to be learned from members of the "fairer sex" who made headlines throughout history.

"It would be a shame to let March pass without taking notice of the many important women who fought to create a better society and world," says Rivera, a former spokesperson for the New Mexico Republican Party and the creator of www.nocryinginconstruction.com, a website aimed at women currently working or planning to work in a male-dominated industry.

"Women from all walks of life have made such valuable contributions that are far too often overlooked or underappreciated," she adds. "Women's History Month provides a great opportunity to take note of their accomplishments and remind ourselves how important it is to continuously fight for a better world."

Here's a women's history wrap-up that takes a look at some of the women who have greatly influenced Rivera and the lessons we—men and women alike—can learn from each of them:

THE WOMAN: Eleanor Roosevelt

THE LESSON: Never back down from your principles.

“Eleanor Roosevelt was courageously outspoken,” says Rivera. “For example, in 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow Marian Anderson to sing in Constitution Hall because she was African American. To show her disapproval of their actions, Roosevelt resigned from the organization and arranged a concert to be held at the Lincoln Memorial so that Marian Anderson could sing. Seventy-five thousand people attended this concert and it was a great success. By ensuring the concert would go on, Roosevelt was able to show Americans the principles she wanted the country to follow.”

THE WOMAN: Margaret Thatcher

THE LESSON: Never compromise your own beliefs in order to please people.

“Margaret Thatcher is always herself,” says Rivera. “Often under scrutiny, she once said, ‘I will not change just to court popularity.’ She sticks to her values no matter who disagrees with her. A great example of that is her response to concerns over the budget that was set for Great Britain in 1981. Many were against her decision to raise taxes during a recession. In response to those opinions she said, ‘The Lady is not for turning.’ As the first female prime minister of England and the one with the second longest tenure in British history, Margaret Thatcher always speaks her mind and always stays true to her convictions. She does not care what people think of her, but she is a compassionate person who cares a great deal for others—qualifications that made her a great leader.”

THE WOMAN: Mary Kay Ash

THE LESSON: Trust your instincts.

“Frustrated at being continually passed over for promotions in favor of men at the company she worked for, and against the advice of her banker, lawyer, and accountant, in 1963 Mary Kay Ash took her life savings of \$5,000 and started her own company,” says Rivera. “She did so because she trusted her instincts concerning her business model for selling cosmetics. When she started her business, she knew that there existed no leader in cosmetics, she knew that women would love to be ‘entrepreneurs’ selling the products to other women, and she also knew in her gut that women would love the product and be repeat customers. It turns out that she was right to trust her instincts. Today, Mary Kay cosmetics is a billion-dollar business.”

THE WOMAN: Harriet Beecher Stowe

THE LESSON: You’re never too busy to change the world.

“Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the well-known anti-slavery book, and in doing so helped move the country closer to abolishing slavery,” says Rivera. “She had seven children, and back in 1852, women were expected to take care of the house and the children. Much of Stowe’s time was spent doing just that. But Stowe knew that making an effort to condemn slavery was just as important (if not more so) as providing for her own family. So between taking care of children and keeping house, she found time to write her book. She once said, ‘Nothing but deadly determination enables me ever to write. It is rowing against wind and tide.’ Her ‘deadly determination’ to do what was right should be an inspiration to us all.”

THE WOMAN: Babe Didrikson Zaharias

THE LESSON: Don't let setbacks keep you from getting ahead.

“With achievements in golf, basketball, and track and field, she is probably one of the greatest athletes in the history of the U.S.,” says Rivera. “She felt that there was no crying in athletics and as such she shed no tears when her athletic career was attacked at the time. In fact, when she was stripped of her amateur status by the U.S. Golf Association, she said, ‘When you get a big setback, there is no use crying about it.’ She fought adversity not by feeling sorry for herself but by excelling in whichever sport she competed, and that is the best way to get ahead.”

THE WOMAN: Golda Meir

THE LESSON: Hard work pays off.

“Meir was the first female prime minister of Israel and played an important role in helping to build the nation,” says Rivera. “She had the stamina of ten men and was under more pressure than any woman head of state has probably ever been. In addition to being prime minister of the country, she was one of only two women to sign the Israeli Declaration of Independence at the country’s inception in 1948. Meir learned the importance of hard work from a young age. She began helping her mother manage her family’s small grocery store when she was just eight years old. She went on to live and work at a kibbutz, where she picked almonds, planted trees, and cleaned out chicken coops. Her life’s achievements show that hard work really does pay off.”

THE WOMAN: Oprah Winfrey

THE LESSON: Be open to learning from others.

“Oprah is another woman who has intelligently trusted her instincts throughout her career,” says Rivera. “She has even said that her success is due to her ability to trust her gut instinct. And one thing she knew instinctively is that in order to get ahead she would have to learn from those who had already reached success in the business. She has said that she watched Phil Donahue every day and learned from him rather than trying to one-up him, put him down, or lessen his importance in the business.”

THE WOMAN: Mother Teresa

THE LESSON: Accept no limitations.

“She knew that she could do anything and so she dedicated her life to helping the poor and the sick,” says Rivera. “After being a nun for fifteen years, she felt that she needed to do more to help the destitute people she encountered where she taught school in Calcutta. In 1950 she received permission from the Vatican to create a new order, the Missionaries of Charity, whose focus was helping the less fortunate and the ill. She started out with only thirteen nuns in Calcutta, and today over four thousand nuns care for the poor, homeless, and ill all around the world. Aside from being a long-standing advocate of the less fortunate, Mother Teresa is known for her cheerful attitude.”

THE WOMAN: Amelia Earhart

THE LESSON: Know the value of tenacity.

“Earhart was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic,” says Rivera. “And one of my favorite quotes from her says it all. She said, ‘The most difficult thing is the decision to act; the rest is merely tenacity. The fears are paper tigers. You can do anything that you

decide to do.’ These sentiments remind me of my favorite speech, which is also the shortest, by Winston Churchill. He said, ‘Never, ever, ever, ever, ever give up.’ And Earhart didn’t. Churchill’s quote hangs on my ‘wall of inspiration’ in my office and Earhart’s brave determination should serve as an inspiration to anyone who wants to achieve things others haven’t.”

THE WOMAN: Sandra Day O’Connor

THE LESSON: Don’t hesitate to break down barriers.

“Though she eventually became the first woman member of the Supreme Court, when O’Connor first graduated from college, she discovered that California was not hiring women lawyers,” says Rivera. “But she didn’t let that prevent her from doing what she loved. So, she went to an attorney’s office where she had heard a woman lawyer had previously been hired and made her presence known, so to speak. She once said of the experience, ‘It wasn’t emotional. It was practical. I needed a job...I sat in that office for two months until he hired me.’ She did not take things personally. She just realized that the double standard existed, and she decided to work with it, not against it. She never let the intense scrutiny that came with being the first woman on the Supreme Court get her down—she handled it with class and humor.”

“These women are precisely why we shouldn’t let Women’s History Month get lost in the deluge of scandal, controversy, and doom & gloom predictions,” concludes Rivera. “‘Women’s History’ is not some puff piece or feel-good feminist topic. Indeed, these women are proof that, regardless of gender, the human spirit can and does prevail. Okay, it’s true that March 2008 hasn’t been particularly inspiring for a lot of reasons, but by taking a look at the accomplishments of women in history, we can find true inspiration and hope.”

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About Roxanne Rivera:

In 1981, using a personal savings of \$1,200, Rivera co-founded a sole proprietorship construction service business and grew it to a \$13 million company that incorporated in 1989. She oversaw all operations and up to 100 employees plus subcontractors in three offices throughout New Mexico. She wrote, marketed, and secured multi-million-dollar contracts in both the government and private sectors.

Rivera's key clients included the US Army Corps of Engineers, White Sands Missile Range, the US Air Force, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, the Department of Defense, Los Alamos National Laboratory, Intel, General Electric, Ethicon, and Rockwell International.

Her construction firm received numerous small business awards, including two Small Business Administrator's Awards of Excellence and several nominations for Small Business Prime Contractor of the Year. She was named Female Executive of the Year by the National Association of Female Executives in 1995. Her firm was listed in the Top 500 Hispanic-Owned Businesses in the United States for five consecutive years.

Rivera has been appointed to several national advisory committees, most recently appointed by Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao to the National Advisory Committee on Ergonomics where she was the only businessperson on the committee.

She has served on both the Association of Builders and Contractors and the Associated General Contractors Boards of Directors. She also served on the Board of Directors for the University of New Mexico Construction Program Advisory Council, which she helped to found. Rivera has been an active community leader, currently serving on the board for the YWCA, and has worked extensively with ARCA, the Association for Retarded Citizens of Albuquerque.

Rivera has also spoken at and conducted seminars throughout the country with regard to Communication in the Construction Industry and Women in Construction.

Currently, she serves as CEO of Syntactics Communication Skills, LLC, a company that offers presentation and speaking skills training and coaching to executives at every level. In addition, she provides corporate consulting through KEYGroup[®], an international consulting, training, and assessment firm based in Pittsburgh, PA.

For more information, please visit www.nocryinginconstruction.com.