

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

3/29/07

Assistant Commissioner Prussack – Women's History Month Remarks

As we have seen today, with social, technological, scientific, financial, political and other types of progress, women are continuing to make extraordinary achievements and have profound impact on every aspect of life.

The male dominated society of the past is truly history as women are leading nations, traveling in space, running billion dollar companies and making more of a difference today than at any other time. Women now lead men in graduation numbers and rates at our nation's universities and colleges.

For decades, women here in City government have made profound contributions to the delivery of services and to the people of the city of New York. Today, women occupy more positions of leadership in City government and at all levels of government and the private sector than ever before.

This is particularly true at DJJ, where women presently occupy the titles of First Deputy Commissioner, Assistant Commissioner, Executive Director, Special Officers, Juvenile Counselors, Congregate Care Specialists, Case Managers and many others. The Chair of the City Council's Juvenile Justice Committee is also a woman as is the President of the City Council. In addition, DJJ was among the first agencies to have women serve as Commissioner.

At DJJ, 47% of our present staff members are women. However, that certainly was not always the case. When I started working at what was then known as Spofford, more than 30 years ago, there were very few women working in detention, especially boys detention, which as you know is the majority of the population we serve. In fact, I was one of the first women to work with boys in our agency. And, while I'd like to say the male staff welcomed us with open arms, sadly this was not the case. The prevailing attitude seemed to be - how can women work with boys, what are they going to do, they'll just be in the way, they'll create more problems than they'll solve, they won't be able to handle these kids, how are they going to restrain anyone, we'll end up having to protect them, and they'll get us hurt. And those were among the nicer things that were said. This was hard stuff, but being young and perhaps foolish, I forged on and pretended not to hear what I was hearing. I wanted to work with kids and I wanted to work with these kids – the kids most of the city did not want to work with, in fact, the kids who most of the city did not want to hear about. And, it was not easy. Talk about your hostile work environment. Back in those days, we did not have annual EEO training, or so it seemed. You just had to deal and deal I did. I have to admit, it was tough, frustrating and hurtful. I can still hear my mother's constant refrain, "when are you going to get out of that place." – she could not understand why

I wanted to work in such an environment. And, I probably shed my share of tears, but I endured with the help of a select few men and women, who mentored me, treated me fairly, saw my potential and encouraged me. There was one woman in particular, a tough supervisor, who helped me the most. She told me not to be afraid, taught me what to do and say in particularly hostile situations, taught me how to handle the sexual innuendos, and modeled for me how to be intelligent, strong, tough, and fair. And, today, although our work environment in detention has improved dramatically, I try to do the same for young women I see coming in the door. I want them to know that there are no limitations on what they can do.

Today, women at DJJ serve as role models to DJJ staff as well as to residents. DJJ's dynamic demonstrates to our residents that there is opportunity to achieve a compelling career and make a difference, regardless of gender. And, there are so many great female role models in our agency. Hard working people like Donna Locke, who started as a secretary, and who is now an Executive Director or Irene Rosa, who also started as a secretary and is now the Property Manager at Horizon. Or a woman, such as Susan Lukin, who has worked tirelessly and excellently as a Case Manager in secure detention for well over 30 years. Or, Marilyn Farmer, who was a Case Manager in CBI and is now our Director of Discharge Planning. These are just a few of our shining stars – women, who through their intelligence, dignity and work ethic demonstrate everyday how women make the DJJ world go round.

I would be remiss in talking about Women's History Month without mentioning being a mother and also being a professional woman. When I became an Executive Director, I was also a new mother. It was hard to continue to work those 10 - 12 hour days when you had a baby waiting in day care to be picked up. I can remember feeling at a distinct disadvantage - because I left early, early being 5:45 p.m. each day. At the time, none of my colleagues were mothers. None of the managers had to rush out to pick up their child. I was envious of their long work day, which I could no longer work. And, I have to admit I've silently felt that way up until recently when Judy Pincus came into our agency. Here was a woman in our agency, in a high power position, with young children. Hallelujah! Someone in a high position who could model for me doing it all and who would understand. I would not be the only manager having to leave to go to a parent/teacher conference or a school play or stay home because my child was ill. And, although the differences have been subtle, they have been dramatic for me and I want to thank Judy for that. Motherhood and a career is a necessity and a right, but not always easy. Our agency is filled with hard working mothers, who sacrifice much with their difficult work hours, weekend work, and their ability to spend quality time with their own children. This was again brought home to me the other day, when I was hearing Tanya Williams, a supervisor at the 145th Street Group Home, describe how she had spent her whole career, up until last Sunday working daily 12 hour work shifts and a 60 hour work week. As most of you know, this past Sunday, our child care staff at our DJJ-run NSD group homes finally achieved a work reduction to a more normal schedule of an 8 hour work day and a 40-

hour work week. Anyway, Ms. Williams was discussing how during her 18 years with us, she had had a baby and how that baby was now 16 years old and couldn't believe it when his mother told him that she was finally going to be home well before dinner and that she would actually be able to now have dinner with him. Imagine, 16 years, of working 7 am to 7 p.m. and not having breakfast, lunch or dinner with your child five days a week. Incredible! Now, that's sacrifice and that's an example of the type of women we have working in our agency.

Finally, in closing, I'd like to say that Women's History Month is not just about women. It is about everyone and anyone who has embraced the concept of equality and working together to have a positive impact and make a difference in all aspects and facets of life.

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