

# Sustain the Sustainers: Lessons from Women of Achievement Awardees

Michelle Glowarcki-Dudka  
*Ball State University*

Jennifer Murray  
*Ball State University*

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## **Sustain the Sustainers: Lessons from Women of Achievement Awardees**

Michelle Glowacki-Dudka and Jennifer Murray, Ball State University, USA

Social movements proceed slowly as change takes time and energy from multiple directions and stakeholders. Leaders in social movements may have become active for various reasons such as to support an idea, to embrace a utopian vision of the future, or to follow a charismatic leader. Yet, over time, the slow pace of change and drifts in the movement's vision and purpose may lead to fluctuations of commitment or disenchantment or burnout. How do leaders in social movements continue to find fulfillment, purpose, and passion in their work? Whom do they draw upon for renewal? What can they teach future leaders? How do they contribute to extending the legacy of the movement to others? What tools sustain and support the people, in order to sustain the movement?

Women's leadership and learning, while recognized as valuable, is still marginalized, especially as it pertains to their contributions to social movements and social change. In *Iron Butterflies: Women Transforming Themselves and the World*, Birute Regine (2010) describes women in leadership roles worldwide whose feminine power leads to healing and social transformation. "In a complex environment and an interconnected world, skills associated with women will prove more and more effective and keenly pertinent: their holistic view of the world, their ability to see interconnections among things, their relational intelligence, their tendencies toward collaboration and inclusion, their ability to empathize" (p. 15).

Our university honors Women of Achievement (IWA) through an award given to women statewide who enrich the lives of others through outstanding accomplishments in a variety of fields, such as: education or research, community or university service, the business community, advocacy for women, and women's health issues. Our study examines women across the state whose leadership has transformed organizations, social movements, and opportunities for women.

For this conference roundtable, we will present preliminary findings from six "Women of Achievement," as we collect the oral histories of these award-winning women. Within a larger study, our findings seek to answer the research questions: How do IWA awardees describe their leadership and their life experience? How do awardees stay passionate and committed to their work over extended time periods? How do they support policies and practices for women through their leadership? How do awardees develop a legacy for others who have similar interests and leadership aspirations/qualities? And, who or what helped to sustain their commitment and passion to their calling?

The oral history interviews were in December, 2012 and January, 2013. The stories have been collected and early themes have been found to grow and develop a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) for this group of women. For the purposes of the AERC roundtable this summer, we will focus on six of the women. We explore their personal and professional journeys, characteristics that have led them to success, and how they stay passionate, connected, and committed.

Adult educators often make due with limited funds, time, and human resources when working to change the world. For this reason, learning how to strengthen the leaders and engage volunteers is crucial. We will synthesize the principles learned from these successful women and reframe them for use in the world of adult education.

### **Stories of the Six Women of Achievement**

*Jill* spent much of her life as a graphic artist while being a wife and mother. Yet, her calling was with NOW (the National Organization for Women), and serving as a lobbyist for women's issues within state politics. Like many of our interviewees, she was an active force in building political coalitions for getting the Equal Rights Amendment ratified in Indiana, the last state to do so.

*Lois* felt called to service as a young adult through the church, in the Peace Corps, and as a foster parent in a group home, and with a chapter of NOW. When her family settled back in her hometown, she found her work in directing and growing the regional Second Harvest Food Bank from a newly formed group to one that serves multiple counties and distributes over a million pounds of food each month. Currently, she is retired looking for what is next to come.

*Mary* is an educator and has been a force for change in her neighborhood for children and families. Even retired, she is extremely active building up community groups and places for children to learn when they are not formally in school.

*Pat* is an entrepreneur, philanthropist, and also served in the state government as Secretary of Commerce. She and a friend built their company as they saw a need for women's luggage and began a small business. With a core team and strong partnership, their company was very successful.

*Priscilla* has always been involved in sports. She played as a girl and built her career through coaching and athletics at a large high school. She began teaching and coaching before Title IX. Early in her career, she coached gymnastics, but through her dedication she had increasing leadership roles. When she retired she was the Assistant Principal and Athletic Director for the whole school of 4000 students with more than 80 coaches and athletic staff. She also has been a leader in the statewide Athletic Director Association and was able to work with teams at the 1994 Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia.

*Sandra* came to our university as the president's wife, but she had been active in state government in Delaware. She was a very active member of AAUW and other organizations in the community. She also helped to establish an Alzheimer's respite center and the men's sleeping room for Christian ministries. She made her home here and was a leader in the community, not as primary breadwinner, but as a local force.

Each of these women's stories share lessons about crafting a "successful" life, but also about being a leader in the various roles that we hold. Their stories provide key elements to leadership and begin to shape a framework of leading, balancing, juggling, negotiating, organizing, and choosing the best route toward a well-lived journey. The roundtable discussion will begin with key findings from our study and some of the stories from the women. During the discussion, we will ask the participants to provide examples of issues and movements in which they and their students are involved. We will then brainstorm ways to apply the principles generated from the research. We will also ask the participants to reflect on any lessons they have learned from their years as leaders, both from failures and successes, which can enhance the research. We invite you to join us in this discussion.