

Mom Was A Feminist (But she'd never admit it)

When I was a youngster, I figured out that my mom was not nurturing and supportive like a lot of my buddies' mothers. It chafed my ass. It took decades for me to develop an awareness of her other characteristics.

Harriet Arlette Rugg (who went by H. Arlette C**I after she married dad) was raised in a working-class Republican family in the tiny Iowa town of Tama, in the 20s and 30s. She went to the University of Iowa in 1939 thinking that she might earn a two-year teaching license. There were members of her community who thought it was scandalous for a woman to "go off to college". Education shaming? She soon found out that she wasn't really interested in teaching or in going to class and dropped out.**

But she did decide that she wanted to seek a career in business. Chicago was a few hours away and the biggest business hub between New York and LA. She moved to Chicago, got an office job, and moved in with some other single ladies who worked at the same place. This really set off the local natterers. "Why would a proper young woman want to go to the wicked city ???" Ambition shaming?

When the US entered World War II, she postponed her dream of a business career and enlisted in the Women's Army Corp. In the twisted imaginations of her gossipy small town, small minded, unenlightened neighbors, a female would only join the service so she could have lots of sex with soldier boys. Service shaming?

In the segregated WWII military, she was assigned to a huge base in Georgia. There were black WACs on the base as well, in their own separate, and surely not equal, area. There were only a few places where the Afro-American and the Euro-American servicewomen could interact. One of those was the PX. While shopping there, mom met and conversed with a couple of her black counterparts. They hit it off and the ladies invited mom to join them at their barracks on Sunday evening as they were free to cook whatever they liked on that one night of the week. Mom went, had supper, and enjoyed the company of her new friends.

When she returned to her barracks and reported her experience to her drill sergeant, he was less than thrilled. When she told him that she wanted to repay their kind hospitality, he angrily told her that blacks could not and would not set foot in *his* barracks. Mom responded in a lively tone, pointing out the unreasonableness and unjustness of his position. She only relented when he threatened to discipline

her with a fine and reduction in rank if she continued to argue with him. Remember, mom had grown up in an all-white town, in the conservative heartland, where racism and bigotry were openly expressed in “polite conversation”.

After boot camp, she attended technical training in administrating a base post office. After graduating but before being dispatched to various bases around the world, the women soldiers were gathered together for an important warning: “You will be assigned to bases located anywhere in the Pacific or Atlantic theaters. There will also be many *servicemen* assigned to those same bases. Do not assume that a man is necessarily a *good* guy just because he is an American soldier. If you meet a guy that you are interested in, don’t meet up with him alone. Take a friend along and double date or make it a group date. That way you will have at least one servicewoman along with you to help maintain a safe situation.”

A few months later mom found herself in just such a situation. A friend had met a serviceman she wanted to get to know, so she invited mom to double date his friend. Mom said that she wasn’t really interested in dating anyone but that she would go along in order to help keep her friend safe. The four of them went to a bar and had some drinks. Mom’s date was

getting what was then called “handsy” but was actually unwanted physical contact, or assault.

Mom was 5’7”, which was tall for a female at that time. She had just finished boot and training camps and was in the best physical shape of her life. In addition, she had always had and always would have, a very strong personality. She had no trouble fending the guy off while making sure her friend’s date wasn’t doing anything unwanted, either.

At the end of the evening, as the four of them were saying their goodnights, her visibly disheveled *date* said; “You must have a lot of self-control”, to which mom zinged “I do, but I didn’t have to use any of it tonight”.

My mom rose to the rank of Staff Sargent supervising a base post office. She was great at her job and earned the respect of those she served with. She was stationed on a hospital base on a small island in the South Pacific. There was a militarized base on the other side of the same island. One night the military side was bombed by Japanese warplanes. When the air-raid sirens went off, she and her barrack-mates went outside and watched while their fellow American soldiers were being bombed and killed a few miles away. Meanwhile dad, who had also enlisted after Pearl Harbor,

loaded US ships at port in Perth, Australia all day and got himself loaded in the Aussie bars all night. Getting “bombed” had an entirely different meaning to him than it did to her. He never saw an enemy ship or plane and never heard a shot fired in anger. He never rose above the rank that he earned in training camp.

When they were discharged, they both returned to Iowa, resumed their romantic relationship, and soon got married. There were loads of jobs for guys with honorable discharges. Women veterans were not held in such high regard. The only choices mom felt she had were; be a teacher, be a nurse, or be a secretary. She did not want to go back to college at that point, so teacher and nurse were out. However, her work running the post office qualified her for a secretarial position. She became a secretary in a large office at a huge aeronautics’ factory in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The same company dad worked for, Collins Radio.

Even though she was not yet familiar with the term “glass ceiling” her *head* got familiar with it quickly, as it was constantly bumping up against it. The men running the administrative side realized that mom was smart, responsible, and detail oriented. The perfect qualifications for being a manager..... except for her gender. So, they would assign her to work with the new guys fresh out of college and she would

teach them how to do their jobs. If they showed even a mediocre level of competence, they would get promoted in two or three years and she would get another newbie to train. Rinse and repeat. Mom was understandably frustrated. Some might say reasonably enraged. But she was completely professional at work and did most of her venting at home towards dad and I. It was many years later before I understood the power dynamics that were in play.

After a while, one of the vice-presidents decided that he would rather have someone with my mother's skill set making his life easier rather than helping the rookies learn the play-book. So, she was promoted to executive secretary by a man who appreciated her brains and work ethic and treated her with as much respect as a woman could expect in that day and age.

One day he suggested that she take an "Executive Assistant" course that was being offered at the local community college. He told her that once she earned the commensurate credential, he could get her a significant raise in pay. She thanked him and took the course. It was a one semester course with two three-hour night classes per week. Over the course of the semester mom was classmates with several women she knew from work and several more that worked for the same company, that she had not previously met. They

informed her that there was a local chapter for credentialed Executive Assistants who all worked for the same company as she did. She was invited to join pending her successful graduation and she accepted.

After she graduated and earned her credential, her boss gave her his heartfelt congratulations and assured her that he would put in the request for her pay raise immediately. She informed him that there were approximately a dozen other women at the firm who all held the same credential but had not received the raise. She further stated that it would only be fair that they all receive the same raise that he had promised her. This led to some hemming and hawing, as well as a bit of stammering on his part. He finally hung his head and said “While I agree with your point, there just isn’t enough money available in the budget to give all twelve of the credentialed E.A.s the raise. Mom replied “When you have enough money to give us all the raise, I will take mine”. Shortly after that, all of the women who had earned the credential, including mom, received the same raise.

Later on, while still working at Collins, mom made the acquaintance of a young woman named Laquesta. She was the first Afro-American woman to work in the secretarial pool. While many of the other secretaries snubbed her, mom made it a point to introduce herself and ask if she could sit with her

at lunch. They not only became friends but it opened the door for some of the other ladies to become cordial with Laquesta as well.

At some point mom noticed that Laquesta frequently had bruises on her face and neck. Mom asked her if she was alright. Laquesta initially demurred from explaining her injuries. But eventually she opened up and told mom that her boyfriend who was both jealous and hot tempered often hit and/or choked her. That night mom told dad that she wanted to help her new friend get out of the abusive situation that she was in. Dad agreed and they made a plan. The next day mom approached Laquesta and said that her and dad would be glad to loan her enough money to rent her own place and accompany her when she moved out in order to discourage the boyfriend from intervening. She declined and insisted that “Don’t worry, I can take care of it”. Mom *was* worried but accepted her friend’s decision. A few days later Laquesta shot her abusive boyfriend to death when he attacked her. She was charged with voluntary manslaughter as the police determined that she had continued to pump bullets into him after he was no longer a threat.

At her trial mom testified both to the signs of abuse that she had witnessed as well as to Laquesta’s excellent character as displayed in the workplace.

I heard these stories in bits and pieces as I was growing up. Mostly from my dad. And I didn't know about the raises for the E.A.s until after my mom's funeral when I read a letter that the Association of Executive Assistants had sent in memory of my mom, thanking her for her solidarity in getting the raises for her colleagues

Even though she always claimed to be a Republican, while dad was a lifelong observant Democrat, I remember her taking me in the voting booth with her, when I was little, and voting for a Democrat for president "because he is smarter and will be better for the country". I believe that she eschewed the label of Feminist, or Democrat, because she was afraid it would "out" her as some kind of left-wing beatnik chick. No one would have *ever* made that mischaracterization. But she somehow hammered her husband and her son into card carrying feminists while being in denial that she was one herself.

ps She never burned her bra, even after a double mastectomy. But if she were alive today, she would burn her membership card from the Republican party in protest of their machinations in support of Trump. She would have voted for Hillary too. But she not might have admitted it.....at first.