Five Noteworthy American Women Since 1920

Their contributions have spanned the one hundred years since the Nineteenth Amendment was passed on August 19, 1920.
Marian Wright Edelman

Marian Wright Edelman was born in 1939 in South Carolina. Her father, a Baptist minister who died when Marian was a young teenager, pushed her to pursue an education. After high school, Edelman attended Spellman College and graduated Valedictorian in 1960. She then was a John Hay fellow at Yale law School, earning her law degree in 1963. She was the first African-American woman to be admitted to the Mississippi Bar.

She began her law career working for the NAACP Legal and Education Fund and representing activists during the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964. She also contributed to the establishment of the Head Start program. She moved to Washington, D.C. in 1968 where she worked organizing The Poor People’s Campaign and the Southern Leadership Conference. She founded the Washington Research Project, a public interest group. She was also involved in several major segregation cases.

Very interested in children’s issues, she founded the Children’s Defense Fund, a non-profit organization that advocates for poor children, children of color and children with disabilities. The organization identifies issues affecting children, researches possible solutions and lobbies for legislation to improve the lives of children. The organization was instrumental in the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 as well as the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 and the Child Income Tax Credit. The Children’s Defense Fund has continued to lobby for issues related to children such as head Start, Medicaid, the Foster Care Program, issues surrounding homeless children and the Children’s Health Insurance Program. It also awards educational scholarships and has established adolescent pregnancy prevention, gun violence prevention and ending child poverty campaigns as well as a number of child enrichment programs. In recent years, the CDF has issued a number of reports on various topics affecting children.
For decades now, Marian Wright Edelman has continued to be a committed advocate for children. Her dedicated and hard work has earned her a number of awards including the Albert Schweitzer award for Humanitarianism. A true hero to children, her work has positively affected the lives of millions of American children. Thank you, Maria.

Elizabeth Platz

On November 22, 1970, Elizabeth (Beth) Alvina Platz became the first woman to be ordained in the Lutheran Church from any Lutheran body in North America. Ordained by the Lutheran Church in America, (LCA), she was followed two months later by the ordination of Barbara Andrews by the American Lutheran Church, (ALC). In 1976, the LCA and the ALC merged to become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Rev. Platz graduated from the Gettysburg Seminary in 1970 during which time she served as a lay pastor at the Lutheran Campus Ministry at the University of Maryland for five years. After ordination, she continued her campus ministry by serving as Chaplain of the Lutheran Campus Ministry at the University of Maryland for a total of 47 years. In addition, she served as a supply pastor and Interim Pastor for CTs from March through August of 1985.

Her half century service is quite remarkable considering the stress and discrimination under which especially the early women in the ministry endured. She credits her success in ordination to male ministry colleagues as well as the President of the Gettysburg Seminary and the Maryland Synod at the time. She explains in, “My story, Our Story,” that the ordination of women at the time of her ordination was controversial, and opposition to her ordination drew criticism from other clergy and leaders in the church who even called her, “the whore of Babylon,” among other insults. The stress and discrimination was so fierce, some women asked to be de-rostered. All in all, Pastor Platz feels that she received solid
support and encouragement from her male colleagues who believed in her. She said of her ordination and ministry, “I was not trying to make a statement,” rather, “It was a spiritual calling.” Saying, “I’m not much of a women’s libber…,” she turned the narrative around from cultural concerns to her earnest spiritual calling to serve the Gospel. This year will mark the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the church. Because of her landmark ordination, she is more often remembered for being the first woman ordained rather than her 47 years of service in the ministry.

Ida Lupino

Ida Lupino was born in London in 1918 to a theatrical family who traced their ancestry back to the Renaissance. Her mother was an actress and her father a musical comedy star. When Ida was still in primary school, she had memorized every line that every leading lady had in the Shakespeare plays. Even though she performed as a child, her first love was writing. Eventually immigrating to the United States, she became an American citizen in 1948. She contracted polio in 1934 and was assigned to bed rest for a year. She spent the time writing incessantly. Although acting in American films during the classic studio days of the late thirties and forties, she longed to not only write but also to direct. She wrote or co-wrote a number of films and hundreds of TV programs and was the only woman to have directed episodes of “The Twilight Zone.” Lupino was the first woman to direct a Film Noir, “The Hitchhiker,” in 1953. A cinematographer once said of Lupino, “She knew more about lenses and angles than anyone.”

Ida Lupino turned the male and female roles in some of her films on their heads. Instead of the female characters always stereotyped as the problem, portrayed as helpless or acting as femme fatales with a flaw, she portrayed male characters with the
angst in films such as, “The Bigamist.” Modern film historians and critics cast Lupino as a feminist pioneer in modernist filmmaking. Although Lupino never called herself a feminist, she once said that sometimes she pretended to know less than she did, as it was easier to get cameramen and production crew to cooperate. Lupino’s directing career in the studio system especially in the late forties and fifties was extremely rare in Hollywood. Her career in writing, directing and acting continued for decades. She said during an interview in later life that she wanted more women to break through and be hired in the directing and filmmaking industry and that women had something unique to bring to the art.

Barbara C. Jordan

Barbara C. Jordan was a lawyer, civil rights champion and United States Congresswoman. She was the first African American to serve in the Texas State Senate since Reconstruction, the first African American Woman from the South to serve in the United States Congress and the first woman and first African American to deliver a keynote speech at a National Democratic Convention. She also served 1 day as the Acting Governor of Texas, the only African American to serve in this position to date. Jordan is well known for her eloquent opening speech during the Judiciary Committee’s hearings on the impeachment of Richard Nixon. During her speech, she never mentioned the President, but rather she stuck to the U.S. Constitution, it provisions and its consequences and impact. American Rhetorics lists Jordan number 5 in the 100 best speeches of the 20th Century.

Jordan was also considered as a running mate for Jimmy Carter’s bid for President in the 1970’s. Jordan served in Congress from January 1973 to January 1979. She was then diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and returned to Austin, Texas, her home city, where she taught law. Jordan, due to segregation could not attend
the University of Texas at Austin during the 50’s, so she attended Texas Southern University, a historic Black college where she graduated Magna Cum Laude. She attended law school at Boston University. She was known throughout her years of education as a champion debater, and while at Texas Southern University, she beat out debaters from Yale and Brown and tied with debaters from Harvard.

Barbara Jordan earned a number of award and honors including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Springarn Award and the second only award given to women from the U.S. Military Academy (the Sylvanus Thayer Award). She was also inducted into the Texas Women Hall of Fame as well as the National Women’s Hall of Fame. Jordan has many schools and other buildings and roads named after her as well as statues erected in her likeness and honor. She was an intellectual giant of moral purpose and a true patriot that believed in the U.S. Constitution and democracy. Developing Leukemia, and cared for by her long time life partner, Nancy Earl, an educational psychologist. Jordan died at the age of 59 in 1996 of pneumonia. Known for her advocacy of progressive politics, Her legacy lives on.

Tammy Duckworth

Ladda Tammy Duckworth is an American Army combat veteran and currently serves as the junior United States Senator from Illinois along with Dick Durbin. Senator Duckworth is the first Thai/American to serve in Congress, the first woman with a disability to serve in Congress, the first double amputee to serve in Congress, the first woman to give birth while serving in Congress, and the first to breast feed her baby on the floor of the Senate. Born in Bangkok, her mother is of Thai descent, and her father, Franklin Duckworth, also a military veteran can trace the family roots back to the American Revolutionary War. Raised internationally, her family moved to Hawaii when she was 16. She graduated with honors from
McKinley High School in Honolulu, earned her B.A from the University of Hawaii, her Masters from George Washington University and her PhD from Capella University.

In 1990, while attending George Washington University, and following in her father’s footsteps, (a WWII veteran), and her ancestors who served in the Revolutionary War, Duckworth joined the Army. She became a helicopter pilot, as that was one of the few combat positions open to women. In 2004, Duckworth was deployed to Iraq. While co-piloting a mission, her Blackhawk helicopter was hit by a rocket from insurgents. Tammy lost one of her legs to the hip, the other above the knee and broke one arm in many places. Today, she uses prosthetics and has limited use of the one arm. She earned a Purple Heart, an Air Medal, Meritorious Service Medal among a number of other medals and honors. She remained in the Army Reserve, promoted to Lt. Colonel and retired from military service in 2014.

Over the years, Duckworth has served in a number of prestigious positions including Director of Veterans Affairs for Illinois and Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs for the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. She also spoke at the 2008, 2012 and the 2017 Democratic Conventions. She was elected to the United States Congress from the 8th district of Illinois and served from 2013 to 2017 when she was elected to the Senate in 2017. She has been mentioned as a possible running mate for Joe Biden in the 2020 Presidential election.

Tammy Duckworth serves as an example and inspiration to women and people with disabilities that they with hard work and drive can achieve great things and overcome adversity. She has been honored by women’s groups, disability organizations and former Bob Dole dedicated his autobiography in part to Senator Duckworth. You go, girl!

— Contributed by Jo Johnson
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