The Edge: Women’s History Month: Celebrating Those That Dare

Beth Gitlin
Women’s Business Center
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I write this column in honor of my great aunt Celia Gitlin, whom I never met, because she died at the age of 16 in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York City on March 25, 1911. It was the deadliest industrial disaster in the history of the city, and one of the worst in the country, causing the deaths of 146 garment workers including 123 women from Italian and Jewish descent. She had bravely emigrated from Belarus to New York just months before the fire to seek a better life, but was instead faced with immense poverty and horrifying working conditions. Her bravery and willingness to “do something” along with so many others in the country like her even when faced with death, gave way to historical social change for women, including voting rights and better working conditions. I stand upon her shoulders and so many other women who have risked their lives, sacrificed for others and with grit and determination have made a better life for themselves and their families.

March is National Women’s History Month. This year’s theme “Weaving the Stories of Women’s Lives” presents the opportunity to weave women’s stories – individually and collectively – into the essential fabric of our nation’s history. Accounts of the lives of individual
women are critically important because they reveal exceptionally strong role models who share a more expansive vision of what a woman can do. The stories of women’s lives, and the choices they made, encourage girls and young women to think larger and bolder, and give boys and men a fuller understanding of the female experience. Knowing women’s achievements challenges stereotypes and upends social assumptions about who women are and what women can accomplish today.

We have seen “firsts” for many women over the years – the first female four-star general, the first female astronaut, the first female CEO of a Fortune 500 company, the first female prime minister, the first female fighter pilot… the list goes on. It is great to be able to honor all of these “firsts,” yet the real objective should be to get beyond the “firsts” and witness half the population achieving all kinds of successes and recognize their significant achievements EVERY month of the year.

I recently watched an interview between Oprah and Sister Joan Chittister, a Catholic nun, world-renowned author and lecturer, who co-chairs the Global Peace Initiative for Women. Sister Joan was asked, “What do you REALLY want to see change in the world?” Sister Joan replied, “I really believe that nothing is going to change in the world until the situation of women changes. I REALLY believe that…. You CANNOT simply dismiss over half the human race, which means dismiss their agendas, dismiss their gifts, and dismiss their intelligence. We are NOW at the place where men are running everything which means that humanity is seeing with one eye, hearing with one ear and thinking with one half of the human brain. No wonder we’re doing the things we’re doing. We’re bringing to the table only half the needs of the human race. And, I don’t mean that men are doing this purposefully. It’s just that they only have half the experience, they have half the listening, and they have half the collective intelligence. So, they’re making FULL decisions out of HALF the resources. Who gets left behind? Who are the poorest of the poor? The women and the children. How can we look at that and NOT understand that that has to change?”

Then, Joan was asked, “What should we be doing to fulfill our humanity?” She replied, “It sounds so simple . . . but we should DO SOMETHING. Each of us must do something. Where we are, we can change the attitude of the neighborhood, the attitude of the office, the attitude of the boardroom… do something.”

I ask each of you to continue to “do something” so that we can continue to make a difference and develop as a vibrant community using the collective intelligence, wisdom, leadership and experience of all. Join the Women’s Business Center at Florida Tech in honoring local women and their achievements at our Women’s History Month luncheon on Thursday, March 19th at the Melbourne Hilton Rialto. You will be amazed and humbled by their stories!
Beth Gitlin is the executive director of the Women’s Business Center at the Florida Institute of Technology.

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