Congratulations! It’s A Girl! Kamala Harris, Vice President

Aileen Riotto Sirey (November 24, 2020)

Exactly 100 years after women gained the right to vote, we will finally have a woman in the second highest office in the land. And as a woman of color and the daughter of immigrant parents, Kamala Harris crashes through two other glass ceilings. Her mother was born in India and her father was born in Jamaica.

The news of Kamala’s nomination took me on more than one trip through our history and memory lane. It brought me back to 1984 and another time we tried to put a woman in an office reserved for white men. That time it was the daughter of an Italian immigrant, Geraldine Ferraro, who became the first woman to run for national office in the US. I think of these two women..

Kamala Harris, and my friend, Gerry, who was so instrumental in creating the National Organization of Italian American women...as women of courage. (It was Gerry who encouraged me to start NOIAW. During her VP acceptance speech in ’84, the CNN cameras were in her mother’s apartment and in my living room as a joyful crowd of NOIAW members were cheering her on.)

Looking at Kamala’s biography, I am struck by the similarities between those two great women. Both were crime fighters; they earned their spurs in a prosecutor’s office. At age 36, Harris was hired as a Deputy District Attorney in Alameda County, California. She then went on to become San Francisco’s

Assistant District Attorney and chief of the Career Criminal Division. There she prosecuted homicide, burglary, robbery, and sexual assault cases – particularly three-strikes cases.

Ferraro worked part time as a lawyer in her husband's real estate business while their three children were young. At 39 she took her first full time job as Assistant District Attorney in Queens , New York. She then went on to head up the Special Victims Unit. (Gerry quipped about not getting royalties from the TV program with the same name).

What was most intriguing was that both were raised by a single mother. They had two Moms who managed to keep the family together and who were an inspiration and supporter of their daughters' ambition. Kamala's parents divorced when she was seven and Gerry's father, who owned two restaurants, died of a heart attack when Gerry was eight years old. Her mother, Antonetta, invested the money her husband left her and lost it. Moving her family to a low income section of the Bronx, she went to work as a seamstress in the garment district to support her son and daughter. They had many financially tough years, but her mother was adamant that she go to college.

Kamala Harris' mother, Shyamala Gopalan Ph.D., was a Biologist, and her father was a Professor at Stanford, so her family was economically sound after the divorce, but they were not without other difficulties. Harris has said that when she and her sister visited their father in Palo Alto on weekends, other children in the neighborhood were not allowed to play with her, because she was black. When she was 12 years old, her mother accepted a research and teaching position at McGill University and moved the family to Montreal, Canada.

The obvious difference between these two remarkable women was the outcomes of their races. In 1984. the choice of Ferraro was viewed as a gamble, but 36 years later we all agree that it was about time! Most people accept that the struggle for women's equality has been and continues to be long and hard, but by now we are all fully aware that it is winnable. We all have ample evidence to that fact in our own personal histories of markers of its progress.

My grandmother, an illiterate Sicilian immigrant, after having 3 of her 8 children, could have gone to Margaret Sangers the very first clinic in Brooklyn in 1918 for birth control. My mother was a teenager when she finally learned that women could vote. In the 1970s, I learned that I could have my own credit card rather than a card in my husband's name. My granddaughter, a recent college graduate, may be still facing a work life where the average woman's unadjusted annual salary is cited as 81% to 82% of that of the average man's. And we are still working for an Equal Rights Amendment to our Constitution.

But for Italian Americans, the Biden-Harris win delivered another prize: an Italian American in the new White House. First Lady Jill Biden is the granddaughter of a Sicilian immigrant. Her grandfather was Dominic Giacoppa who arrived in the US in 1900. His name was changed to Jacobs in the characteristic Ellis Island name confusions.

Yes, women have come a long way from 1776 when Abagail Adams wrote to her husband John, who was hard at work in Washington with his associates, Jefferson and Franklin "I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors"

Yes, but there's so much more to be done…

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