

There was standing room only at the Riverside Memorial Chapel on April 2, 1998, as friends and admirers gathered to celebrate the life of a woman who believed she could nudge, inveigle, and wrangle the world onto a path of social justice. The speakers evoked a heady era of political possibility as they told “Bella stories”; they implored each other to preserve her legacy and carry forward her agenda. They began asking each other, as colleagues and admirers still do today, nearly a decade later, What would Bella do?

One of the first speakers was Geraldine Ferraro, the only woman to appear on a major party presidential ticket, as Walter Mondale’s running mate in 1984. “If there had never been a Bella Abzug, there would never have been a Gerry Ferraro,” she said. Bella “didn’t knock lightly on the door. She didn’t even push it open or batter it down. She took it off the hinges forever. So that those of us who came after could walk through.” Marlo Thomas told how happy Bella was to hear that she was finally getting married and then began to push her to have children. “I said, ‘Bella, I got married. Make Gloria [Steinem] have the babies!’ ” Marlo’s husband, Phil Donahue, recalled a gathering of intellectual luminaries at which he sat next to Bella. Minutes into each presentation, she would mumble, “Good. Sit down.” The historian Amy Swerdlow marveled at Bella’s “brilliance as a strategist” and recalled her appearance impersonating Marlene Dietrich, dressed in a tuxedo and singing “Falling in Love Again.” Jane Fonda wore a hat to commemorate Bella’s signature symbol. Shirley MacLaine—true to her faith in channeling—spoke “directly” to Bella, and the microphone mysteriously jumped to one side. Speakers recalled the pride she took in her two daughters and the “great love affair” with Martin, her husband of more than four decades, who had died twelve years earlier.

Gloria Steinem, one of the last speakers, tried to sum up this larger-than-life, braver-than-any leader. She described how frightened she was the first time she encountered Bella’s outsized voice and aggressive conviction. Then she took note of Bella’s independence and unremitting passion and pointed out that she had “come up through social justice movements, not through a political party.” In other words, she was beholden to no institution with traditions, trade-offs, and party lines; she was guided by her commitment to the ideas and the groups she believed were working to make society more responsive to the needs of the people.

As a lawyer and a congresswoman, Bella Abzug was an activist and leader in every major social movement of her lifetime—from socialist Zionism and labor in the forties, to the civil rights, ban-the-bomb, and anti-Vietnam war movements in the fifties and sixties; the women's movement in the seventies and eighties; and, in the years before she died, global human rights, as, along with her lifelong collaborator, Mim Kelber, she founded the Women's Environment and Development Organization to promote an international agenda of economic equality and environmental sanity.

She began her life's work as an advocate and organizer, developing policy and legal arguments, making connections between ideas and constituencies. Then in 1970, at age fifty, she ran for office for the first time and was elected to Congress, representing a progressive district in Manhattan. Being on the inside was a new experience for her, but Bella became one of the most respected strategists in the Congress. Friend and foe alike marveled at her mastery of congressional procedure and her innovative approaches to legislation. Moreover, she continued mobilizing pressure on the government, organizing women around the country to participate in lobbying her colleagues, and securing funding and authorization for the First National Women's Conference, which she chaired after she left office. Then she was appointed chair of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Women only to find herself on the outside again, when President Jimmy Carter fired her for the insubordination of insisting that the economy and even foreign policy were women's issues.

With each evolution her career underwent, her core commitment to social justice took on a new dimension. Thus, for Bella, feminism was a natural extension of her years in progressive politics; for many other women, the politics came later, growing out of the frustrating experience of trying to establish an equal footing in the culture. From the beginning she was committed to diversifying and enlarging the reach of any movement she became part of.

No matter how big the job she took on, Bella always made it bigger. As a member of Congress from New York, she became better known in most other districts than the representative serving there. Later, as an international leader and activist, she may have been better known in several other countries than in her own. To this day, women leaders in emerging countries will identify themselves as "the Bella Abzug of Nigeria" or "the Bella Abzug of Mongolia."

Along the way, she ruffled plenty of feathers. But she stood up to all adversaries with fierce conviction, and frequently bested them with her trademark wit. In 1995, at seventy-five and in a wheelchair, she was attending the world conference on women in Beijing, when George H. W. Bush, who was in China on a private visit to give a speech to corporate executives, attacked her as an extremist. “I feel somewhat sorry for the Chinese, having Bella running around,” he said. Bella’s reply left no doubt as to what she thought of that remark: “He was addressing a fertilizer group? That’s appropriate.”

For over half a century, Bella Abzug was the standard-bearer for the politics of the powerless and disenfranchised. While others courted interest groups, she gathered her constituencies into a larger and larger coalition. Where did she get the chutzpah? Where did she get the resilience and optimism and tenacity? Where did she get the brilliance?

Most perplexing, where are the contemporary voices of outrage and defiant optimism? In recent years the executive branch of government has reconfigured the relationship of the United States with the rest of the world from trusted alliances to unilateral exercise of power, with barely a murmur from our elected representatives. Until recently, momentous issues were being decided virtually without public debate or accountability from Congress. In the lead-up to the 2008 elections, it is inconceivable that Bella would keep quiet. Even if she couldn’t immediately change minds, she would raise the issues—and her voice. She would prod and poke; haggle and debate; educate and galvanize. If she were still among us, what would Bella do? If we are to carry forward her legacy, what should we do?

The question is repeated over and over again in conversations with those who knew her personally and worked with her. It is echoed by those who only know of her and long for a resurgence of the kind of fierce outrage and creative stubbornness she stood for. Bella’s real legacy may turn out to be the inspiration her life offers us and the model she sets for the kind of leadership we are so desperately looking for today.

Because we both knew and worked with her, we know how uppity and vivid she was, how

passionate and loud. We were convinced that the way to bring her persona to life was to build a memoir in many voices from her own testimony and the words of those who knew her. The stories told by fellow politicians, family, friends, and enemies evoke one of the most colorful, controversial, effective, courageous—and very cantankerous—women of the twentieth century. The image that emerges has many layers. Her complex relationships with family, friends, and colleagues could generate deep conflict and bitterness as well as joy and appreciation.

No one is able to talk about Bella without reciting a “Bella story,” frequently assuming her unmistakable New York accent in the telling. (Norman Mailer, not an admirer, said her voice “could boil the fat off a taxicab driver’s neck.”) Everyone had a favorite Bella phrase that nailed an issue. The journalist Myra MacPherson singled out a favorite with typical Bella vocabulary: “Abzug even stressed equality for the mediocre, cracking that the goal was not to see a ‘female Einstein become an assistant professor. We want a woman schlemiel to get promoted as quickly as a male schlemiel.’ ”

We assembled a list of people to interview, from those who knew her as a girl growing up in the Bronx through those who were beside her in the historic moments she helped create as well as those who worked for her (now that was an experience). We also had access to her incomplete memoir and to oral histories taken at Columbia University. In addition to evoking one of the most audacious and outrageous women of her time, the testimony brings to life many compelling people who shared moments in her political legacy.

We edited those interviews into a “conversation” in which the story unfolds through anecdote, embellishment, contradiction, flashback and flash-forward, asides, commentary, speculation—as if the wide-ranging and ill-assorted cast of characters were gathered around a fireplace reminiscing about someone who stomped into their lives and left an indelible mark. It is not necessary to know who’s who to follow the plot, but we have also provided thumbnail sketches of all the speakers. To set the stage, each chapter begins with a short chronology of events in Bella’s life and the world at large.

The cumulative testimony speaks to a particularly powerful moment in which vital social

movements converged in the second half of the twentieth century, every one of which featured Bella as a catalyst and creative force. It sheds light on how she mobilized followers and used whatever tools were at hand—the pressure of protest, the force of law, the give-and-take of the legislative process—to move forward on a broad agenda. And it gives insight into the personal qualities that fired her courage. Her life stands as an example of those rare and crucial public figures who stand up—and do so again and again, without losing faith—to “speak truth to power.”

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