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Inspiring And Empowering Women

Never Goes Out Of Style

BY SHARON STEWART

No one is rewarded for occupying a position, however they are rewarded for becoming effective in the position occupied. If you occupy the position, you must then have the weight of influence in order to matter.

I am honored to write this article about a woman who lives in our community and was one of the original trailblazers passionately "championing equal rights" and changing the way women are treated and valued in society. Imagine being honored for your life-long dedication changing the course of history for women!

This amazing woman, Sonia Pressman Fuentes, is a lawyer, author, speaker and pioneering feminist leader who fought for women's equality in the workplace. Fuentes is one of the founders of NOW as well as Federally Employed Women (FEW). In October 1999, she was one of four recipients of the 1999 Women at Work Award of Wider Opportunities for Women given in recognition of her commitment to women's issues and leadership in the fields of law and business. Prior recipients included Jane Fonda, Katie Couric, Linda Ellerbee and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Fuentes was the first women lawyer to work in the office of General Counsel at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), an agency dedicated to enforcing federal employment discrimination laws. She played a significant role in increasing the opportunities for women in the work force the second half of the 20th Century.

I first met her last year and my first impression of this petite, dynamic woman was her razor-sharp wit and mind as well as her detailed recollection of her historic past. It was as if she had her life's resume in her mind and was able to recall people, dates and events in a flash. What really impressed me was her ability to communicate by discussing facts. Her training as a skilled lawyer was evident.

When I asked her where her ability to influence others came from, she said that her passion and motivation were strong tools in her lifelong fight for equality. Her ability to influence others played a big part in her achieving social change for women.

Sonia Pressman Fuentes

I was intrigued as to how she acquired the skills to become a leader in the fight for women's rights and wondered how she felt about playing a role in the history of women's rights. She said that when she was five years old her life was saved from the Holocaust. Her family fled from Nazi Germany in 1933 and in 1934 they came to New York City on the Red Star Line's S.S. Westerland. From the age of ten, she felt that because her life had been saved from the Holocaust, there was something she was meant to contribute to the world.

Fuentes was valedictorian of her high school class and was awarded two scholarships to Cornell. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Cornell in 1950 and was first in her class at Miami School of Law in 1957.

Sonia was one of the 16 women (nine living, seven deceased) recently honored in Washington, D.C. by the National Women's History Project (NWHP) for their contributions to government and public service. When I asked her how she felt about receiving the honor, she said, "Wonderful."

This intelligent, witty, strong and beautiful woman is still working hard today at 87 in support of her convictions. She is a lively speaker and author who is not allowing herself to "rest on the laurels of her past accomplishments." Her passion still fuels her pursuit of increasing the rights of women both in this country and abroad.

In 1999 Sonia's memoir, *Eat First—You Don't Know What They'll Give You: The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter,* was published. It has been required reading for courses at Cornell and American University.

Coco Chanel once said, "Fashion fades, only style remains the same." Sonia Pressman Fuentes' passion and dedication to equality will never go out of style.

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