

**LIFE LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP
REMEMBERING SENATOR WYNONA M. LIPMAN THE “LIONESSE” OF
NEW JERSEY’S SENATE**

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The selection of Valerie Jarrett, Senior Advisor to President Barack Obama and the Chair of the White House Council on Women and Girls, to deliver this year’s Senator Wynona M. Lipman Lecture in Women’s Political Leadership at the Eagleton Institute of Politics lead me to think about what Senator Lipman would have said about the election of President Barack Obama and Ms. Jarrett’s service in the White House.

I know that Senator Lipman’s career paved the way for them and that she would be honored at Ms. Jarrett’s selection. I also know that Ms. Jarrett would have appreciated and respected Senator Lipman.

When the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy passed away, he was hailed as the “lion of the Senate.” Senator Lipman was New Jersey’s own “lioness” of the New Jersey Senate.

Senator Kennedy was commended for his outstanding record in the enactment of legislation. “In the Senate, Kennedy was the driving force behind dozens of landmark bills that changed the social fabric of the nation, expanding the availability of health care, education and housing and advancing the rights of immigrants, women, minorities, gays and the disabled.” (*USA Today*, August 27, 2009)

Senator Lipman accomplished a similar outstanding legislative record during her 27 years in the New Jersey Senate. Her bills changed the lives of many of New Jersey’s citizens. And she did so as the State’s first African-American female Senator while also raising two children – one of whom passed away as a young adult.

All of this she handled with grace, dignity, intelligence and wit.

Senator Lipman’s distinguished legislative record included sponsoring bills related to her deep-seated commitment to children’s rights, the rights of women and the disenfranchised and to assuring that health care and essential services were provided to New Jersey’s residents. Her record of getting more bills signed into law than most legislators stands today and this is directly correlated to her “life lessons.”

Even prior to her election to the State Senate, Senator Lipman accomplished more than most women of her day. After attending Talladega College and Tulane University, she received a Rockefeller grant that enabled her to pursue a doctorate at Columbia University, and while there she received a Fulbright fellowship to study at the Sorbonne in Paris.

I never knew why she studied French literature, but I understood it, having a mother of the same generation who ventured abroad to study Spanish literature in Mexico and Columbia during World War II. In fact, I am sure that my own mother’s drive, perseverance and long-term career well prepared me to respect and understand Senator Lipman during the decade that I worked with her.

When I first met her, Senator Lipman had already been in the Senate for eight years. Her election came during the turbulent years when women and men across the country were working together to secure the enactment of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the United States Constitution. The ERA was a proposed amendment to the Constitution that was

intended to guarantee that equal rights under any federal, state or local law could not be denied on account of sex. The ERA failed to gain ratification by the requisite number of states before its 1982 deadline. And in New Jersey, a referendum proposing a state version of the ERA was defeated by voters.

However, the defeat of the State ERA resulted in Senator Lipman's decision to sponsor legislation establishing the State Commission on Sex Discrimination in the Statutes. The Commission was created on February 28, 1978, and Senator Lipman was elected to serve as the Commission's Chairperson. In turn, I was appointed the Commission's Executive Director.

The Commission was mandated to conduct a systematic study of the statutes to determine whether the laws were discriminatory or whether the absence thereof resulted in women being denied full equal protection under the law. As Senator Lipman stated: "Many of the state's laws contain discriminatory provisions based upon sex and reflect policy judgments which are no longer accepted by our society." (*Trenton Times*, June 28, 1979)

How did she achieve the extraordinary accomplishments in a time when her fellow politicians were not accustomed to dealing with women legislators and before the achievements of women such as Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton or her predecessor Condoleezza Rice?

She knew the legislative process. She persevered. She persuaded. She compromised. She formed alliances. She believed in her bills.

1. Process: During the two year part-time legislative session she worked full-time (while also serving as a professor and advisor) to get her bills heard in Committee. She cajoled and called staff and legislators to post her bills. She knew that getting a bill through both houses of the

Legislature and to the Governor's Office took focus and persistence.

2. Perseverance: It is one thing to know the process, it is another for any legislator to get a bill listed on the agenda by a Committee Chairperson. Senator Lipman knew that she had to maintain a sustained effort through all types of pitfalls, such as a bill being "held over" due to opposition or compromising on amendments, to not lose momentum. For example, when the Commission found that "divorced or widowed women may find themselves legally without access to health insurance," the New Jersey Business and Industry Association stated that it was "opposed to every conceivable type of legislation that dictates health benefits." (*The Home News*, August 4, 1985) Her message to me was that we must work constantly to the keep bills moving – especially since we were fighting against competing interests.

3. Persuasion: Senator Lipman's powers of persuasion were legendary. When she wanted a bill to go forward she passionately advocated for her legislation and she often "wore down" her colleagues. However, sometimes the opposition was not persuaded. When the Commission released its first report on Employment Related Discrimination recommending the enactment of legislation including "equal pay for equal work," a representative of a "Stop ERA" group interrupted the Commission's press conference to state that its members should "resign" and that the process was a "farce." (*The Star-Ledger*, October 18, 1979) Senator Lipman replied that the Commission studied sex discrimination "whether against men or women." (*The Bulletin*, October 18, 1979) She then went on to calmly announce the Commission's next area of study.

4. Alliances: Senator Lipman knew that there was strength in numbers. Many of the bills recommended by the Commission were enacted with the strong support of other organizations or individuals. From law professors to ordinary citizens, Senator Lipman understood that their voices counted in lobbying for a bill.

5. Compromise: With the formation of alliances came the knowledge that compromises must be made – a “half a loaf is better than none.” Senator Lipman always met with interested parties. I was part of those meetings and I learned early on that the goal was to get the bill through. A law could be amended later on to strengthen its provisions.

6. Beliefs: There is no doubt that Senator Lipman’s legislative success was attributable to her strong belief in the need for the legislation. Whether it was the establishment of the State’s first domestic violence act, child support laws, the parentage act, economic equity legislation, recognizing Advanced Practice Nurses, or AIDS related legislation, her ground-breaking bills reflected her belief in those issues. There was no mistaking her deep passion and commitment to social justice and equality.

As I reflect on more than the three decades since I first met Senator Lipman and my career as an attorney both in government and at law firms, I know these life lessons have served me well. As I stated once to a reporter “You have to be patient. You have to be thorough and be willing to do whatever it takes to do the job well. If that means staying up all night, that’s what you do.” (*The Home News*, December 22, 1985)

Her life’s work has left a lasting legacy in this State and the “life lessons” I learned from her are timeless.

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