

To: The National Women's Hall of Fame
From: Alison Parker and Sabrina Parker
Re: Joanne Johnson Parker's Entry into the *Lives and Legacies* Book
Date: September 25, 2013

The daughters of Joanne Johnson Parker are proud to be able to enter her into the National Women's Hall of Fame *Lives and Legacies* book. This is a fitting tribute to Joanne Parker, whose life has been dedicated to expanding and enriching women's lives.

Joanne Johnson Parker (b. November 7, 1933) has had a life-long commitment to civil rights and women's rights. After earning her B.A., Master's Degree, and becoming A.B.D. (all but dissertation) in English Literature from Northwestern University, Joannie moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1961 where she became a new faculty member at the Women's College at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. There, Joannie bonded with her black and white students, encouraged them in a boycott of local segregated stores and the movie theater and offered to let them use her office for their picket signs. In spite of hostility from her white faculty colleagues, Joannie Parker embraced non-violent civil disobedience and civil rights activism and never turned back.

Trained and inspired by her participation in the Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam War movements, Joannie extended her passion for equality to the battle for the Equal Rights Amendment and women's rights. Joannie Parker taught courses at the University of Southern California, Cal State Northridge, and the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles before she became a full-time teacher of English literature and Women's Studies at Westlake School for Girls. In the early 1980s, she received a grant to found one of the country's first Women's Studies programs in a high school, at the Westlake School for Girls. She later created the Gender Studies for Men and Women at the Harvard-Westlake School. With her ardent commitment to feminism and women's leadership, she inspired her students to be activists, leading them to defend abortion clinics at 5 in the morning and to be fervently involved in the political process. As she has said, "My students were on the cusp of social awareness and clearly eager to take their bountiful energy and channel it; they created a bond with me that went far beyond the classroom."

During her nineteen years at the Westlake School and Harvard-Westlake, Joannie Parker worked tirelessly to establish the Women's Studies Program, a significant part of which has been the annual celebration of Women's History Week where

noted speakers are invited to address the student body. Over the years, Joannie secured ground-breaking women as speakers, including Betty Friedan, Shirley Chisholm, Bella Abuzug, Pat Schroeder, Gloria Steinem, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Amy Tan, and Sally Ride. Her students remember Ms. Parker, an award-winning teacher, as one who influenced their careers and lives for the better; they include Jessica Yellin of CNN news and Eric Garcetti, the new Mayor of Los Angeles.

When she retired in 1998, the Joannie Parker Fund was established to honor her work and to ensure the continuation of the Women's Studies Program and Women's History Week. Shonu Gandhi, Class of 1999, Harvard-Westlake, paid tribute to Joannie at her retirement celebration, stating: "You gave me a gift, Ms. Parker, and I am unable to thank you. You have let me see, let me learn, let come to understand why literature is important, how it shapes us, how we shape it, why words are not just words, why 'Great art is never accidental.' You have so greatly enhanced my appreciation for life by allowing me to experience the beauty of it through Thoreau and Dickinson and most importantly, you. I see you, and I see someone whose passion for life excites me about my own life every day I sit in your class. I will not forget your class, Ms. Parker. And I most certainly will never forget you." Not surprisingly, in 2005, she received the Westlake School for Girls, Great Teacher Award.

Over three decades, from the 1970s through the 1990s, as Joannie Parker taught full-time and raised two feminist daughters, Alison Marie Parker and Sabrina Martha Parker, she held major leadership positions in a variety of feminist organizations. She served as President of the California Abortion Rights Action League; President of the California National Organization for Women Foundation; Chair of the Speakers Bureau for the California National Organization for Women; Vice President for Political Action of the National Women's Political Caucus/LA; and Chair of the Equal Rights Amendment Outreach Committee of the National Organization for Women/Los Angeles. Over the years, she won several important honors. In 1990 she received the *Bread and Roses Award* from the National Women's Political Caucus, L.A. Westside; in 1998 and 1999, she received Resolutions and Commendations from the City of Los Angeles, the County of Los Angeles, and the State of California for her work on behalf of Women's Rights; in 1999, the California Women's Law Center's *Pursuit of Justice Award*; and in 2013, the Veteran Feminists of America *Lifetime Achievement Award*.

Joannie Parker's work in education extended from her passionate teaching in the classroom to the legal and political realms. As a member of Gender Equity in Education committee and as a Board member on the Council of Women in

Independent Schools, Joannie wrote and facilitated the passage of the California State Title IX.

Joannie Parker's enthusiasm and committed feminist activism empowered generations of students. She encouraged them to reflect upon their own dreams, enabling them to see their own potential as well as to see how feminism really did matter in their lives and in the broader world. Joannie continues to be a prominent activist, campaigner for women's issues and candidates, and an on-going educator in all aspects of her life. She makes a difference in lives of all who interact with her, including her beloved and most-fortunate grandchildren, Akua, Frances, Ziah and Dalyon.

With Love and Admiration,

Alison Parker and Sabrina Parker

The following is a speech by **Lizzy Weiss** introducing Joannie Parker at the Veteran Feminists of America 20th Anniversary Celebration Gala Awards Dinner, where Joannie received the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Leadership Award on September 7, 2013. Lizzy Weiss is a screenwriter and television producer; she is currently a screenwriter of the popular *Switched at Birth* on ABC:

“The first screenplay I ever wrote 20 years ago was called *The 19th*, and it was about the friendship between Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and their lifelong battle for Women's Suffrage and the 19th amendment. The screenplay focused slightly more on Anthony, because in the partnership, Anthony was the one out there in the cold, town after town, getting tomatoes thrown at her, while Stanton was married with seven children and so was tied to her home.

I never sold the script, a period drama about an old lady in bloomers in the nineteenth century. No real shock I suppose, but I never stopped thinking of Anthony as my hero. I loved the fact that she was this old lady in granny glasses, so easy to dismiss, and yet she actually was the fiercest, toughest, most determined person I had ever studied.

Ms. Parker was my first Susan B. Anthony. A middle-aged woman who dressed conservatively, she had an upbeat, innocuous, uber friendly vibe. I'm not here to cause problems! I'm just keeping my head down, teaching the Norton anthology!

It was what you might call a stealth strategy. Behind closed doors, this Susan B. Anthony shed her safe exterior, revealing herself to be the savvy, intense, indefatigable activist she really was.

I was a student of Joannie Parker in the late 1980s for both junior English and senior year women's studies at Westlake School for Girls in Los Angeles, just before it went coed. This was over 25 years ago, but I remember like it was yesterday, how fired up she got about poetry of Emily Dickinson, the brilliance of Adrienne Rich, Thoreau, Walt Whitman. How infuriated she was at Reagan and Oliver North, Gary Hart, Bob Dole, Bork, Rehnquist. It was 1988. There was a lot to be fired up about back then.

Somehow, Ms. Parker brought Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou to speak to us. That is crazy in itself, that she got these women to come. But she did. And the message we got from that was not just that we deserved to meet and hear these incredible women, but that we were next in line to be these women.

Ms. Parker was an activist for women's rights and choice for decades. She held major leadership positions in California Abortion Rights Action League, the National Women's Political Caucus and the National Organization for Women. She played a prominent role as the writer and facilitator of the California State Title IX, and as a Board member in the Council of Women in Independent Schools.

These were in addition to creating the women's studies program at Westlake, and then after the merger, the gender studies for men and women at Harvard-Westlake. As for me, I started on Joannie's exact path in my early 20s, literally trying to emulate her, working with the Fund for the Feminist Majority defending clinics in that very aggressive time of war on abortion. Then I slowly discovered that my calling wasn't with politics and policy activism, but in writing fiction, creating girl characters in movies and on TV who are centered and smart and athletic, and that take themselves seriously and demand that the world give them everything they deserve. That was my path. And it is just one of hundreds of paths that have been deeply influenced by Ms. Parker.

I only reached out to women in my grade, and I got such impassioned, ebullient responses -- tell her I love her! Tell her how much she meant to me! Just imagine multiplying that number by 19 years, and all of the students that she touched.

Joannie continues to be a prominent activist, campaigner for women's issues and candidates, and an on-going educator in all aspects of her life.

What that means is that she's pushing 80 and she refuses to stop being engaged by, infuriated with, and thrilled at the great victories she sees in the world.

I can say with complete confidence, that if Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were here today, they would be honored to be in her presence."

Below are memories from a few of Joannie Parker's former students:

Cara Familian Natterson:

"I have often thought about what a trailblazer Joanie is/was, and how even though we appreciated her, we never really fully appreciated all that she was.

My most poignant memory was early in the class when she told us that we do not need to wear mini-skirts and stilettos to get ahead in life, and that women who do were actually putting themselves into submissive roles. I went home and promptly lectured my mom on her outfit choices (which all seemed to involve mini-skirts and stilettos, though shoulder pads as well). My mom marched into Parent's Night and confronted Joanie. It could have been a battle, but Joanie apparently looked at my mom and said something to the effect of: Honey, I told those girls they could wear whatever they want so long as they do not act in a submissive manner! From then on, not only did my mom continue to wear her signature style, but she explained to me that it was, in fact, a feminist thing for her to do. It's not how you look, it's how you act and what you say that matter. Who knows what the real conversation was between Joanie and Liz, but it gave everyone in my house the ability to call herself a feminist."

Justine Stamen Arrillaga:

"I can absolutely say that in my case she was responsible for my confidence, my career and my college...three c's. She helped me get everything I wanted because

she believed in me. She treated us like adults and not little girls and wow, she was right about the real world. Thank god for her.”

Erica Edelman-Benadon:

“She had such a high hopes and big expectations for us. She knew we would be leaving home, going to college and she wanted us to carry the "feminist" torch and wanted us to make an impact on the world around us. Made us feel as though we were part of something bigger than ourselves. Got us excited and interested and gave us (at least for me) a completely new perspective of the world and my place in it. She made me question things that I never had before. Remember one of our assignments was to look at degrading images of women in magazine and writing letters to the editors. Just not something I had ever questioned or thought about and certainly had never written to an editor before. She made us feel like it was OK to stand up for yourself and others. I try to do that now and I hope to be able to pass that on to my kids. Joannie Parker told us we could be and do anything and we believed her. She was so definitive and confident about that. No one dared question her. She was always exuberant, energetic. She has such strong personality and never backed down or hid behind a veil of formality. She was who she was and wasn't ashamed to be herself. She was a real person and shared her ups and down with us regarding what had led her to feel so strongly about what she was doing. There was no one like her at Westlake and I haven't encountered anyone like her since. She also loved what she did. It came through in everything she taught. She treated us as though we were her own daughters- each and every one of us. She cared about us deeply and genuinely.”

Joanna Pearlstein:

“When Adrienne Rich died, all of us who were lucky enough to have had Ms. Parker as our teacher felt her loss deeply; I was emailing around my favorite works by Adrienne Rich ("Power" is my favorite) and seeing what other Westlakers had to say about Rich on Facebook. Then, earlier this year I attended a reunion day at Westlake, and Joanie gave a lecture about Adrienne Rich. We discussed "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev." Listening to her talk was -- and I don't use this word lightly -- enthralling. I was transported back to our Women's Studies classroom c. 1988 and even remembered exactly what she'd say about certain lines, lo those 25 years later. I think one of Joanie's favorite lines from that poem is likely: "We will not live to settle for less." She drove that message into the minds of young women over and over again, year in and year out. We would not live to settle for less, and thanks to Joanie, we have not.”

Sarah Ouchi Tsai:

“Ms. Parker truly DID shape my life, in ways I can't begin to put into words. Teaching me to be strong, believe in myself, and never give up. When I decided to move to Tokyo after college, I joined Sony, and told them right off the bat that I would not 'serve tea or answer phones.' In what was still a very traditional, male-dominated workplace, I was able to sit at the table because I asked to... and that was thanks to Ms. Parker. My favorite memories? Coming to class with a pint of Ben-and-Jerry's, which we ate during the lecture while watching her dance around the room, her enthusiasm oozing from her pores. She was definitely the most influential teacher I had at Westlake.”

Lisa Wachtell Miner:

“Joanie was my teacher and wow did she impact me in so many ways! One memory is that because of Joanie, I was one of the chairs of my university's pro-choice efforts as part of the women's organization. In this role, I organized, I think it was over 800 people, from Penn to march on Washington for choice. We met up with Joanie and some other Westlake women there, which was so special. Thanks to Joanie and her influence, even my parents flew across the country to march with us!”

Kelly Foster:

“Ms. Parker- she challenged me, inspired me and made me believe in myself. In her classes she always had us read aloud. I loved volunteering to read to the class. One day, she stopped me in the midst of a sentence - we were reading *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin - and she said, "You see Loves (that endearing term she always called us), Kelly has such a gift for reading the words." That made me feel so special and proud. She makes every student aware of their gifts- and it's the love she has for what she does. I appreciated the Gender Symposium with Shirley Chisholm- Ms. Parker moved mountains with her love and taught us that we can do anything - be anything. She would always reach for the stars and bring them to us! Our Senior year, I played Ms. Parker in the teacher spoof we did- I had so much fun! She inspired me in my life in general. I learned from her that my voice is strong and powerful and I can convey SO very much with it. That dignity and strength come from within- that I always have a choice and to stand up for my beliefs.”

Shelby Balik:

“I am grateful to Joannie Parker for many reasons: she introduced me to wonderful literature, she modeled uncompromising feminism, and she nurtured hundreds of students' own political awakenings. But mostly, I'm grateful to her for giving me the first (and only!) C I ever got on a paper. When I arrived in her junior English class, I was pretty confident about my writing. And for my first paper in her class, I dashed off something that I thought would be good enough. But it wasn't, and she told me so in no uncertain terms. I recovered in that class, to be sure, but I never forgot that C. It taught me to think harder, write better, and never settle for a dashed-off effort. It taught me more than any A ever has. I have been a teacher for almost twenty years: first a high school history teacher and now a history professor. Ms. Parker is rarely far from my thoughts. I try to bring to the classroom the same passion for my subject matter that she brought for hers. And whether I'm grading students' writing or working on my own, I still remember that C. I know my students can write better than they ever thought possible. And with long overdue thanks to Ms. Parker, I know I can, too.”

Amy Levin:

“Ms. Parker: You are the most inspirational and empowering teacher I have ever had. I so wish my daughter could have taken Women's Studies or English from you. You made these subjects come alive for me at Westlake.”

Juliette Kayyem & Marisa Kayyem:

“Thank you Joanne Parker for teaching us to be independent thinkers and to find and listen to our own voices.”

Valerie Salkin, Superior Court Judge, Los Angeles:

“Dear Joannie:

Thirty years ago, in the fall of 1983, I was lucky enough to take your Women's Studies class at what was then the Westlake School for Girls. At the time, I never imagined that thirty years later, the lessons I learned from you would remain with me and would continue to inspire me.

I am not unique. At high school reunions, or even when casually discussing our high school memories, my classmates fondly recall wearing 'ERA Now' buttons and marching in Washington with the Feminist Majority. We even remember you joking about retiring and living in the 'Feminist Rest Home'!

You taught your students to dream big, to believe in ourselves, to pursue excellence, and to dare to stand up for what is right. You changed lives and you had a profound effect on me, and on thousands of others.

Thank you for your extraordinary efforts on behalf of American women. Thank you for making a difference in my life.”

Lizzy Weiss:

“Hello former Ms. Parker classmates! Reporting back on the awards ceremony: there were 12 awards given for leadership, education, and activism by the Veteran Feminists of America, including one to attorney Gloria Allred and author/activist Kate Millet. Ms. Parker is almost 80 and looks smashing. It was totally inspiring. She is healthy, fit, happy, energized, everything you remember. In accepting, Ms. Parker discussed this powerful memory of defending abortion clinics years ago against operation rescue, pro-lifers who were throwing urine at them and blocking people from coming into the clinic, and how she organized the defenders to form a human chain and lift the women who needed to go inside over the operation rescuers. She is, as Joanna Pearlstein noted in an email to me, an enthralling speaker. I couldn't believe in watching her that she hadn't ever run for senate or some political office.”