

## Moms Inspired to Change History

### 8 women making a difference

By Joanne Cronrath Bamberger

They refer to us as soccer moms. TV commercials still show mothers, not the fathers, as the ones wiping up spills and wiping noses. As important as parenting is, plenty of mothers have more on their agendas -- they're finding their own ways to make their mark and change the world. Here are eight we found particularly inspiring.



#### **Stephanie Himel-Nelson and Vivian Greentree, Blue Star Families**

Stephanie Himel-Nelson and Vivian Greentree, each a mother of two young sons, were never political activists until the 2008 presidential campaign. Both had connections to the armed services, though, and wanted to help highlight the many issues faced by military families. From the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, both women played integral roles of Blue Star Families for Obama (BSF4O) -- Greentree as the group's director for leadership, and Himel-Nelson as deputy outreach director.

Greentree, herself a veteran and the wife of an active military member, helped to recruit and organize BSF4O nationwide, which ultimately led the organization to grow from five members in August of 2008 to tens of thousands of supporters with chapters in 22 states. There are also representatives at 67 military bases across the world, according to Himel-Nelson, who is now the organization's director of new media.

While BSF4O supported Barack Obama in his quest for the presidency, the group is now a non-partisan organization whose goal is to "serve as a bridge" between the military and all policymakers.



#### **Victoria Rierdan Hurley, public school advocate**

When Victoria Hurley's six-year-old son started school in Los Angeles, she didn't have any thoughts about becoming a public school advocate. But as she started learning where the school budget was being cut, and cut again, and cut

again, she knew she had to step in. Hurley says she was motivated by the presidential campaign of Barack Obama to step up and take on that role.

While that may not sound like the path to world change, Hurley would disagree. Budget cuts have left her children's school with few resources for science, music, the library and other programs she and other parents know are essential to their children's education. Hurley argues that if they can raise money to get those programs back to the levels they should be, it not only helps the students, but also attracts more people to the neighborhood, thereby increasing property values. And that, she hopes, ultimately results in more money for the school.



### **Amy Sewell, author and filmmaker**

When a writer and filmmaker finds a topic she can sink her teeth into, there's no stopping her. That's what happened with Amy Sewell, of "Mad Hot Ballroom" fame, when one of her twin daughters said she didn't think girls could ride motorcycles because she'd never seen one doing so. That was Sewell's "aha" moment, and she wondered, "What else are my daughters not seeing that they think isn't possible?" So the idea for her film, "what's your point, honey?" was born. It's a movie about seven girls and how they might put a new face on political leadership in our country, especially one that her daughters, now 11, could relate to.

At the time she was making the movie, America had had only presidents who were white men, and she wanted to do something to change that dynamic, especially for girls and women. Sewell hopes her film will challenge thinking of today's teens and 20-somethings who believe they don't have to worry about equal political opportunities.

Why? For Sewell, the answer is simple. "I'm a mom who wants to change the world."



### **Rebekah Spicuglia, media manager, Women's Media Center and activist**

Rebekah Spicuglia has a lot on her plate to keep her busy -- she's the media manager of a prominent women's organization and a mom of an 11-year-old-son. But when her sister got fired after reporting sexual harassment at the Chili's restaurant where she worked, Spicuglia turned to another aspect of her life to try to do something about it -- the blogosphere. Spicuglia wrote an article for The Huffington Post about what had happened titled, "Chili's Fires Long-Time Employee After Sexual Harassment Claim."

It didn't take long for the power of the pen, and the blogosphere, to kick in -- within hours, Chili's corporate office responded, reinstating Spicuglia's sister after the blog post began to spread virally and after Brinker International, the company that owns Chili's, had received more than 1,200 e-mails about the episode.

Grassroots advocacy doesn't always work so quickly or effectively, but in this instance one mother proved to the world that if you speak up about injustice in the right ways and places, it only takes one voice to right a wrong.



### **Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, MomsRising**

Kristen Rowe-Finkbeiner didn't start out to become a leader of an organization of more than 160,000. But after she became a mother of a son born with an immune-deficiency disorder, she quickly came to understand the realities of what happens for families who don't have the social safety net she had. Her concern led her to write the book *The F Word: Feminism in Jeopardy -- Women, Politics and the Future* (Seal Press, 2004).

With that under her belt, she teamed up with MoveOn.org co-founder Joan Blades to start the organization MomsRising, whose mission it is to build a more family-friendly America through legislation that impacts family leave, flexible work schedules, child care, health care and fair wages. Rowe-Finkbeiner, its executive director, has become a powerful voice for working families. The efforts of MomsRising have been instrumental in advocating for the recently passed Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act and an increase in funding for children's health insurance programs.



### **Gina Bennett, security analyst and "national security mom"**

Gina Bennett has spent the better part of the last 20 years as a senior counterterrorism analyst at the CIA and was one of first to write reports in the 1990s about Osama bin Laden and his terrorist activities being a threat to America. But when the mother of five was asked to put together a presentation about work/life balance for her office, she had an epiphany that affected how she approaches her work. Bennett realized that parenting principles are equally applicable to national security. What better way, she thought, to help parents understand national security issues than to write about them in that way?

And that's what she did with her book, *National Security Mom: Why "Going Soft" Will Make America Strong* (Wyatt MacKenzie Publishing, 2009), a primer for the public on terrorism and counterterrorism. Bennett hopes that parents

and teachers who read her book will be better able to help children understand the realities of the world we live in today by using language and scenarios they already understand, whether it's not giving in to bullies or helping to clean up your own messes!



**Rondi Charleston, singer/songwriter**

Can a song change our world? Some might scoff, but singer/songwriter Rondi Charleston believes music today can still have the political impact it did during the civil rights movement and inspire people to find their own personal ways to make change.

Charleston's anthem, "A Song for the Ages," was written after she watched Barack Obama's speech in Chicago on the night of his election as president. By documenting the political sea change using her own talents, Charleston hopes that her daughter will understand the importance of each person finding a way to use their unique personal talents to effect change in our communities and our world.