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–Saundra Pelletier, CEO, Woman Care Global

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International Women’s Day: Give Yourself the Chance to be Extraordinary

Article by Saundra Pelletier. Originally published on Huffington Post, March 7, 2014

As I think about International Women’s Day on March 8th, it reminds me that throughout my life I have been groomed by a series of extraordinary women who have always encouraged me to be an advocate for women who need a louder voice. I grew up in Caribou, Maine, a small town distinguished only because it is the Northernmost city in the United States. Women in this farming community were told they had only two important choices in life: whom they would marry and how many children they would bear. My mother felt oppressed by this mentality, so when I was 5 years old she told me, “Domestic skills won’t get you out of Caribou, so you leave those to me and I’ll teach you what’s really important.”

Instead of dusting and cooking, my household tasks included balancing the checkbook, educating my younger brother and organizing family activities. My mother’s reluctance to raise another Betty Crocker became blatantly obvious when I started kindergarten and she sent me to school with a briefcase instead of a lunchbox. According to her, school was not about what your lunch looked like, it was about progress.

The upside of this “alternative” way of growing up is that I can’t ever remember being treated like anything other than an adult. My mother discussed everything with me, and I was allowed to present my case for any issue I deemed worth debating. If I had a compelling argument, I could actually win. It was fabulous. I never felt the need to conform. I always stood up for my beliefs, and it never occurred to me to ignore my intuition because I knew my mother was in my corner cheering me on.

Unfortunately, not every young girl grows up with a strong female role model in her immediate circle looking out for her in the way that my mother did for me. But female leaders and role models, past and present, ABSOLUTELY exist in droves outside of the confines of our childhood homes and neighborhoods. All you need to do is seek them out for inspiration and learn by their example. Every woman needs a cavalry of mentors, emotional supporters, helpful taskmasters and strategic alliances.

As for my female peers who are leaders today, when it comes to changing perceptions, we must always LEAD by example. As Eleanor Roosevelt so eloquently stated, “Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent.” By taking risks, not only do we learn to be brave, but we discover opportunities that lead to miraculous outcomes. The women who accomplish the most are often the ones who are willing to take chances. Our culture encourages conservatism, yet we admire those who are brave enough to take the road less traveled in business, politics and activism.

That kind of bravery comes in all shapes and sizes. One of my favorite embodiments of female heroism can be seen through the actions depicted by education activist Malala Yousafzai, who said, “We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced.” Even in the face of violence, this 16-year-old woman teaches us the true meaning of creating courage where fear exists.

Calculated risks are based on experience, knowledge and a certain amount of due diligence. Those types of risks have the potential to take us leaps and bounds above what we thought we could achieve. Few people at the end of their lives think or say, “I wish I had been more conservative and taken fewer risks.” That is also the reason it is completely plausible that we may finally see the first female President of the United States in our lifetime — because someone planted the seed that it was possible. I have a distinct feeling that gardener was another strong woman.

As you are thinking about what International Women’s Day means to you, I encourage you to look for inspiration from the many successful females in leadership roles that are in front of us everyday as citizens of the world. I challenge women and girls to learn from example and have the courage to overcome mediocrity. Give yourself the chance to be extraordinary. Embrace the words that Gabby Giffords has repeated over and over, “Strong women get things done.” I know my mother would agree.