



March/April 2005

## Through Rainbow-Colored Glasses

By Christine Dinsmore

Women's History Month has arrived. I wonder how Laura and Lynne will celebrate. Can't imagine they'll be snuggled in bed, poring over Elizabeth Bishop. Or curled up near a fireplace, gushing about Jewell Gomez. I'm not sure how they'll commemorate the day, but I'm certain it won't be like Senator Hillary. Will Hil be at Smith College reading selections from Lynne Cheney's trash novel, *Sisters*? Not the passages of steamy lesbian sex, of course.

This whole idea of Women's History Month seems a bit silly to me. Women's accomplishments should only count one month out of the year?

Honoring women's achievements was unheard of 30 years ago. California's Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women established the first Women's History Week in 1978. Not until 1981 did Congress establish it nationally, at the behest of Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) of all people—supporter of both a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage and the Unborn Victims of Violence Act—and Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.). Seven days evolved into 31 by 1987.

History months can be burdens for educators. At this very moment, there may be a teacher pondering whether Rosa Parks can be used two months in a row. After all, she was part of Black History Month. It seems as if the same women get dragged out each year to remind children that women matter. Truth be told, those who do show up are either tame characters or sanitized versions of reality.

How many kids are asking their parents for help in writing an essay on Helen Keller? And confused adults are muttering, "Hmm, isn't she that blind girl Patty Duke played in *The Miracle Worker*? The one who said 'wa wa' by the water pump while her teacher sobbed?"

The real Helen—communist, reproductive rights supporter, civil rights activist and a founder of the American Civil Liberties Union—rarely appears. How many schoolchildren know that she was shadowed by the FBI?

I'm not thrilled about the month, but I do love March 8th—International Women's Day. First marked on March 19, 1911 in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland, it was held one week before the Triangle Shirt Factory fire in New York City. The inferno killed 140 young women—mostly Italian and Jewish

immigrants—because all the doors were bolted shut. It was a bonfire of global proportions.

Robin Morgan had it right – Sisterhood *is* global.

Not to dismiss the United States' trailblazers, but I'm campaigning for intrepid leaders from around the world to become household names.

Like Wangari Maathai, winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her allegiance to women and the environment. She introduced the Green Belt movement to Kenya in 1977. Since then, over 10 million trees have been planted. Reforesting prevents soil erosion and provides firewood for cooking. Maathai has been arrested, imprisoned and beaten for taking on government officials and businesses that put profits over people, destroying the livelihoods of millions of women.

Or Fannyann Eddy, the leader of the Sierra Leone Lesbian and Gay Association. She spoke before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in April 2004. The 30-year-old activist urged the timid commission to challenge nations everywhere on the discrimination and violence faced by lesbians and gays. Her high profile proved deadly. In September 2004, Eddy was murdered in her Freetown office.

So many more – Hanan Ashrawi, Estela Carlotto, Waris Dirie, Shirin Ebadi, Graça Machel, Yayori Matsui, Nafis Sadik, Rigoberta Menchù Tum...

What are the odds they'll join Sally Ride and Molly Pitcher in school celebrations? About as high as Laura Bush inviting Molly Ivins to the White House.