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Leading with Purpose: Nancy

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Overview:

- Nancy Richards-Stower's upbringing as the granddaughter of immigrants instilled in her a deep sense of social responsibility.
- Motivated by the personal experience of her parents' advocacy for equality, Nancy became a staunch advocate for workplace rights.
- A civil rights employees' advocate and political activist, she uses her legal knowledge and platform to represent employees facing workplace injustice.
- Nancy encourages aspiring advocates to use their talents and passions to effect change.

1. Tell us about your childhood and how your early experiences shaped who you are today.

I am a granddaughter of immigrants on both sides of my family. My Italian grandparents arrived in the United States in the early 1900's about a decade apart. They didn't speak English initially and lacked financial resources, but they had relatives who

welcomed them to Massachusetts. They had both farmed in Italy. As immigrants, they always had large gardens, expanding them to supply their commercial vegetable/fruit stand, even as they worked in factories. They raised 3 children, including my mother, who faced pressure to leave school and work to help support the family.

However, my mom wanted an education. World War II raged during her high school years, so upon high school graduation, she enlisted in the U.S. government's Cadet Nursing Program, created to train healthcare professionals to fill shortages in the wartime public health system. Through the Cadet Corps, Mom received her Registered Nurse degree. Over the decades, she loved her work and after some time off while her girls were young, returned to work and became a beloved and expert oncology nurse.

My father's family hailed from Lithuania and Poland. He was orphaned around age 10 in Massachusetts and spent a few years in a Catholic orphanage. The president of Mount Holyoke College, a prominent female leader,

was on the Board of Directors of the orphanage. She liked the polite, smart young man, and recognized his potential. She suggested and facilitated his becoming the foster child of a janitor working at her college. My father, showing talent for design and marketing, graduated from high school, enlisted in the new Army Air Corps, and upon the end of World War II, earned his college degree in business from Northeastern University thanks to the G.I. Bill, and became the advertising director for a Maine shoe company. One of his college term papers was about the emergence of women in business.

My parents had diverse ethnic backgrounds, but shared the “future has no limits” attitude of first-generation Americans. Both, as noted, received college degrees thanks to federal government programs. They were always grateful for the opportunities that resulted and became community volunteer-leaders in our small Maine town, raised two girls, modeling and instilling a passion for education; and, for me, a passion for social justice through politics and activism.

As a child in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I witnessed the civil rights movement unfold on television. The injustices I saw demanded a commitment to activism to fight for racial equality, voting rights, gender equality and environmental justice. The Vietnam war raged, and I saw the divisive effects of the draft and that horrible war on our little Maine community and the nation. The nightly news at 6:00 PM, broadcasted to all, with only 3 TV networks. Thus, we had the war brought into our homes in all its brutal, terrible insanity.

I was personally motivated by the call of our young president, John F. Kennedy, assassinated when I was 12, who had spoken in his inauguration speech the words which would direct my life: *"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."* In my house, in my public school, in my little Maine town, we took that seriously.

Determined to enact change, I attended George Washington University (GWU) in the heart of Washington, D.C. My dormitory was only 2 blocks from the White House (during

the Nixon administration) and only a block and a half from the National Draft Board. I took on student leadership roles, including negotiating with GWU's administration to provide food and shelter for the thousands of demonstrators who arrived in DC for the anti-war demonstrations in the fall of 1969 and the early 1970's, many of whom used our campus as a "center." There were more people in the gatherings on the D.C. mall than

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from practicing law to becoming a political leader in New Hampshire?

There was no transition. They were coterminous. I served on the NH State Democratic committee and supported and campaigned for candidates who advocated for social justice. I ran for office. My lawyering provided a strong foundation for

leadership and had created a media profile, while I contributed to political discourse and policy making efforts. New Hampshire's first in the nation presidential primary gave us activists incredible opportunities to meet, befriend, work with, and for, national political leaders.



At the N.H. Secretary of State's office with Senator George McGovern signing up for the 1984 N.H. presidential primary. (Senator McGovern had been the Democratic nominee for president in 1972, losing to Richard Nixon

and decided to run again in 1984 on issues of justice and peace.)

3. What motivates you to advocate for workplace rights?

What I learned about my parents' challenges in the workplace and what was obvious from the public discourse: employees needed advocates; few workplaces were unionized, women and minorities earned less, had fewer opportunities, and all that was reflected back within the political system. My father refused to dismiss his elderly, long-serving secretary, despite facing termination threats during a company buyout. My mother was pushed out of her position as a senior oncology nurse at the Maine Medical Center because she advocated for a nurse's union in the early 1970's. The union was blocked and blocked again after a second union effort years later. Finally, the third union campaign succeeded and in 2021, the Maine Medical Center nurses voted in the union. It was too late for my

mom, but, it was part of her legacy.

I've made it my mission to represent employees who face adversity at work, using my legal expertise, public reputation and media platforms (including a Nashua, NH radio show for four years.)



Between 1998-2002, on her radio show at Nashua's WSMN, AM-1590, Nancy interviewed many political figures, including N.H. Governor (now U.S. Senator)

Jeanne Shaheen.

Age and experience don't shield workers from injustice. My father was 54 and my mother was in her 60's when their careers were unjustly slammed. Workplace injustice for older workers has lifetime effects because of negativity bias—a bias that predisposes humans to focus on negative events; and, when they occur in the final decade of a career, they can bring permanent pain.

4. Have you had any mentors in your journey, and how did they help shape who you are today?

I had the best mentor in the Universe.

Although I had planned to attend GWU law school after receiving my BA in Political Science, a combination of my campus activism and mediocre LSAT scores left me facing a delay in beginning law school. GWU law rejected me, pending reconsideration “the next fall.” But I was “in a hurry” and when I learned of a brand-new law school opening up in New Hampshire, still taking applications, I applied. Franklin Pierce Law Center (now, UNH Franklin Pierce School of Law) was founded by [Robert H Rines](#), physicist, inventor, patent attorney, musician, scientist and world-wide explorer. His dream was to train scientists and medical professionals as lawyers so the complex technology he saw on the horizon would be litigated by knowledgeable experts. In the first year of the school, 1973, he was not so

picky. I was one of 8 women in a class of 115. He became my mentor for the rest of his life. Dr. Rines played a pivotal role in shaping and supporting the wonderful life I've had. He encouraged me in everything I did, from law, government service, politics and media. With his doctorate in physics and law degree and patent background, and as an inventor in radar technology, even as he won Broadway awards for his theater music, and traveled the world for business and adventure, he inspired. He taught entrepreneurial classes at MIT every week for decades, where his students were always on the cutting edge of new technologies. They became his friends, then his clients and several became his business colleagues, further fueling his own academic and legislative activism. Not only did he establish New Hampshire's only law school (with its world-wide reputation), his advocacy led to the establishment of the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit. His life was full of amazing relationships. He was the patent attorney for the governor of New Hampshire at the time he met with Nelson

Mandela (whose post-prison eye surgeries were performed by Bob's South African patent client, an inventor of a cryogenic probe). Bob walked easily among all those he met, from all over the world, always generous with his grace and hospitality. I was blessed by his friendship and support through law school and throughout my legal and political careers, until his passing in 2009.



Nancy, with a portrait of Dr. Robert H. Rines in the entry of the University of New Hampshire, Franklin Pierce School of Law

5. What advice would you

offer to aspiring advocates or activists?


Love the people in your life. Explore your interests and talents. Plot a path toward your dream-goals. Know that life will always include failures. Embrace them and use them to open new possibilities. Remember that life is too short to waste time on a life or career path you don't love. Choose wisely: and assert and exert yourself as equal to your talents. Then, use those talents to lift up others. No one succeeds alone.

Conclusion:

Nancy Richards-Stower's journey leveraged her personal experiences and the support of her husband, Unitarian Universalist minister, (Ret.) Rev. Richard M. Stower, son, Jonathan Douglas Stower, and her mentor, Dr. Robert H. Rines. Her story and commitment to advocacy highlight the importance of resilience, empathy, and belief in one's ability to effect positive change in the world.


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“One girl empowers another. Let’s change lives together: one girl, one woman and one human being at a time.”

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