

SUPER WOMEN

*Females we respect and adore
for their efforts to reshape
the Philadelphia area*

by

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Business owner. Philanthropist. Doctor. Lawyer. Educator. Crime fighter. Women today are wearing many hats, so to speak, in their efforts to make the world—or even a small part of it, such as a sliver of the Philadelphia area—a better place.

Each of the women featured in the following pages is a superstar in her own right. Whether it's pursuing justice for the abused, helping other women find new life after a debilitating disease or singlehandedly improving our region's global reputation, each of these women has built a certain level of success by following her passion and looking what appears to be an impossible task in the eye and saying, "Let's do this."

We happily present the Superwomen of 2012. →



Lynne Abraham owns the distinction of being the longest-tenured district attorney in Philadelphia's history. But one might suggest she settled for second best when she pursued a career in law.

Abraham, now a practicing attorney with Philadelphia-based firm Archer & Greiner P.C., earned a reputation for being a tough but fair DA, devoting her time as the city's chief law enforcement officer—a post she held from 1991 to 2010—to preserving the rights of Philadelphians who had “their human dignity robbed from them,” she says. Thought it's different now, she was often the sole woman—a confident and decisive one at that—in a field dominated by men.

“To be in the profession I was in, in the position I was in, you had to have a certain level of self-awareness,” she says. “If you didn't have confidence going in, there was nothing you could do to build that. I knew I had to have that kind of certainty from the very

Lynne Abraham



Her advice to younger women:



You have to be totally dedicated to whatever it is you want to do, and put your heart into the implementation and have a vision and a plan for how to fulfill it. You also have to put up with people who say, ‘This is crazy,’ or ‘This is stupid.’ Follow your heart and your dreams and put them to work.”

beginning. ... I never considered it ‘power’; instead it was all about how to serve the people better.”

Abraham says she was always “devoted to doing the right thing,” reaching decisions based on available information, while realizing some of the missing pieces of the puzzle might not make themselves known till later. In these cases, she sometimes had to make a U-turn, figuratively speaking, but she believes having the courage and conviction to do so is a mark of resolve.

“You might have to alter or change course, but in life you sometimes have to admit that mistakes are made and have to correct them,” she says. “It's what a good leader does; we're not perfect human beings. If something turns out to be not the way it was originally presented, and if you're required to make adjustment or a change, that's strength, not weakness.”

In addition to her work in law and justice, Abraham has played a strong hand in improving the city and its outskirts in other ways. In 1995, for example, she co-founded a nonprofit charter school in Reading, the Institute for Leadership Education, Advancement and Development Inc. (also known as I-LEAD). The school, which has approximately 400 students, gives high school dropouts an opportunity to reengage in their education and transition successfully into adulthood.

Closer to home, Abraham founded the nonprofit Urban Genesis Inc. to promote community leadership and fund projects to improve neighborhoods, help the needy and improve schools in the city of Philadelphia.

“With I-LEAD, some people have asked, ‘Why not stay in Philly?’ There are many charter schools in Philly, but there are no charter schools in Berks County, and Reading is the kind of place that needs our help. It's still a work in progress, but any time you get kids who have dropped out to recognize they've made a dreadful mistake and that they cannot exist without a high school diploma, it's something good. ... Our goal is to get them into a college way of thinking, to have them on a path to get their bachelor's or even their master's.”

Although Abraham has enjoyed great success in the legal profession, she cautions other women against entering the field. Instead, she encourages them to look to areas she believes would benefit women most, such as engineering, science and technology.

“You have to have your head screwed on right and be adaptable, because nothing is forever,” she says, regarding her transition from DA to attorney for Archer & Greiner. “The reason human beings have the ability to do the things they do is because we're adaptable. You have to be smart about the transition when it comes to you.” —BD

Margaret Balitsaris

Haiti, a country that has long struggled with poverty and corruption, was dealt a one-two punch by nature in 2010. While many see the country's situation as heartbreaking and hopeless, Margaret Balitsaris finds inspiration there.

“In Port au Prince, amid the rubble of the earthquake [and hurricane], the people are so positive and persevering; I never saw abject despair,” she says. “You do not come away with a sense of despair; you see the people of Haiti and realize humans can do anything. They are amazing.”

In April 2012 Balitsaris and her husband, Matt, took a small delegation from Bucks County to visit Haiti and see the work of



Funkoze, a micro-lending organization they support. They met with some of the organization's poorest clients and followed the progress of its successful ones as they climbed the ladder out of poverty.

“From a woman who has five children, married, who has been living in a structure about 8' by 8' with a banana-leaf roof ... to

a very proud store owner who is sending money to her son in the United States so that he can go to school, we saw people in various stages,” she says.

This was Balitsaris' second trip to Haiti, but the real work is done from home, where she is a tireless fundraiser for the organization and spokeswoman for its goals.

“Micro-lending is not very sexy but CLM (the organization's program, *Chemen Lavi Miyo* or, “Road to a Better Life”) is so beau-

The accomplishment she is proudest of:



Being a learning-disabled child and becoming a writer. With difficulties reading and writing, especially reading out loud, I had to slow down, so I believe it taught me how to write. You can't learn to paint by dashing through the Louvre.”

tiful. It doesn't just loan women money; it provides them support with literacy and support groups. The organization will supervise 18 months of lifting this family out of poverty: building a new house, giving them a tin roof, getting the children health care and enrolled in school—all with foundation money.”

In addition to organizing fundraising events such as the jazz concert featuring legendary singer Vaneese Thomas she hosted earlier this year, Balitsaris has turned her personal project, Listen Well (listenwell.org) into a fundraising effort for Funkoze as well. “The website offers one recorded essay a month with a spiritual or ethical theme,” she explains. “You listen to the current offering, about 15 minutes apiece. The goal is to lift spirits ... [and] it embraces the wisdom of all philosophies and religions.”

Proceeds from the sale of a CD containing past essays benefit Funkoze. —SAS

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