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MAKING HISTORY IN THEIR OWN LIFETIMES BY FIGHTING THE SYSTEM

JOAN SWIRSKY

If it's true, as Santayana said, that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it, then it's equally true that a new history will be made — and is being made — by those 1990s women who have learned from the past and have decided to do things in a new way.

Doreen Banks and Lorraine Pace are two such women.

Both unlikely candidates, by conventional measures, to turn things upside down, they have succeeded in taking on monolithic systems — one political, the other medical — and telling the world that women can do it better.

Mrs. Banks, who is 37, is a resident of East Williston; wife of Bill, a banker, and mother of two sons, seven-year-old Brent and five-year-old Blake. A graduate of Wellesley College, she worked for ten years as a marketing consultant and sales representative for the insurance industry.



Doreen Banks with her husband Bill and sons Brent and Blake

In the mid-eighties, Mrs. Banks spearheaded the formation of the East Williston Civic Association. Shortly after, they learned that LILCO and the New York State Power Authority were going to bury some power lines in her neighborhood, the better to provide "clean, cheap electric power" to L.I. They learned that the project was destroying thousands of acres of Indian hunting territory and was, in fact, neither clean nor cheap. "At our first meeting, 120 people showed up," said Mrs. Banks. "It was my first insight into the great concern this issue caused the community." Their concern prompted them to hire a lawyer to help investigate and vigorously fight the plan.

Her appetite for the political process whetted, she began attending Town Board meetings. "When I saw the kind of representation the community was getting, I knew I had as much, if not more, to offer." She decided to run for the job of Town Clerk of North Hempstead and won against popular incumbent John Davanzo. "I loved the job," she said, but when an opening appeared to fill the unexpired term of Republican Harold McConnell for County Clerk of Nassau County, she said she "didn't want to miss the opportunity to get involved politically on the County level." In the contest against Carl Marcellino, the Town Clerk of Oyster Bay, she prevailed, the only woman and only Democrat elected to countywide office — but not before she learned that "it's a jungle out there."

Her victory, by 720 votes, was contested. Because more than 500,000 votes had been cast, including thousands of absentee ballots, a recount was demand-

ed. Declared the winner (but only after the Republicans filed a motion for another recount, which was rejected by Judge Howard Levitt), Mrs. Banks was sworn in as County Clerk, on December 1, 1992.

Mrs. Banks said that being a housewife and mother provided excellent experience for running the County Clerk's office. The necessity of keeping within a budget, juggling multiple tasks and managing family affairs are "not jobs that routinely fall to men."

The biggest problem in the County Clerk's office, said Mrs. Banks, was a lack of management, in spite of six deputy clerks. The regular workers, many of whose jobs were cut, "did admirably under these circumstances," she said, "but they took a bad rap for mismanagement and when drastic cuts were made in personnel, it was the more experienced people who lost their jobs." She said another major problem was the decision to automate the office. "Many of the employees who remained were inexperienced in using hi-tech equipment and this was compounded by having competing vendors for the equipment."



Lorraine Pace with the West Islip Breast Cancer Coalition

The Clerk's office, she said, takes in millions of dollars every year. "It's a revenue-producing department, but the people who made the budget and personnel cuts failed to take this into account."

However, Mrs. Banks feels confident that her plans to restructure the office will be effective. "We're in a quagmire," she said, "but things are already starting to change."

"The task that lies before me necessitates both short- and long-term priorities," she explained. In the short term, she is attempting to get rid of the backlogs in deeds, mortgages, mortgage satisfactions, liens for equipment, etc., and in the long run, to consolidate information and make it easier for the public to gain access. "This will improve the efficiency and the economy of our computer system," she said. She is also committed to setting up a system of accountability and has already boosted morale by holding regular staff meetings in which the advice and input of employees are welcome.

"The old boy network is going to be replaced by a more achievement-driven network, that includes both women and men who are committed to improving the way government works," said the new County Clerk.

"All it takes is for women to get in there, educate themselves about the issues, and somehow get enough confidence to know that they can do things as well, in

fact better, than they've been done before."

Last year, Lorraine Pace, a 50-year-old housewife with three grown children, discovered she had breast cancer. "I never smoked, I don't drink, I don't have breast cancer in my family, I have an excellent diet and I live in an area that seems so idyllic and healthy and clean," she said, "that I knew there had to be a reason. Before I even had surgery, I started asking questions."

She suspected that her breast cancer had "something to do with the water," since the pipes outside of her home — one of three in a family compound of three homes on the water in West Islip — were rarely cleaned and when they were, the service people had to return three times in one week. When she questioned a water company worker, he said that the water stagnated at the end of "all the dead-end streets."

After her surgery, while undergoing chemotherapy, Mrs. Pace began what she described as her "mission to find answers to this mystery." First, she testified before the Center for Disease Control's panel to determine whether or not the original L.I. Study should be reevaluated. (The CDC's recently released findings were found inadequate by most L.I.ers. See last month's *TWR* for an analysis of their report).

She already knew that 13 friends in her area had breast cancer, and soon learned that six others had been diagnosed with the disease — all within a fifteen block radius of her home. "Many of the women were in their twenties and thirties," she said, "and most, like me, had none of the so-called high-risk factors."

Mrs. Pace, who worked for several years in a family real estate firm, decided to put her people-to-people and organization skills to work. With a friend, Pat Nichols, she contacted the Suffolk County Commission of Health, Dr. Mary Hibberd, the Suffolk County Water Authority Commissioner, Michael LoGrande, and her oncologist, Dr. Michael Feinstein. "I told them I wanted to find out why so many women were getting breast cancer," said Mrs. Pace, "and that what we needed was a well-designed study — now!"

They agreed. Along with Director of the Suffolk County Board of Health, Dr. Mafous Zaki, and advice on demographics from Roger Grimson, Ph.D., a professor of preventive medicine at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, a study was designed and a map of the 11795 zip code area of West Islip constructed.

Mrs. Pace said that, "The State's study didn't answer the 'why' of this disease on L.I., and the publicity it got ignored Suffolk County, which has a younger population than Nassau, but a higher mortality rate. We needed answers."

During this time, Suffolk County legislator Alan Binder, who is the chairman of Health and Human Services Committee, held a hearing about breast cancer on L.I. Mr. Binder's mother was present and so horrified by the numbers of young women who stood up and said they had the disease that she went the next day for a mammogram, only to learn that she, too, had breast cancer. She is starting a map in the town of Huntington. Mrs. Pace has shared her story with numerous groups on L.I. She said that women from Long Beach, Locust Valley and East Meadow are also starting maps and women from Bay Shore have developed a petition to Governor Cuomo to encourage more state funding for research.

Mrs. Pace contacted then-Congressman Tom Downey for funding. She called Ted Shiebler of Good Samaritan Hospital, who offered printing and postage for no charge. Mr. Shiebler called Lou Grasso, the publisher of *Suffolk Life*, who ran the questionnaire the group designed on the newspaper's front page, also for no charge. Within two weeks from its August 5th publication date, the West Islip Breast Cancer Coalition's questionnaire received approximately 1,000 responses. Fourteen of the women who responded negatively to the question, "Do you have breast cancer?", were inspired to have mammograms that changed their initial responses from "no" to "yes." At this point, the questionnaire has yielded over 4,500 responses, an astounding 52 percent of population to whom the questionnaire was mailed. Normal response is between two and six percent.

As the questionnaires started coming in, Mrs. Pace turned her home into a "war room," where 20 of her friends, many of them undergoing radiation and chemotherapy treatments, spent four-to-six hours a day collating data, recording it on three-by-five cards and marking the map of 11795 zip codes with color-coded highlighters: pink for benign breast disease; yellow for malignant; blue for no breast cancer. "On one day, I was so sick from the chemo that I threw up for 12 hours straight," said Mrs. Pace. "Other women in the group had horrible days too. But we never missed a day. We even worked after hours, making follow-up phone calls until 11 at night.

"Even the women who work full-time jobs would come after work. We're totally committed to this," she said. "If not for ourselves, then for our daughters and granddaughters."

The efforts of the group did not escape media attention. This writer wrote about them in a New York Times article. Network television, Channels 2, 4 and 7, as well as Cable 12 and 21, featured stories, as did USA Today and other publications.

Almost completed, the West Islip study will be analyzed by computer, its findings released to the public sometime this spring. "So far, we know there are clusters," said Mrs. Pace. "But, we're looking at everything, from the water to electromagnetic fields to the transformers to pesticide use to personal factors. We're going to test the soil and the dead-end-street water mains, and we're going to compare the data between those south of Montauk Highway and north of the highway. And we're going to do another mailing."

She has also asked Robert Gaffney, Suffolk County Executive, to change the death certificates of women to more accurately reflect the actual deaths from breast cancer. "We don't even know how serious this is," she said, "because the death certificates of most women who die of breast cancer say they died of cardiac arrest or some other symptom of terminal illness."

"West Islip," Mrs. Pace explained, "is a good place to conduct this research because it is not considered a high-incidence area, it is not a transient area — most people who live here have lived here all their lives.

"There is something that we all have in common," she said, "and I'm going to find out what it is that's causing so much breast cancer in this area if it takes me the rest of my life.