

Bella Abzug

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By Amy Simon

Appropriately born in **1920**, the year American women won the vote, *Battling Bella* as she was called (among other names), was a life-long rebel; a lawyer, mother, civil rights activist, passionate pacifist, author, disruptor, fierce feminist and social justice warrior. Raised in the shadow of **World War II and Hitler's genocide**, Bella grew up in the then-Jewish borough of the Bronx, New York - a mostly immigrant, working class neighborhood. She and her sister, Helene, were raised lovingly in a religious home that supported and encouraged activism, social responsibility, education, music, art and sports. The family celebrated Shabbat - the Jewish weekly twenty-five-hour ritual of rest and respite. Every Friday night Bella's mom and grandma cooked up a storm, and after they lit the candles, said the prayers and feasted, the music and dancing began. Bella's Jewish values were the foundation on which she lived. Her faith inspired, motivated and sustained her. *Tikkun Olam* is a Jewish concept which means repair the world, and Bella spent her life trying to do just that. She believed **no one was free unless we all are free**.

Education was always a priority. A naturally gifted student, always outspoken and an obvious leader, Bella was an excellent, high-achieving and popular student. She graduated in **1942** from Hunter College with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. Despite the lack of female lawyers as role models, Bella always wanted to be a lawyer and "set things straight." But was outraged when she applied to Harvard Law School and was rejected as they did not accept women. In 1942, only three percent of women in the United States were lawyers. Undeterred, she attended Columbia University, one of very few women and became the editor of the *Columbia Law Review* which was a very big deal. She earned her law degree in **1947** and began her professional career. From then on, Bella battled antisemitism, sexism, chauvinism and misogyny. At meetings, she would always be mistaken for a secretary and would regularly be asked to get coffee. So, she began wearing gloves and a hat to signal her professional identity. It worked. The hats stuck and became her signature.

Bella's lifelong work began focused on **unions and labor law**. As a progressive protector of civil rights, she quickly became well known, sought after and respected. She took the tough cases and defended working people. Often for free. She could not turn her back on injustice. And Bella opened her own law firm just in time to fight **McCarthyism**. After World War II ended, a fear of communism permeated the country. Senator Joseph McCarthy led the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) where ordinary American citizens

were accused of being Communist. They were questioned about their political affiliations and asked to *name names* and rat out any friends that were communist. Thousands lost their jobs. Many turned to Bella who fought for them. Hollywood was especially targeted by the government. So, Bella also represented actors and celebrities who were blacklisted as the result of witch-hunts. It was a terrible time for free speech and civil rights in our country. And the Hollywood people, as Bella called them, were there for her when she ran for Congress.

By **1970**, disgusted with the status quo, Bella Abzug decided to be the leader she did not see in Congress.

...it was primarily in the hope of being able to exemplify that kind of leadership that I ran for Congress. I certainly didn't do it for ego. I wasn't looking for a new career. Believe me...the last thing I needed at this point in my life is to knock my brains out to get to Congress.ⁱ

Bella had the full support of her feminist husband Martin who she married in 1944. Theirs was a great love story. They were madly and passionately in love for forty-two years.

We had a stormy relationship. We get along so well because we fought out all our differences for two years before we got married.

Bella always wanted a family but knew the challenges of being a lawyer and a mother. However, Martin assured her he would be a true parenting partner, hire a housekeeper and pick up the slack. And he did. Bella always said she never could have had the career she had along with being a mother, without Martin. He truly made it all possible. Just as women have been doing for their husbands for centuries.

Bella was elected to Congress in **1971**. Her campaign slogan was *This Woman's Place IS In The House - The House of Representatives!* It dismissed and challenged the age-old patriarchal view that *a woman's place is in the home*. Bella had a way of getting her points across...

The test for whether or not you can hold a job should not be the arrangement of your chromosomes....women as a group are physically, mentally and culturally suited for every kind of activity for which men are suited....

The battle for women's rights had escalated with the **Second Wave of Feminism**, and Betty Friedan's 1963 groundbreaking book ***The Feminine Mystique***. It identified women's

unhappiness confined to their domestic roles as “the problem that had no name.” **The Women’s Liberation Movement** was in full swing with the formation of the **National Organization for Women (NOW)**, and the publishing of the revolutionary and wildly popular **Ms. Magazine**, co-founded by Gloria Steinem.

Appropriately, Bella’s first House vote was for the **Equal Rights Amendment** for which she spent her entire life fighting. Bella was first on so many important issues. She was the first member of Congress to embrace, engage, support and defend the **gay and lesbian community**. She introduced the **Equality Act in 1974** which made discrimination on account of sexual orientation, sex, or marital status illegal. It was Bella who made possible “Women’s Equality Day” annually on August 26th. That’s the day women won the vote in 1920 with the passage of the **Nineteenth Amendment**.

Bella sponsored a whopping *three hundred six bills* and co-sponsored *eleven hundred thirty-one bills*. Her entire, remarkable record is available online. A few historic bills enacted include the **1974 Equal Credit Opportunity Act**. Bella fought for this after she applied for an American Express credit card and learned she needed her husband’s signature. Without a male co-signer, women were denied loans, mortgages, bank accounts and credit cards simply because they were women. Bella worked with **Congresswomen Patsy Mink and Shirley Chisholm** on groundbreaking **Title IX**, giving equal education opportunities to girls.

Determined to make government proceedings more transparent she was a key figure in the passage of the **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)**. Suspicious of closed-door meetings, Bella also co-authored **The Sunshine Act** which opened federal government agency meetings to the public. An early and lifelong environmentalist who in 1961 co-founded **Women Strike For Peace**, Bella fought for **clean water and clean energy**. During her three terms in Congress, Bella brought close to six billion dollars into New York. And made many big and small improvements such as ramps on curbs to make the city more accessible.

Bella never stopped fighting for working people. Her energy, stamina and work ethic were unparalleled. No one could keep up with her. She died in 1998 of heart disease at what is considered young at the age of 77. She left behind two daughters, Eve, a psychotherapist, and Liz who founded and runs the Bella Abzug Leadership Institute (BALI). Young women are trained to be future leaders. According to trailblazer and first female vice-presidential nominee Geraldine Ferraro:

...She didn’t knock lightly on the door. She didn’t even push it open or batter it down. She took it off the hinges forever! So that those of us who came after could walk through.

Hillary Clinton...

As I travel around the world...I am always meeting women who introduce themselves by saying "I'm the Bella Abzug of Russia," or "I'm the Bella Abzug of Kazakhstan," or "I'm the Bella Abzug of Uganda."

Her many awards and honors include being inducted into the **National Women's Hall of Fame** in Seneca Falls. In 1997, the United Nations honored Bella with their highest civilian award, the **Blue Beret Peacekeepers Award**. The American Bar Association honored Bella with the Margaret Brent Award. **Margaret Brent** was America's first female lawyer in 1638. Bella received the Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award. There is Bella Abzug Park in New York City and an intersection in Greenwich Village is co-named Bella Abzug Way.

Bella Abzug improved our lives and did it with grit, guts and gusto. Her passion, compassion, persévérance, intelligence, drive and sense of humor informed all of her life's work. She was never satisfied with the status quo and never stopped battling for the little people. And women's equality.

...In the face of so much pain, I remain an incurable optimist. I am fueled by the passion of the women I have been privileged to meet and work with, buoyed by their hope for peace, justice and democracy. – Bella Abzug

Amy Simon is a **playwright, published writer, producer, actress, mother, and self-proclaimed Cultural Herstorian**. Her first solo play, *Cheerios In My Underwear (And Other True Tales Of Motherhood)*, held the record as the longest-running solo play in Los Angeles, until it was broken by *SHE'S HISTORY!* her solo play about women who make and made history. Her latest solo play is *Bella Abzug: That Beautiful, Ballsy Broad Who Gave 'Em Hell!!* Simon's YA women's history book will be published by Bloomsbury Press.

Complement Your Teaching

Primary Sources

The materials below are intended as starting points for teacher exploration and potential primary source integration. Sources have not been comprehensively reviewed page-by-page for classroom use, and educators should preview and select excerpts appropriate for their students and instructional context. These materials may contain perspectives, language, or content that educators may wish to excerpt, contextualize, or adapt for student use.

1. [*Bella Abzug: How One Tough Broad from the Bronx Fought Jim Crow and Joe McCarthy, Battled for the Rights of Women and Workers, Rallied Against War and for the Planet, and Shook Up Politics Along the Way* \(2007\) – oral history by Suzanne Braun & Mary Thom. Includes personal interactions and stories from Bella Abzug’s family, friends, and colleagues.](#)
2. [Bella Abzug’s mock American Express ad created at a 1983 Center for American Women and Politics conference | Congresswoman Bella Abzug tells how she helped secure equal credit for women.](#)
3. [Ms. Magazine digital archives](#)
4. [Plenary Speech at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women - Sept. 12, 1995 - Archives of Women's Political Communication](#)
5. [*Gender Gap: Bella Abzug’s Guide to Political Power for American Women* \(1984\) by Bella Abzug & Mim Kelber](#)
6. *Bella! Ms. Abzug Goes to Washington* (a diary of her first year in Congress)