

IRENE ZEHMAN VOLUNTEER AWARD
May 8, 2009

Good afternoon.

I am Charna Sherman, and I am one of the lucky granddaughters of Irene Ratner Zehman. I am lucky to be here today with so many other family members whose lives were also blessed by being related to her. They include my cousin, Nancy Wolf, and the two tables seated in the front. You all know them. Will all of the family please stand.

Every other year when it is my turn – indeed my privilege – to introduce our honoree, there's always a moment when the light goes off and I know how I want to convey, hopefully in a fresh way, what my mother and my Aunt Roz held so dear about Grandma Irene's legacy . . . and what they intended to uniquely honor by this award.

This year it was late on a Friday night on a long plane trip from Austin, Texas. I know, Shabbat. But I was returning home from a Women's Power Summit at the University of Texas Law School about advancing women in the law. And, to be honest, I was exhausted and drained. We had spent days

analyzing and debating why decades of concerted efforts by generations of talented, committed women had still failed to adequately eradicate so many pernicious, sexist barriers. And in the field of law, no less, that purports to cherish principles of equality and justice.

And yet, I couldn't sleep on the plane. I was returning to the same seemingly insurmountable challenges, but with a new resolve that was keeping me awake. And as I repeated in my head our intense debates over how could we really change the playing field, it dawned on me: that my rejuvenated sense of purpose and optimism were rooted in precisely the lessons Grandma Irene had learned from the women who raised her, and which she passed on to the women she raised.

For starters, there simply couldn't have been a Ratner Family without the Ratner women. However different their styles and their methods, there was a singular message with which Ratner girls were raised: that we are blessed with the unique and extraordinary talents – as women – with which to change the world.

And I still remember as a young teen the real awe I felt for the women in this Division when my Grandmother took me to my first UJA telethons. And I am just as struck today by all of you . . . and just as I was impressed by the select group of women lawyers I was privileged to join last week.

Take a moment to look around this room: at the sheer and overwhelming collection of amazing talents, accomplishments, and commitments. Consider the incredible time and resolve the women here have collectively given to improve the lives of others. And this year, in the face of historic turbulence, what this group of women has done is even more fabulous and remarkable.

Indeed, my Grandmother was adamant that women have the greatest capacity of all to cultivate joy in life . . . even in the most uncertain of times, and especially so in the face of challenges. You could hear her feminist optimism resonate in my Aunt Ruthy's campaign speeches across Cleveland about the future of this city in terms of half full glasses; and when my mother trekked all across Ohio on behalf of children and the mentally retarded, in her entreaties to make lemonade out of lemons.

But the real mark of Grandma Irene's leadership was how she celebrated women: simply, she put them to work. She recognized more than most that women understand the healing power of human connection. That reaching out to another human being in a time of need defeats isolation and despair. And that's how Nancy and I, and our cousins were raised – amidst a legacy of a woman who was always doing for those in need around her, and organizing others to do it with her . . . whether it was sewing, or cooking, or whatever else was necessary to lend a helping hand. My mother always recounts how my grandmother, during World War II, organized the shipping of kosher salamis to soldiers overseas . . . including setting up the neighborhood assembly line in her basement for first dipping them in wax to preserve them.

And what she really understood is that when women join with other women to repair our world, their collective effort has an exponential effect. Such efforts not only add some joy to the difficult lives of those most in need. But there is exponential joy that emanates too from the connections among the women who offer those kind hands together, and change the lives of those

in need, one need and one life at a time. And it is that joy that is its own reward.

So I shouldn't have been surprised really that my plane ride back was joyful. Although my sisters at the Bar and I crafted a very impressive and authoritative "*Manifesto*," at the core of our pledges was really just the message on the needlepoint my Grandma Irene hung in her kitchen:

I shall walk through this world but once, and any
good I may do, let me do it now, for I shall not walk
this way again.

And as I thought of her on my Shabbat journey home, I couldn't help but smile at my epiphany: that whether it's in a courtroom or a neighborhood, that is what women of valor do. Women of valor extend the hand of help and human connection to raise the bar for others . . . and in so doing, for everyone, including ourselves.

Ladies, that's what my Grandmother's award celebrates. And today, how special it is to honor a woman whose entire life has been dedicated to the truest sense of hands-on sisterhood.

Lenore Bletcher has been a consummate volunteer for more than 60 years. She has literally applied her hands and dedicated her other unique talents to meeting the needs of those in our community over her entire lifetime, and like our grandmother, also has drawn other women into her fabulous projects.

So, as a former art student, she engaged a group of women from the Fairmount Temple Sisterhood to meet weekly to sew dolls for children in shelters. She has been a long-time volunteer at the Cleveland Sight Center, where she recorded books for the sight impaired, including books with medical terminology and Jewish content. She has volunteered at the Hunger Center for more than 15 years. Recently, she began knitting shawls for women in Somalia. And even to this day, Lenore directs the Belvoir Singers, a choir that performs at senior centers and nursing homes. This group rehearses at her home every Wednesday morning.

Each of us on some days, in some ways, is a woman of valor. But a lifetime dedicated to lending a hand to so many others, in so many ways, is an inspiration to all of us. And this honoree has done so in the quietest and most unsung of ways. So let me ask Lenore Bletcher to come up and accept this year's Irene Zehman Volunteer Award. You are the model hands-on volunteer, and deserve all of our hands in recognition.