

On Responding to Challenges

By Shari C. Gribbin

Introductory note: *In the spring, Exelon held a kickoff for the Network of Exelon Women's (NEW) History Month on March 3, 2006. Gribbin, an Exelon inhouse attorney, was the keynote speaker. What follows are excerpts from her address.*

I can tell you that when I quit high school, I had no idea that I would someday get my GED, graduate from college, earn a law degree, become a lawyer for a big utility company, let alone a “regulatory” lawyer, and have a chance to address a group like this. But I did always know I wanted something better; that never changed and probably never will. Let me back up a little bit.

In the spirit of diversity, I decided I would talk today not about what diversity means or how we, as a collective group, are different, or even what has occurred in the past. Instead I am going to talk about where we are going and what our new challenges are.

In the 60's and 70's, advancing diversity meant fighting for basic rights and equal treatment. In the 80's and 90's advancing diversity often came in the form of corporate and educational programs targeted at providing basic opportunities. Appropriately, diversity, and our understanding of the concept, has continued to evolve, and more than ever our leaders, teammates and colleagues understand how valuable, critical even, our contributions as *individuals*, not just as a collective group, are to the end result.

With that understanding, more and more opportunities, at all levels, are being provided, and with this comes responsibilities on our part. We have an obligation to continue to push ourselves out of that era, where our primary focus was on fighting for basic opportunities, and into this one, proving that we are as individual as men in our contributions and that the more modern view — that we have something to add as individuals — is correct.

But in order to truly be effective at this, we must do two things: continue to work very hard and become completely comfortable with who we are. We are no longer being asked to contribute for the sake of being asked to contribute. We are being

asked to contribute because there is an appreciation for what we have to add as individuals. (And yes, I honestly and strongly believe this to be the case). We cannot do that if we are pretending to be something we think someone else wants us to be. We must be okay with working and leading in a style that is comfortable to us.

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So our mission, which we have no option but to accept, is to continue to work hard and to do so with a new and better sense of self-confidence, unyielding determination and persistence (one of my 10 middle names — literally). Many of you may be looking up here thinking, “Great advice, but how much could you really know at this point? What do people like her know about how it feels to be insecure and with a need to get more comfortable with one's self?” Many of you may also be thinking we all work hard, there is only so far “hard work and unyielding determination” can take you, and how sweet it is that I probably just don't know any better yet.

But I do.

I didn't grow up in a traditional or “normal” family, whatever that is. I realize that most of you probably question how “normal” your families are, but trust me, I *might* have something on you there.

I am the oldest of three kids. I never met my biological father, who was Arab and returned to the Middle East before I was born. My adoptive father, who is my sister's biological father, was married to my mom

for a short period of time. Out of respect for my mom and family I won't get into the details of why, but for most of my childhood and young life, my family consisted of only four people: myself, my mom, and my brother and sister. There was no family network of support, though there were lots of people who did pitch in to help along the way.

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Over the years we moved around quite a bit. We lived in many different states and cities all over the U.S. and lived here in Philadelphia for a spell when I was a teenager. I have a standing joke that we moved whenever the rent was due. It was not easy. There were many days we were hungry. On a few occasions we lived in homeless shelters (a couple of which were right here, in North and West Philly), ate in soup kitchens and a couple of times even lived in our car – in the winter. If we'd had to walk I'm pretty sure it would have been uphill both ways with some kind of bear on the trail or in the vicinity.

Like the contestants on the first season of “Survivor,” I know what it is like to eat nothing but rice for a month. And like the contestants on the current season of “Survivor,” I know what it is like to eat nothing for a few days. We very rarely had new clothes, toys or other things that are important when you are a kid. There were very few Christmases or birthdays and we were very often not only the new kids, but also the poorest kids in a very poor neighborhood.

I began working formal jobs at 14 and dropped out of school in the ninth grade to work full time. Since then, I have done everything from washing dishes to working with patients at hospitals and even have painted lines in parking lots. At 16, I moved out on my own. At 18 I got my GED and started college at a small community college, and at 19, after just one semester, my younger sister came to live with me. She was at the end of eighth grade and I did not want

her to quit high school as I did and my brother later did.

But I stayed in school. I worked full time, sometimes two jobs, carried a full course load and took care of my sister — all through her high school years (and she has done a fair amount of taking care of me now that she is all grown up) while finishing college myself. When I finished my bachelor's degree, I went on to law school and just like undergrad I worked and carried a full course load. In my last semester I came to work here, and have been here ever since.

I hope now that you believe me when I tell you that our secret to continued success is hard work, self-confidence and unyielding determination and persistence, and that you will believe me as I leave you with a checklist that I find comes in handy on a regular basis:

1. Do not dwell on your hardships.

Instead, celebrate your accomplishments. Focusing on how hard it is or was, on the struggle itself, will undermine your future success and only encourages self-pity, which is like mud — sometimes even quicksand.

2. Work hard, then work harder.

Stop waiting for it to get easier. If you consistently challenge yourself to move forward, it will not get easier and that is a good thing; it means you are constantly growing.

3. Set goals. Man, is this important.

Both long- and short-term. Long-term goals are important because they help us figure out what all the short-term goals are to get there. Short-term goals are really important because they help us feel like we are making progress.

4. Take the initiative. You *have* to

drive yourself. Seek out opportunities and make things happen. Don't wait for the world to bring it to you. Everyone else is just as busy as you are and at the end of the day none of us is “owed” anything.

5. Remember that every opportunity is a blessing. Take each one given to

you as a chance to move forward, onward, upward. If you waste it, it will

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be taken from you and given to someone who wants it more. Prove you deserve it and more will come.

6. Be thankful for help. Last and most importantly, don't forget to be thankful for all the people who help you get there, every day, as much as you can. *Nobody* does it on their own; I had lots of encouragement and love from all kinds of places along the way. If you look for it, you'll find it is probably there, from friends, family, coworkers, even strangers. Anyone who helps or inspires you at any level, and gives you what you need to keep moving: thank them as often as you can. Then reach out and help as many other people as much as you can.



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