

# Standing on My SISTERS' SHOULDERS

BY KATE JACKSON

Facing personal sacrifice and enduring arrest, violence, and humiliation, these women persevered first to become grassroots leaders and then prominent figures in the Civil Rights Movement.

*Dorie Ladner at Civil Rights training  
(copyright Herbert Randall)*

Several decades ago, Annie Devine, a black woman from Mississippi—in a place and time in which a black woman had no voice—spoke to the nation. “America,” she said, “you need to think about your soul.”

Devine and a handful of equally passionate and dedicated women, all improbable heroes, risked everything to force the nation to examine its soul. These ordinary women joined to become an extraordinary force in history that changed the face of the nation. Yet, their remarkable courage and tireless efforts have long gone unrecognized, even though their impact has been enormous.

If independent filmmaker Joan Sadoff, MEd, MSW, has her way, these pioneering women—Annie Devine, Fanny Lou Hamer, Mae Bertha Carter, Unita Blackwell, and Victoria Gray Adams, to name only a few—will take their place along with Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others who changed the social landscape of our country as heroic and essential figures of the Civil Rights Movement.

Sadoff's passion to put a face on history and acknowledge these long unsung heroines was driven by a shocking moment captured in a documentary film that aired on public television. When she sat down one evening in April 1992 to watch the second of a three-part public television presentation on the life and times of John F. Kennedy, she had no inkling that the program she was about to view would change her life and redirect her career. Tuning in to PBS's segment on the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi was the first step on a path that would take her from her role as a clinician to one of independent filmmaker—from one who passively listens to others' stories to one who elicits and shapes personal narrative.

This second episode in the three-part series focused on civil rights during Kennedy's administration. The program, she recalls, was all historical footage. “It was not Hollywood's take on what was going on during the civil rights period in Mississippi, but it was archival footage of what actually happened. There was a narrator explaining what the footage was depicting, and basically the narrator said that the police in

Birmingham, AL, had been told not to get involved with crowds who were involved with the riots at the time, but rather to let the crowds handle them themselves.”

This particular footage, Sadoff recalls, showed a busload of freedom riders coming into the Birmingham Greyhound bus station. Someone from the mob that had assembled there ran toward the bus and placed an object behind the door handle so people couldn't open the door from the main side of the bus. “The rest of the mob rushed toward the bus, bashed in the windows with baseball bats and clubs, and torched the bus.” She was watching film of people



Left to right: Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray Adams, and Annie Devine at the Congressional Challenge 1965 (copyright Corbis)

visit that part of the country and find out for herself what happened during the civil rights period in Mississippi. So, in summer 1992, she and her husband traveled to Mississippi, visiting Birmingham, Montgomery, Selma, Meridian, and, ultimately, Philadelphia, where three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and

## The stirring documentary merges archival footage with the oral histories of the participants of the crusade for civil rights to create a window on the American soul at a crucial point in history.

in a burning bus with no way of getting out. Then she saw someone run from the crowd and remove the object from behind the door handle of the bus. “The door flew open, and all the people jumped out in flames and began to roll around on the ground trying to extinguish the flames. I sat there in absolute horror looking at this footage and recognizing that it happened not only in my country but during my lifetime,” Sadoff remembers.

“I had to ask myself where I was when all of this was going on. I was recently married, I was having babies, and I was living as far away from Mississippi as one could live. Mississippi could have been Mars in the sense that it seemed so far away.”

### TAKING ACTION

This experience was so jarring and unsettling that Sadoff had to know more. She decided that she wanted to

Michael Schwerner—were murdered in 1964. They also went to Vicksburg, Jackson, and Oxford, where people talked and they listened. “We interviewed people in the streets strictly for our own edification with no project in mind,” she says.

At one point, the pair became lost while trying to find the Mount Zion Methodist Church in Philadelphia, MS. They encountered a woman who helped and inspired. While helping them find their way, she told them her own recollections of 1964. She said, “If you've got a tape recorder, I know people with stories.” After a great deal of planning, negotiating, and fund-raising, the couple returned with a tape recorder. As a result of this experience, the Sadoffs produced their first documentary, *Philadelphia, Mississippi: Untold Stories*, which examined the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on this community in which one of the



Left to right: Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, Victoria Gray Jackson, Betty Pearson, Dorie Ladner, and June Johnson (copyright JD Schwalm, 2003)

most notorious crimes occurred: the murder of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. It won the bronze award for Best Documentary for Educational Purposes from the National Education Media Competition. Several years later, they returned to Mississippi to hear the testimony of the Mississippi women who fought tenaciously for the right to vote and access to equal education.

### FROM CLINICAL PRACTICE TO FILMMAKING

It may seem like an unlikely career change, but at the core of both professions is a love of people and their stories and a desire hear their voices. As a social worker, she explored personal history to help individuals gain perspective and insight into themselves. As a documentarian, she has delved into individuals' personal tales to trace their impact upon their communities and, ultimately, the nation. The culmination of this new direction, thus far, is the stunning documentary *Standing on My Sisters' Shoulders* (produced by Sadoff and her husband, Robert Sadoff, MD, and written, directed, and coproduced by Laura Lipson), which traces the emergence of a surprising and potent force that changed the course of the Civil Rights Movement and, thus, American history.

The stirring documentary merges archival footage with the oral histories of the participants of the crusade for civil rights to create a window on the American soul at a crucial point in history. The counterpoint of the images of Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s to

the firsthand stories of the witnesses of brutality tell a story that is in equal parts painful and inspiring, horrifying and uplifting. It begins with chilling images of the segregated South in the 1950s—lynchings, cross-burnings, beatings—and traces the determination of the women who, finding their

---

**The counterpoint of the images of Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s to the firsthand stories of the witnesses of brutality tell a story that is in equal parts painful and inspiring, horrifying and uplifting.**

courage through the support and strength of those who came before them—by standing on their sisters' shoulders—began and sustained the fight for the right to vote.

Facing personal sacrifice and enduring arrest, violence, and humiliation, these women persevered first to become grassroots leaders and then prominent figures in the movement, some finding their way into the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and fighting not only the Democratic party but the President of the United States to be the voice of their state at the Democratic Convention in 1964.

The documentary, which will be distributed by Women Make Movies, New York, has garnered highly enthusiastic reviews and a host of honors. It was awarded the Jury Prize for best documentary at the Savannah Film Festival, the Audience Awards at the Atlanta

Film Festival and Los Angeles' Dancing with Film, the Fortunoff Humanitarian Award at the Long Island International Film Expo, and was a finalist in the USA Film Festival in Dallas.

This work would be a striking achievement if it came from a leading and seasoned documentarian. It's that much more remarkable that it was spearheaded by a husband and wife team, with only one other documentary under their belt. Both had impressive careers in other fields. Robert Sadoff, executive producer, clinical professor of psychiatry, and director of the Center for Studies in Social-Legal Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, is a prolific author and an award-winning professional in psychiatry, forensic psychiatry, and legal medicine.

Trained in social work at Temple University, Philadelphia, producer Joan Sadoff worked in a more traditional mode for 16 years—in clinical practice helping children, adolescents, and adults in hospitals, schools, family agencies, and community settings. At first, such work might seem to have little in common with the tasks involved in creating a documentary film, but Sadoff would argue that

there's really little difference. Both, she says, are all about people and their stories. The experience having conducted more than 5,000 interviews served her well in her new role, helping her to establish a rapport that allowed her to coax stories from strangers and put a face on history. She had already developed a taste for delving into personal history as an interviewer for the oral history project for Gratz College, Melrose Park, PA, interviewing survivors of the Holocaust.

On the surface, Sadoff has little in common with the women whose stories she devoted years to exploring and bringing to light, and she seems an unlikely figure for her subjects to reveal themselves to and trust with their deeply personal tales. But, it takes only a few moments in Sadoff's company to understand why the women of Mississippi turned to her. Not the least signif-

icant of Sadoff's filmmaking skills is a disarming charm that draws people in and a sincerity that invites and encourages them to share themselves.

"There's something generic about social work, and that is that you can apply it to just about anything you do," says Sadoff. "Dealing with people is surely one of the things that social work training helps the social worker learn how to do. Making the leap from the actual practice of social work in a clinical setting to social work applied to the film industry is really a natural."

### **SOCIAL WORK FOUNDATION**

Sadoff's training in social work laid the groundwork for her work as a filmmaker. "So much of social work is really about relationships, and relationships are everywhere—from the most basic between, say, a mother and a child to family to extended family to a community to a society to a job to a world. Everything that happens in our lives is in some way connected to the way we relate to people and the relationships that we develop," she suggests. Accordingly, she believes that this generic aspect of social work allows one to take that basic concept and apply it everywhere. "Knowing how to listen sounds much easier than it is. You can listen, but you must be able to hear what the person is saying and help them tell their own story in their own way. All of the work that we've been doing with these films isn't about me. It's about the subjects' story." Her challenge as a filmmaker was to listen and encourage people to address how they felt when they had these experiences, where they were in their lives, and to weave in the historical events that may have helped to shape them, their times, and their families.

"A social work background," says Sadoff, "allows one to help the interviewee feel comfortable to tell you anything about their personal lives. They must feel that they can trust you. The skills one learns as a social worker help you develop that sense of trust quickly. We didn't live in the community and we weren't going to have a long-term relationship, so we had to develop a rapport quickly so the people would be willing to share, to self-disclose in some personal way, and know that the relationship wouldn't end." Sadoff is thrilled with the direction that these projects have lent to her career.

"I could do it 24 hours a day, seven days a week and never get tired of it. I've never felt such passion before about anything I've done, and it's been

wonderful being able to combine the social work training and background to the events of history." What makes her a good social worker, she suggests, is what allowed her to be effective as a filmmaker. "I really love people. I'm curious about their stories. I love the idea of putting a face on an event and

being a conduit through which the stories are told. Everybody's got a story to tell."

For more information, visit [www.sisters-shoulders.org](http://www.sisters-shoulders.org).

— Kate Jackson is a staff writer for **Social Work Today**.



## **Professional Liability Insurance Protection for Social Workers – as low as \$110 a year.**

HPSO provides you an "occurrence policy" with limits up to \$6,000,000 aggregate, up to \$1,000,000 each claim. This means you are covered regardless of when a claim is made, provided your policy was in force at the time of the incident.

**FAST, EASY, SECURE ON-LINE APPLICATION**

**[WWW.HPSO.COM/SOCIAL2](http://WWW.HPSO.COM/SOCIAL2)**

Plus, additional features up to the applicable limits of liability *at no extra cost:*

- License Protection
- Defendant Expense Benefit
- Assault Coverage\*
- Personal Injury Coverage
- Deposition Representation

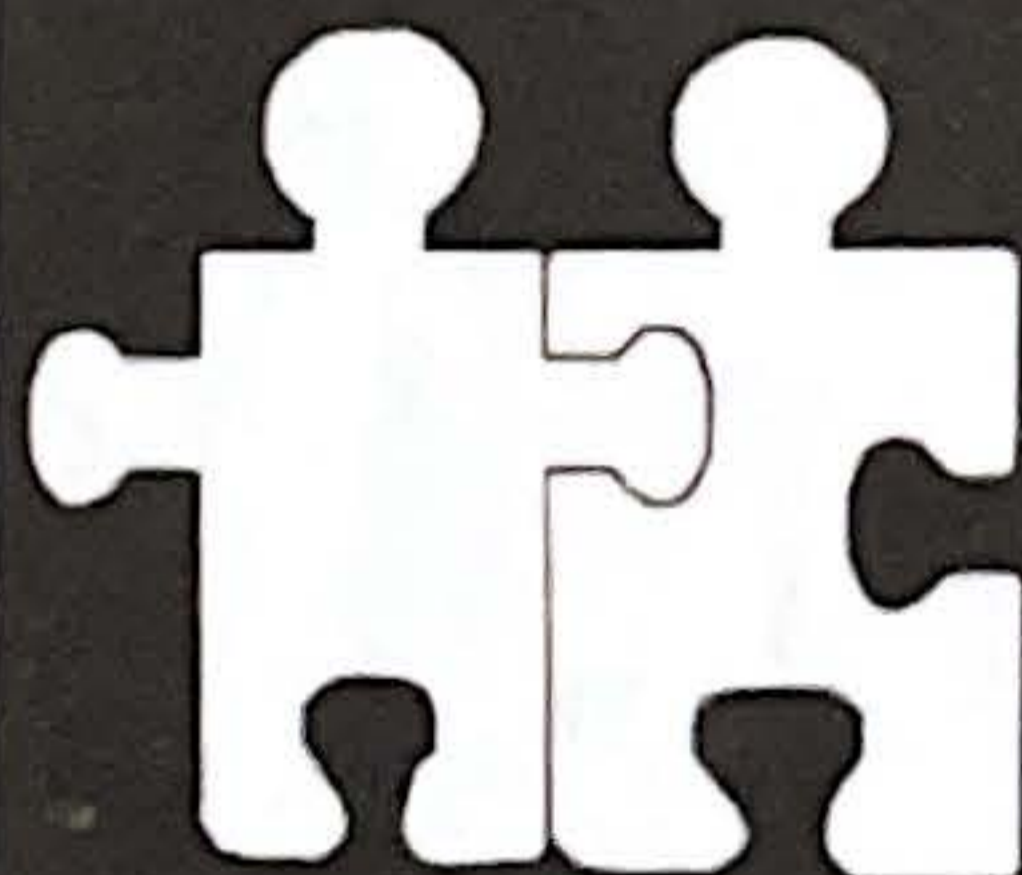
Once you're insured, you have easy access to on-line services:

- Pay your premium
- Change your address
- Request a Certificate of Insurance
- Newsletters
- Plus much more...

**1-800-982-9491**

\*ASSAULT COVERAGE NOT AVAILABLE IN TEXAS.

SOC-B204



## **Smart Marriages®**

**8th Annual Conference**

**July 8 - 11 • Dallas**

**72 hrs CE**

### **As good as it gets**

The only conference where you can TRAIN & CERTIFY to teach dozens of practice-expanding marriage and family programs. Plus research and funding updates.

**John Gottman, Michele Weiner-Davis, John Gray, Harville Hendrix, Pat Love, Howard Markman, John Covey, Scott Stanley, Bill Doherty, Lori Gordon, David Olson, Susan Heitler, Les Parrott, Wade Horn - 200 top presenters!**

**Courses like PREP, PAIRS, Divorce Busting, Hot Monogamy, IMAGO, Becoming Parents, 7 Habits, Mars/Venus, Rekindling Desire, African American Marriage Enrichment, PREPARE/ENRICH, Learning Sobriety Together, Smart Steps for Stepfamilies, How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk, Compassion Workshops for Anger Management, Controlled Separation, Marriage Savers - 100's of sessions.**

**72 hrs CE • Conf: \$315 includes 9 Gnrl Sessions, 3 Netwrkng Inches, 7 90-min wrkshps, 100's from which to choose. Grp, spse & stdnt discounts • Hotel \$79S/\$89D! 202-362-3332 • [smartmarriages.com](http://smartmarriages.com) • For FREE brochure & FREE e-newsletter**