



Photos by Kate Philbrick

Brenda Garrard: “Brazen” Ambition and a Lasting Legacy

Part of “Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine”

Written by Michaela Cavallaro

As a young, ambitious woman working in media and advertising in the 1980s, Brenda Garrard looked for opportunities to move ahead—and took them. A 1979 graduate of Bates College with a degree in art history, Garrard initially worked as director of public information for Maine Public Broadcasting.

On her own initiative, she applied for and received a women’s training grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. “CPB had an interest in helping women vault over the pitfalls that could impede their careers,” Garrard says.

Through that experience, she was offered a seat on PBS’s national brand development committee, a group of seasoned marketers for large

public televisions—plus one young college graduate from Maine—who were tasked with determining how the network should present itself to the public. “It was my first exposure to the advertising business, and I got it pretty quickly,” Garrard says, sitting in the sleek office of her eponymous Portland communications firm.

Though she was recruited by the Washington, D.C. ad agency that helped develop the PBS logo, Garrard decided to stay in Maine. Over the next several years, she worked for a Portland radio group, the Portland Press Herald and WCSH. At each company she looked for opportunities to shine, whether that meant learning how to sell radio advertising on the fly or coming up with an innovative plan to retain clients at WCSH.

“ I want to know that through my actions or my example I have made an individual’s life better, whether that’s a young woman I teach, a business help or an employee I’ve nurtured. In the end, I think it’s enough to provide for others the kind of love and nurturing you received. ”



"I was young, smart, female—and probably a pain in the ass," Garrand says, laughing as she tucks her bare feet under her.

Though Garrand wasn't easily daunted, some of the obstacles she faced were outsized. Loutish behavior from male colleagues and supervisors was common—as was blatant disbelief that a young woman had serious career aspirations. Case in point: In the mid-1980s, Garrand decided to apply to law school. As part of that process, she met with the legal studies committee at

Bates, where the dean of the college asked her what she hoped to do with a law degree. "I think it would be really rewarding and exciting to be a judge," Garrand responded.

His response? "I can't believe you would be that brazenly ambitious."

"I had the temerity to say I wanted to be at the top of my field, and that was unacceptable," Garrand says.

Law school admissions committees disagreed: Garrand was accepted at Franklin Pierce and the University of Vermont. She eventually decided not to attend, dealing instead with a difficult pregnancy and a work environment that had become uncomfortable. In fact, Garrand was ultimately fired from WCSH over a perceived conflict of interest. "At the time, it was devastating," she says. "My income was really important to our family. But it ended up being the best gift anyone ever gave me, since I ended up starting—with my infant son in tow—the business that later became Garrand."

Indeed, this year marks the 20th anniversary of Garrand's firm, which provides public relations and advertising services for organizations ranging from Gorham Savings Bank to Maine Medical Center to H.P. Hood.

Along the way, Garrand has been active in numerous community organizations, including the United Way of Greater Portland and the Maine chapter of the Multiple Sclerosis Society. At an early age, she realized the value of volunteer work—both for the community and for her own personal and career development. "Serving on boards is how you access relationships with people you wouldn't otherwise get to meet, whether that's captains of industry or people in walks of life other than your own," she says. "I loved getting to experience women like Bettsanne Holmes, Peggy Osher and Maddie Corson—women who weren't classic entrepreneurs, but who used their wealth and education to create a legacy through community service."

At age 51, Garrand has begun to consider her own legacy. Rather than seeking to put her name on a building or an endowment, Garrand hopes to create meaningful change in the lives she has touched. "I want to know that through my actions or my example I have made an individual's life better, whether that's a young woman I teach, a business I help or an employee I've nurtured," she says. "In the end, I think it's enough to provide for others the kind of love and nurturing you received."

How do you want to make change happen? Tell us.

