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# *A BIT OF ME*

PTODI Celebrates SUNY Broome's Women

## *Virginia Shirley, PhD*

*Who is the most influential woman you know? How does she inspire you?*

**There are so many influential women out there, but I'll stick with one I know. Betty Reid Soskin is famous for saying that history is told by the people in the room.**

She's not only been an incredible part of history, she's fought for her and others like her to be in the room. She's a musician, a civil rights activist, helped form the Rosie the Riveter Park, and became the world's oldest living park ranger at 85. She was still working at the park just before her 100th birthday.

In her 90s she was attacked in her apartment and severely injured. She locked herself in her bathroom and heated up her iron to counter attack, in case the man tried again. This earned her the name Iron Woman. In spite of the racism and injustice she's faced, she stays positive and continues to spread her message of love, positivity, and inclusion.



***Dr. Virginia Shirley***

**Associate Professor English Dept.**

*Who is your favorite historical female figure? What do you admire about her?*

**Khutulan - the "Wrestling Princess" was Mongolian and daughter to Kaidu Kahn.**

She had a fearsome reputation as a fighter, an archer, and a wrestler. She refused to marry any man unless they could beat her in a wrestling match. She amassed a fortune of 10,000 horses through winning and never lost a single match. At the time, and after, women were not allowed to wrestle.

The wrestling gear was very traditional, but Khutulan wore a very different wrestling vest that made room for her breasts. She was so feared and respected that her vest became the fashion for wrestling, although today it is supposedly a tool to prove your opponent is male.



*What have been the most significant changes in women's roles in the past 50 years? In the past 10 years?*

When I was about to graduate high school my guidance counselor told me I could become a nurse, a secretary, or a teacher. I asked why not a doctor, a CEO, or a College Dean? She laughed at me. She called over to one of the other counselors and told them what I'd asked - they laughed too. I went straight out and joined the military, where I could be quite a lot more but still held back by gender. While we still have a long way to go, but I am encouraged at the changes and acceptance of women in virtually any occupation they choose.

*Why are "firsts" important to note? What other barrier breakers have you witnessed in your lifetime?*

Firsts for any group are important because it disproves all the rhetoric that it just can't be done. It opens the doors for others to follow, to have the courage to prove they can do it too, and that they have the right to try. If a woman can be good at science, why not any minority? The same language of CAN NOT is used against any and all groups the "majority" wants to keep out. Firsts are important because it leads to the second, then third...then it's just normal inclusion.



*What are some of the biggest challenges that women face today? How do you think these might change over the next 20 years?*

**Women are still challenged by The Pink Tax and lower wages than their male counterparts.**

We need to start asking manufacturers and service providers why products for women are of lesser quality yet cost more. Many women I know have started buying “men’s” products (shampoo, deodorant, sweat pants) because they’re cheaper, have a better variety to choose from, and are far better made.

*Which achievement made by feminists are you most thankful for? Why?*

I’m most thankful for the right to vote. Without representation, we would have no chance at equity or equality.

*In what ways do you think women's overlapping identities – including race, class, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation – impact how they experience oppression and discrimination?*

**Intersections of identity can be absolutely brutal.**

I grew up relatively poor, and was barred from participation in education and the community. I was also a “tomboy” (an early phrase for “she’ll grow out of it, please don’t let her be a lesbian). As a tomboy, I was an inappropriate playmate for girls, but also not supposed to play football or even tag with the boys. There were more than a few times in school where we were teachers divided the class into “girls” and “boys” and the teachers weren’t quite sure where to put me. As a lesbian, I wasn’t a “real” woman, and was often disincluded from events, discussions, or other opportunities. I was paid less than co-workers because, “I’d never have children to support, and didn’t have a family to go home to.” It didn’t matter that I had been in a relationship with my now wife for more than a decade. While I can never be “other,” I do have a corner of understanding of how these overlaps of identity lead to oppression and discrimination.

**"I tend to like boundary breakers and bad asses."**

*Has a particular woman inspired you in your current taste or aesthetic? If so, who?*

When I was young, I was intrigued by pictures of women like Greta Garbo or Vita Sackville-West wearing masculine clothing. Up through grad school I dressed in suits and ties, or non-traditional clothing. There was a freedom of movement and expression missing in girl’s or women’s clothes. Fashion started to change and I found a few suits for women that didn’t come with the requisite skirt, but pants. Believe it or not, I can really rock a dress, but I prefer clothes that are gender neutral.

*Is there a female villain that you like or identify with?*

I really love Circe as a “villain.” She’s pretty much invisible until it’s discovered that she’s a pretty powerful witch. She’s shipped off to an island where she lives peacefully until invaders land on her island and take advantage of her hospitality. She turns them into pigs. Her basic attitude is balance – don’t diss me and I’ll do you no harm. Madeline Miller’s book Circe does an incredible job of bringing her back to her power and luster.

*Who is your favorite fictional woman and why?*

There are far too many fictional women to choose from. Circe might be one, but I tend to like boundary breakers and bad asses.