

*New York Women's Bar Association Foundation Hosts a Successful Special Event with
U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand*

By Annie M. Ugurlayan

On October 23, 2014, the NYWBA Foundation had the honor of presenting a special event featuring a discussion with U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, United States Senator from New York. Senator Gillibrand remarked on her recent book, Off The Sidelines: Raise Your Voice, Change the World. Senator Gillibrand was first sworn in as Senator in January 2009, and was elected to a full six-year term in 2012 by an overwhelming majority. Senator Gillibrand has been a tireless advocate for open and honest government, being the first Senator to post her tax returns on her website. She also led the fight to pass the STOCK Act, which makes it illegal for members of Congress to engage in insider trading, and the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," which banned homosexuals from serving openly in the military. She also ensured that 9/11 first responders and community survivors who are sick with diseases caused by the toxins at Ground Zero would receive health care and compensation. Last year, as chair of the subcommittee on personnel, she held the first Senate hearing in almost a decade on the issue of sexual assault in the military, and has been leading the fight to reform the military's handling of sexual assault cases. Senator Gillibrand was named one of Time Magazine's "100 Most Influential People In The World" in April 2014.

NYWBA Foundation President Karen Mitchell welcomed the audience of over 100 to the event, and then introduced Marilyn Kunstler, a NYWBAF Board Member who was instrumental in organizing the event. Ms. Kunstler introduced Senator Gillibrand and was joined by Katherine Posner, a fellow NYWBAF board member, to pose questions to the Senator. The questions centered on Senator Gillibrand's new book and

her experiences before and during her service in the Senate.

Senator Gillibrand remarked that her book was inspired by her conversations with women and their common struggles. She wrote the book as a call to action for women to be heard on important issues and to advance women into leadership positions. An example described in the book was the situation in 2006, when congressional hearings on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were largely focused on military readiness. She and then-Congresswoman Gabby Giffords highlighted the alarming increase in post traumatic stress disorder, suicide and domestic violence among members of the armed services. Their leadership, bringing to public attention the domestic impact of the wars, caused Congress to have a more complete discussion about the needs of the military.

Senator Gillibrand also touched on how she defines “having it all.” She explained that the key question that should be asked is what is being done to ensure that men *and* woman can balance work and family. This means ensuring that families have adequate structural support, such as access to universal pre-K and paid sick leave. This is particularly true for low wage earners who simply cannot afford to take time off when they become ill.

Senator Gillibrand also discussed the pivotal role her mother and grandmother played in her life. Both were trailblazers—her mother was one of only three women in her law school class and also managed to be a hands-on mother; her grandmother, who started out as a secretary in the New York State Legislature and became a valued adviser to party leaders, encouraged women to get involved in politics and public service, engaging in grassroots advocacy.

As to why there are still so few women in politics, Senator Gillibrand observed

that it is because most women do not aspire to hold a political office. She pointed out that many women engage in organized sports because they have learned to be unafraid of failure. She believes that one way to get more women involved in politics is for them to be more involved in sports. She also suggested that women considering political involvement focus on what they are passionate about because their thinking will shift from themselves to their causes. She also noted that she has an excellent working relationship with her fellow female senators, often crossing party lines to reach consensus on a wide variety of issues.

Among the many attendees were students from Stuyvesant High School, one of whom asked how to change the perception of women not being equal to men. Senator Gillibrand responded by referring to the recent scandals regarding domestic violence among professional football players, where no facts are in dispute, and the deplorable response from the NFL, namely no firings of players. She urged that a national conversation begin about violence against women on college campuses, in the military and other arenas. Senator Gillibrand also referred to a lack of women heroines in US culture, but asked the audience to consider Rosie the Riveter, the cultural icon who flexed her bicep and said “We Can Do It!” to inspire millions of women to work in factories during WWII, adding that the same impetus can spur women to positions of leadership.

The Foundation thanks the following firms for their sponsorship of the event:
Baker & Hostetler LLP, Berke-Weiss & Pechman, LLP, Boies, Schiller & Flexner LLP,
Condon & Forsyth LLP, H5, Latham & Watkins LLP, Martha E. Gifford, Esq., Orrick,
Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP, Proskauer Rose LLP and Sidley Austin LLP.