WOMEN’S FORUM INC.
NEW YORK 1974–2009

A Brief History
Celebrating Our
35th Anniversary
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Introduction

The compilation of this history of the Women’s Forum has been a labor of love, and I thank the 35th Anniversary Committee for asking me to undertake the project.

I was fortunate to know the amazing women who brought the Forum to life—to challenge it, to shape it, to cherish it and to send it out into the world. In the early 1970s, Betty Freidan ignited the imagination of a generation; Bella Abzug and Shirley Chisholm made their voices heard in the halls of Congress, and Elly Guggenheimer was determined that women’s voices would be heard in her beloved city.

In 1986, I became the first full-time Executive Director of the Women’s Forum, and for the next 22 years nurtured it “from adolescence to splendid maturity.” Exceptional leaders were elected President of the Forum during those decades, and each left her mark. Elly herself became my mentor, my hero and my friend, and she delivered her files to my safekeeping in 1998. I have called upon all of their memories, as well as those of earlier Presidents, to map the journey of the Forum for 35 years. It remains today a vibrant organization
whose invitational membership attracts women of achievement from diverse disciplines.

In 1989, and again in 1999, the Forum marked its 15th and 25th Anniversaries with chronicles based on recollections of its presidents to date. In the earlier instance, Rena Bartos, a leading historian on changing roles of women in the 20th century, wove the collective memories of Forum leaders into the fabric of what became the resilient, supporting, underpinning of a unique organization. I have built on her 1989 history so as to preserve the true, historical voice of the early contributors.

Warmest thanks are extended to the women I interviewed personally and through correspondence for this history: Muriel Fox (NY), Colette Mahoney, RSHM (NY), Susan Bird (NY & SF), Marilyn Levy (NY), Betty Cott Ruder (NY), Eleanor Holmes Norton (NY), Susan Davis (DC), Mickie Siebert (NY), Gail Schoettler (CO), Judy Johnson (SF) and Susan Wood-Richardson (NY). Special thanks to the Forum’s second president, Muriel Fox, for her Foreword, and to Susan Wood for several early photographs.

No history of the Women’s Forum could be compiled without noting the constant dedication and contribution of one of its earliest members, Lucy Jarvis. Lucy has never failed to support every president and every major undertaking of the Forum. In her professional capacity as a producer extraordinaire, she gave us memorable evenings celebrating our 25th, 30th and 35th anniversaries, and orchestrated two of the most successful IWF Conference/Galas hosted by New York in 1987 and 1994. She is one of a kind, and New York is proud to claim her!

Importantly, the Forum is, as was always intended, a network of support by women, for women. The economy of 2009 impacted all Americans; the Forum reached out to its members with heart and mind, good will and strategy. Women supporting women, as they look from today toward a Golden Anniversary in 2024!

Suzanne Dowling
October 2009
Although most Women’s Forum members have tended to be members of “The Establishment,” our history shows that we should also take pride in our victories as Revolutionaries. The Forum has played a major historical role in the feminist revolution that historian Eli Ginzberg called “the single most outstanding phenomenon of our century.”

From the very beginning the Forum has not only highlighted the talents of top-caliber women and helped those women achieve even greater success, but it has also channeled the leadership skills of its members into a powerful medium for helping all women everywhere. The Forum’s contribution was unique, and it should not be underestimated.

Elinor Guggenheimer had a clear vision of that contribution in 1974 when she described it at an organizing luncheon of “two Elinors and two Muriels” (herself and Eleanor Holmes Norton, myself and Muriel Siebert). Elly envisioned an admittedly elitist assemblage of pre-eminent women, an organization that could attract worldwide attention and make things happen through its special influence with the establishment.
Elly’s vision for a counterpart to the Old Boys Network was realized more quickly and forcefully than even she had imagined. The Forum turned the noun “network” into a verb, and the new concept of “networking” for women came alive almost overnight.

In addition to publicizing and utilizing the leadership capabilities of women, the Forum served another unique purpose: It revealed to its members how much women can gain not only by supporting one another, but also by sharing and caring. Women who’d been “Queen Bees” in their work environments suddenly learned how to create an emotional bond with other women who instinctively understood their life experiences. Through social get-togethers at conferences, rap sessions, small dinners, brown bag lunches and other special Women’s Forum devices we have learned the special joy of personal relationships with other successful women.

Forum discussions have sometimes generated controversy over the question of whether or not we should take activist roles in politics and social movements. We’ve made different decisions at different times. But nevertheless, let there be no mistake: The Women’s Forum has indeed made history, and it has helped change the world for countless women everywhere. Yes, we have all been activists in promoting the advancement of women. We have all been revolutionaries. And hooray for our success!

Muriel Fox (President, 1976)
October 2009
An Idea Whose Time Had Come

She was a charming, educated, privileged, engaging, and talented woman of the 20th century, but Elinor “Elly” Guggenheimer was born to organize. A visionary for her time, she was at the forefront of efforts to improve the lives of children, women, consumers and senior citizens. No challenge was too great; each was met with an enduring organization.

But it was a particular sense of outrage that gave birth to the Women’s Forum. In the summer of 1973, Elly, the first woman member of the New York City Planning Commission and a passionate and committed activist in city politics, was supporting candidates for Mayor and for President of the City Council in the Democratic primaries. She was asked to represent the male candidates at a meeting with young women who claimed to speak for the women of New York.

She agreed to the meeting, but the anger was already smoldering—first at the candidates who didn’t think it important enough to accept the invitation, and then at six young women in jeans who asked questions that portrayed their total lack of knowledge of City government. She left the meet-
ing muttering “we have to do something!”

The next morning, she called a woman who, she believed, would share her sense of indignation. “Eleanor,” she said, “I’m going to form an organization of influential women and I want your help.” “You,” responded Eleanor Holmes Norton, the city’s Commissioner of Human Rights, “have lost your marbles...but I’ll help!” It was an idea whose time had come.

Elly recalled the reason for forming such an organization was that there was no critical mass of women of achievement who occupied leading positions, such as the “old boys’ network” that existed for men. There was no way for powerful and accomplished women to speak out as a group or to communicate with each other.

The next two women who were brought into this circle were both named “Muriel.” Muriel “Mickie” Siebert had already made history by becoming the first woman member of the New York Stock Exchange; Muriel Fox was a top executive in public relations.

Two Elinors and two Muriels breathed fire into the nascent idea for an “organization of the city’s prominent women who would bring women’s voices to the table!”
The Early Years

The train had left the station. Elly and her cohorts contacted a number of the City’s women leaders and asked them to join forces. At the very first meeting at the Harvard Club, recalls Muriel Fox, Joan Ganz Cooney stood up and declared it unacceptable that Eleanor Holmes Norton had not been reappointed Commissioner of Human Rights. Every woman in the room returned to her office, took out her letterhead, and challenged the mayor to do just that. It was done. [Pointedly, since the Harvard Club was a strictly male establishment at the time, women entered by the side door. Twenty-five years later, when that inequity had long since been dispatched, the Forum held its silver anniversary at the Harvard Club, entered through the front door, and occupied the main floor!]

By September of 1974, a fledgling group, now 59 women strong, made its debut at a news conference at the Plaza Hotel attended by only a handful of reporters and some of the organizers and backers. A Steering Committee had specified that membership in what was to be known as the Women’s Forum should be limited, with special emphasis on preemi-
nence and balance, and should include ethnically-diverse women in business, government, education, the arts, the profes-
sions and the non-profit world. The stated goal was to “bring together women of accomplishment and provide them with a forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences.”

Eleanor Holmes Norton said: “This was formed because there was a vacuum. We are not going to do what other women’s organizations are doing. We are not confined to women’s issues…we will be speaking out on local and national issues. Some of us are feminists and play roles in the women’s movement but, in order to be truly effective, we have to operate on many different levels and one area where women have not been effective is leadership.”

It was noted that although men in government and in industry had long had “an old boys’ network”, no such network existed for women; it was hoped that the Forum would provide a means for influential women to get to know one another and to discover their mutual interests.

The early organizers included familiar faces from the women’s rights and feminist movements, among them Congresswoman Bella Abzug, Betty Freidan, Myrna Lamb and Barbara Seaman. Elizabeth Forsling Harris pointed out that the Forum was not to be a political organization, nor would it take partisan stands. “The National Women’s Political Caucus, and others, do a superb job in this field,” she said. Discussions at early meetings were very intense, and it was frequently noted that while nobody had the answers, everybody had an opinion!

One of the early dust-ups concerned the use of the Women’s Forum name by a group headed by Phyllis Schlafly, a leading opponent of the ERA and opponent of abortion, etc. Forum counsel, the esteemed Harriet Pilpel, who had drawn the Forum’s bylaws, advised that previous organizations had also used the name, but that she would endeavor to have Ms. Schlafly’s group cease and desist. She was successful in contacting the errant organization’s counsel and gained their agreement to change their name!
Meetings were held at a furious pace in that first year. It was all chiefs, all the time, but it soon became clear that a semblance of organization was required. Bylaws were drawn and 15 board members were elected, who in turn elected officers from among themselves. In short order, that practice was revised to involve the growing membership in electing all officers and 15 board members.

Although the Forum traditionally refrained from partisan political stands, it did lobby effectively in 1974 for State and Congressional assistance to New York City which was in the throes of a financial crisis. As part of that effort, it joined with the Coalition of Black Women and the Conference of Puerto Rican Women in forming WUNY (Women United for New York) to promote unity and mutual support among the city’s female leadership. And again in 1978 the Forum lobbied for extension of the deadline for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, supporting the efforts of Forum colleague and then Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman, the National Organization of Women, the new Congressional Women’s Caucus and others. The extension was gained until 1982; the amendment never received the requisite 38 states ratifying.

By mid-1975, the Forum’s newly-minted leadership and many active members sensed that an atmosphere of urgency and potential divisiveness was enveloping the organization for lack of a specific answer to the question “What is the Women’s Forum and What Does it Do?”

After a series of meetings with the Executive Committee and the Program Committee, Betty Cott summarized the many discussions with a thoughtful Memorandum to the Membership that:

• reinforced the Forum as a haven for members to exchange ideas and understanding of attitudes and positions representing a broad range of professional interests.

• restated the Forum as a major force for the presentation of women’s perspectives on mainstream issues; it
Early Members of the Women’s Forum
left open the possibility of considering proposals on specific issues—approved by the membership—to commission researched papers for discussion, endorsement and public distribution, if appropriate.

• encouraged members to spotlight, support and learn from their peers within the Forum ranks!
• challenged the organization to work toward supporting itself and achieving a healthy bank account!

During each of the succeeding three decades, these very subjects would be revisited—with regularity!

Despite the early stumbles of any innovative organization, the Forum prevailed as it wove its way among conflicting and often opposing viewpoints. Initial meetings featured discussions of *Politics, People & Power* with elected and appointed city officials; a look at the influence of women at the city’s Consumer Affairs Department which had been headed successively by three women Commissioners: Bess Myerson, Betty Furness and Elly Guggenheimer; and a discussion of State and National Politics by Congresswoman Bella Abzug and State Senator Carol Bellamy. A 1977 luncheon featured *Corporate Boards—The Woman Director*, and drew nearly the entire membership, as did a program on *Women Helping Women: How Does It Really Work?*

Founding member Eleanor Holmes Norton served actively on the Forum’s first board of directors and on committees until she was appointed by President Carter to chair the EEOC in 1977. The Forum cheered and honored her, and, though members worked hard to support her nomination, reluctantly wished her godspeed. Eleanor recently recalled early memories of the fervor of “women as a go-to group” just starting; a time when insurance didn’t pay for pregnancy. When she returned to Washington, the city of her birth, the EEOC was a completely time-consuming job for the mother of young children.

The first five presidents served for one year only: Elizabeth Harris, Publisher of Ms Magazine (1975), solidified
the Forum’s structure; Public Relations Executives Muriel Fox (1976), continued recruiting eminent women and stressed two types of monthly programs—luncheons with distinguished speakers and late-afternoon “rap sessions” in which Forum members shared their experiences and aspirations (she also initiated the Forum newsletter, “Letting Each Other Know”); Betty Cott (1977) helped the Forum define and consolidate its goals while increasing its membership to include more executives from the business world; Founder Elly Guggenheimer (1978) whose tenure was marked by a luncheon honoring outstanding corporate CEOs (Elly recalled that everyone jockeyed to sit next to Citicorp’s Walter Wriston—his retirement brought peace back to the Forum); and Sr. Colette Mahoney (1979), President of Marymount Manhattan College, whose term initiated Salute to the Arts events to honor women who had made outstanding contributions to the cultural life of the city. Among distinguished guests were Alice Tully, Helen Hayes and Forum colleagues Marife Hernandez and Beverly Sills.

Another highlight of Sr. Colette’s term was its support for Marcella Maxwell’s proposal for a free-standing Commission for Women in New York City. (Marcella became the first Commissioner.)

While early members were all women of accomplishment, many did not know each other on a personal level before they joined the Forum. They began to forge links of friendship as they shared experiences in a series of members-only “rap sessions.” Programs such as Erica Jong and Sylvia Porter Talk About Love and Money and Our Mothers created new feelings of friendship as mem-

Betty Harris

Muriel Fox

Betty Cott Ruder
bers became aware that other successful women had life experiences similar to their own. In a later session, psychoanalyst Erika Freeman and public relations executive Muriel Fox led a discussion on *Love and Power*. Muriel said she was “unable to steer the conversation to love because members were so preoccupied with the totally new discovery that it’s all right for women to lust after power!” It was understood that, as was the case with all Forum members who spoke among themselves, their remarks were frank and off-the-record.

In the summer of 1976, members agreed to take advantage of the fact that the National Democratic Convention would be held in New York City. The Women’s Forum held a luncheon, hosted by *The New York Times*, with some 50 prominent women attending the Convention as delegates and Rosalynn Carter as special guest. Forum President Muriel Fox emphasized that Republican members would be as welcome as Democrats and, indeed, might raise some of the most provocative points during the discussion period!

In early 1978, Founder/President Elly Guggenheimer reminded members to be in touch with the goals of younger women, and to play a role in opening doors for them. A lunch was planned at The Cosmopolitan Club, and members were encouraged to invite a young guest, preferably under thirty, who was talented, involved and showed signs of future leadership. Elly was always looking to the future!

The 1978 *Salute to Outstanding New York City Chief Executives* was a hugely successful event for the young Forum. Each of eight CEOs (male) was nominated by a Forum member whose individual and collective visibility soared.
Then Vice President Natalie Lang described Women’s Forum to the executives as an organization of highly diverse, richly varied group of accomplished women whose differences made them unique as a group: college presidents, bankers, television producers, politicians, feminist leaders, corporate executives, attorneys, psychiatrists and key leaders of the voluntary sector meeting and supporting each other’s interests. And added to that playwrights, artists, publishers and editors, entrepreneurs, government officials, scientists, advertising and public relations executives, distinguished members of the media and several foundation leaders.

“As you can imagine,” said Natalie to the CEOs, “we’ve talked about you for years—now it’s time for you to start talking about us!” And they did.

In April of 1979, Sarah Weddington, Special Assistant to President Carter, was a special luncheon guest. She gave an overview of what was happening on the national scene with regard to women’s organizations. The next month, the Forum welcomed three Congresswomen from New York City—Shirley Chisholm, Geraldine Ferraro and Elizabeth Holtzman—to discuss mutual concerns and explore opportunities for the Forum to make an impact. Each and every program kept the embers of possibility glowing!
One of the early organization’s ad hoc committees was an “Affiliates Committee.” Word of the Forum had spread to other cities, and the climate of the late ’70s encouraged what Elly Guggenheimer called “the process of helping other communities build Forums.” Susan Bird, then president of a similar organization in San Francisco, recently recalled Elly’s first visit to the West Coast, and her subsequent efforts to persuade two outstanding groups—the other led by Beverly Willis—to combine into what we know today as Women’s Forum West. It was our first affiliate!

Outreach continued to other parts of the country: Susan Bird recommended Alex Armstrong in Washington, DC, who turned to Susan Davis for her organizational skills and wide reach through many networks. Susan recalls that she and Alex planned a day at Rehobeth Beach where, over glass[es] of wine, they listed categories where women were in top positions in the Washington area, and planned a luncheon of the “elite” at which Elly Guggenheimer was the guest of honor and speaker. Of 35 women leaders invited, 34 accepted and,
inspired by Elly, Alex and Susan, embraced the Washington DC Women’s Forum. The Chicago Network, The Trusteeship of Southern California (Los Angeles) and the Colorado Women’s Forum quickly follow suit and soon there were six. In 1979, the National Women’s Forum was formally launched at a meeting in New York City, and Susan Davis offered to house it in her Washington office. As Forums were organized in other parts of the country, many of them, in turn, helped to develop Forums in other states. Adrienne Hall of The Trusteeship of Southern California in Los Angeles was particularly adept and determined in founding Forums throughout the country.

It wasn’t all work, all the time—Forum members knew how to have fun, and New Yorkers set the tone. In the Spring of 1985, the National Women’s Forum held its first spring retreat in Phoenix, Arizona. After addressing the business of the meeting, hair came down when New York presented a skit, written by the inimitable Elly Guggenheimer, and drawing on the singing and dancing talent(s) of Shirley Polykoff, Tina Santi Flaherty, Dorthea Winston, Ruth Cowan, Donna Shalala, Mickie Siebert, Polly Bergen, Carole Hyatt, Muriel Fox, and Carole Hyatt. 

L–R: Shirley Polykoff, Tina Santi Flaherty, Donna Shalala, Dorthea Winston, Ruth Cowan, Muriel Fox, Polly Bergen, Dorothy Chappel, Mickie Siebert, Carole Hyatt
Fox, and Kate Rand Lloyd. Except for Polly Bergen and her merciful professionalism, the cast was blissfully amateur, and their “kick” line, not necessarily synchronized, became part of Forum legend and lore!

To the tune of “Alice Blue Gown,” Polly Bergen led off with Elly’s unforgettable lyrics:

In my suitable suit by Dior
When a customer knocks at the door,
Every customer knows—
From my head to my toes—
That they’re able to trust me because of my clothes.
I can steadily rake in the loot
For I never, no never, look cute:
In my little bow ties I’m just one of the guys,
In my very appropriate suit…

Not one of the women in the audience, which included, among others, corporate executives, college presidents, lawyers, judges, artists, journalists and government officials, wore a “success” suit—but each was enormously successful in her field!

The chorus (to “One” from Chorus Line) chimed in:

We’re (kick) feminine achievers, everybody knows our names
We’re (kick) positive believers in the power of dames...

Successive cast members followed with Elly lyrics to “Matchmaker” from Fiddler on the Roof:

I am a broker, I’ll buy you a stock
One that is solid and firm as a rock
A share or a whole institutional block
Or maybe a bond or two—ooooo...

Mickie Siebert

Public Relations, yes that is my biz
Changing an image, I’m known as a whiz
I take a her and I make her a his
On Madison Avenue—ooooooo….

Muriel Fox
And of course the Treasurer rose to give her report—to the “Funeral March”:

Told all the members our funds were running short
Asked corporations to give us their support
No one gave us any
Didn’t raise a penny
That is the end of the Treasurer’s Report!

Kate Rand Lloyd

It was all a roaring success, and a reprise was presented to the New York Forum members later in the year!

The international reach had began in 1982, while Elly Guggenheimer was serving as president of the national group. She had always dreamed to someday have a conference of women from around the world—movers and shakers in their own countries—who could make things happen that could affect the role of women in the world. New York City was holding a “Salute to Great Britain,” and to Elly, this was a perfect opportunity to reach out to women in London. She cabled to Forum colleague Melanie Kahane, who was working abroad, and asked her to identify the leading women in the UK. Ten prominent English women, including two members of Parliament, were invited to New York, where they met with Forum members who marshaled every resource within reach to treat the visitors royally; the Forum UK grew out of that visit.

As Forum members from all parts of the country traveled overseas, they made contact with like-minded women in other countries and helped to organize Forums from the Philippines, Singapore, Hong Kong, Jordan and Israel to South Africa, the Bahamas, Mexico, Montreal, Italy, Spain and beyond. The international strength of the Forum continues to grow as women in one country reach out and help develop Forums in other countries. Today’s International Women’s Forum provides an umbrella through which sixty-four autonomous Forums are affiliated with each other, comprising an impressive international network of more than 4,300 women leaders across five continents.
The 1980s

Back in New York, economist and Chase Manhattan Bank executive Karen Gerard became the sixth president of the Forum in 1980, initiating the two-year term for officers. She recalled that the question of what kind of organization the members wanted rose often and vociferously!

In mid-1980, Small Dinners in Members’ Homes—for members only—became a staple in the Forum’s calendar. They continue to this day as a jealously guarded tool in encouraging members to bond with each other in the intimacy of a private home. Earnest discussions were held about professional success, the price one paid for it, and the balance it brought to feelings of loneliness and overwork nearly all members shared. At one home, the group noted that women of their generation carried a double burden in male/female relationships, but that their daughters seemed able to share responsibilities more equitably. At another, the group unani-
mously passed a resolution that “Women’s Forum Members, when and if invited to any private club which maintains discriminatory membership practices, shall decline to accept such invitations, making it clear that the invitation is rejected as a result of said discriminatory practices.”

The enduring insight resulting from the Small Dinners came as a result of the exchange of personal notes, getting to know each other better, seeing that professional and personal problems were similar no matter what the personal or career backgrounds. Muriel Fox recently recalled that the bond grew stronger each day; she kept the Forum membership list in her desk drawer as a “first point of referral” when encountering a question, challenge or opportunity outside of her own field. Women were learning to network!

It was a heady event when Forum member Bess Myerson challenged Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman (soon to be a Forum colleague) for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate seat held by Senator Jacob Javits. The Forum sponsored a debate between the two, which was remarkable only because of their shared gender! Holtzman took the nomination, but lost the election to Republican Alphonse D’Amato.
In February of 1981, the Forum, held its first all-day conference at Marymount Manhattan College. It brought together distinguished women—recognized experts in their fields—to discuss the critical public policy issues facing society. “Change: The Issues at Stake,” explored The Changing Economic Environment; Changing Rights & Expectations of Individuals; The Changing Environment & The Labor Force; and Changes in Science & Technology. Governor Hugh Carey served as Honorary Conference Chairman, Mayor Edward Koch delivered special greetings, and the Hon. Juanita M. Kreps, former US Secretary of Commerce, gave the keynote address on “The Perils of Public Policy-Making: A Retrospective View.”

The Conference was viewed as an important milestone that showcased the breadth and depth of women who were experts in their fields. Shortly after the conference, Mayor Koch asked Karen Gerard to accept a position in city government as Deputy Mayor, a move that Karen attributed to the spotlight on top women who comprised the Women’s Forum.

An Issues Committee was established in 1981 to explore topics of concern and almost split the Forum with differences in viewpoint on what came to be known as “pro-choice.” Members moved on, reminding themselves that the Forum was not an issues-driven organization. As always, there were as many opinions as there were members.

Also during Karen’s term, the Forum successfully sought federal approval for a 501(c)(3) entity to enable fundraising for “good causes.” The new philanthropic arm was named The Education Fund of the Women’s Forum. It took another two decades for The Education Fund to come into its own!

Ellen Sulzberger Straus, a community leader and president of station WMCA, assumed the Forum presidency in 1982. She had the foresight to lay groundwork for the Forum to find and pay for a central office so that the president would not have to “house the headquarters” on her premises, as had
been the case from the beginning. It would take another few years for that to happen, but the result was a larger pool of women standing for election as president.

With membership in the Forum capped at 200 and now a highly-coveted invitation, the Membership Committee was asked to reiterate the procedures and criteria for membership. Continued emphasis was put on preeminence of candidates in their fields who also had recognition in the general New York community, the principle of one class membership, and the responsibilities of members to present complete nominating packages to the Committee. The Committee was charged with the responsibility of weighing credentials against the broad spectrum of represented fields, and recommending accepted candidates to the Board. Candidates were not “rejected”—but simply “not recommended at this time.” Diversity and balance were always uppermost in the Committee’s approach. Failure to pay dues in a timely fashion caused a cessation of membership!

A hot item shared by senior women at this time was their exclusion from private clubs in the city. In 1983, the Mayor, and the President of the City Council [then Carol Bellamy, a founding and dedicated Forum member] initiated a bill to ban discrimination in clubs that benefited financially from outsiders who used their facilities for business purposes. These were places where business was conducted and where those unfairly excluded were put at a disadvantage. The Mayor and City Council President did not have to ask twice for the Forum’s support. The bill passed, and was challenged by the New York State Club Association in New York Supreme Court. Women’s Forum was one of seven organizations signing as amicus curiae.

In 1984, Donna E. Shalala, then president of Hunter College, became the Forum’s eighth president. Her tenure strengthened the case for women’s admission to clubs, and a determined effort ensued to broaden the membership to include greater ethnic and racial diversity.

In the still-early days of cable, Manhattan Cable partnered
with the Forum to syndicate one of its local productions. The Idea Exchange: Today’s Changing Woman, explored women’s issues with panelists from the left to the right. Hosted by Donna Shalala and Polly Bergen, the program included Bella Abzug, Linda Chavez, Carol Bellamy, Mary Cunningham, Judith Richards Hope and Alexis Herman.

During the show, two telephone surveys were conducted. The first question: Are Women Better Off Today Than They Were Ten Years Ago? The second question: Should Government Give Tax Incentives To Businesses For On-Site Day Care?

When journalist, television commentator and producer Ponchitta Pierce became the ninth president of the Forum in 1986, a “mid-life crisis” was well underway. Turmoil and challenge gave way to a stronger sense of the Forum’s mission, as members emphasized the need for improved communication and their broader participation in operations.

A fundraising event, underwritten by Hermès of Paris, provided sufficient funds for The Education Fund to institute Educational Awards to mature women of the city who, after an interruption in their educations, had returned to the pursuit of a college degree.

It was also during this period that the Forum became a grown-up, bona fide organization with a [rented] office and a full time executive director. Ponchitta remarked “It is a tribute to this membership that while we were working on our future…the Women’s Forum still found time and energy to host the 1987 International Women’s Forum Conference and Gala, a successful event that brought together participants from throughout the U.S. and Europe.” A unique agreement was reached with IWF President Jane Macon of Texas and New York’s leadership which allowed New York to share in the net proceeds of the event with IWF. This encouraged major tapping
of New York’s resources to support the international conference. It also helped to pave the way toward financial stability for the Forum.

By 1988, Carol Bellamy, then a Managing Director of Morgan Stanley, brought to bear all of her considerable collegial and political skills to bring together all factions and interest groups within the membership and to restore harmony and purpose. Clearly, the Women’s Forum was here to stay! As its tenth president, Carol said “…its invitational membership has comprised a unique group of women achievers…held together chiefly by the dedication and commitment of its members. Women’s Forum has survived and grown because it has used its resources and diversity to contribute to the community as a whole.”

A regular Newsletter was initiated, and members were encouraged to not only participate in the Forum’s activities, but keep peers up to date on news, honors, and issues of interest and importance to them.

The Education Fund had begun to find traction; in addition to the Educational Awards, and after a 1989 panel on the crisis of homelessness in the city, the Forum decided to focus on the specific needs of homeless women. Members of the Issues Committee prepared a report and fact sheet to identify ways in which members could make an impact. As individuals and as executives within their respective industries, many were able to provide resources and direct clothing, linens, toiletries, accessories and money to several shelters who cared for this population.

A festive evening at the Pierre celebrated the Forum’s 15th Anniversary in November of 1989. Lesley Stahl, CBS White House Correspondent, was the guest speaker, and Barbara Cook provided memorable entertainment. Starting with the founders, all reflected on the “blink of an eye” that had taken the infant organization to the challenging age of 15!”

Carol Bellamy
The 1990s

Private banker Susan Greenwood was elected the Forum’s eleventh president in 1990. There was still an undercurrent of unrest which the membership addressed with increased programs, diverse in style and content! “Brown Bag Lunches” in members’ conference or board rooms were added to the calendar but an increasingly busy membership found limited time and interest in midday diversions; a winter weekend Forum “Retreat” centered around Mickie Siebert’s Southampton home drew about 20 members who enjoyed it immensely, but the effort reinforced the fact that Forum members typically reserved their weekends for family!

New York was facing numerous crises, and members felt strongly that it was appropriate for women of achievement and influence collectively to raise their voices and make a difference. The Issues Committee continued to do all they could to focus on homeless women and children, and they designed
a problem solving workshop in media and public relations handling for the Coalition for Homeless Women advocates for the Women’s City Club

For the first time under by-laws amended in 1990, the Nominating Committee was charged with the responsibility of presenting a slate of officers and new board members, thereby enlarging the board from 15 to 19. The Membership Committee was restructured to stagger the two-year terms of four board members elected by the board in even years and four members elected from the membership in odd years, with the president serving as the 9th member of the committee which would elect its chair each year.

A symposium entitled “Inside the U.N.” was co-sponsored with the International Women’s Forum. Susan Greenwood went on to become president of the International Women’s Forum and its Leadership Foundation, and brought her considerable energy to connecting with and expanding the IWF reach globally.

In 1992, two Forum Past Presidents, Donna Shalala and Carol Bellamy, were appointed to President Clinton’s cabinet! And Suzanne Jaffe, a pension fund specialist who had served as Deputy Comptroller of New York State and served as a trustee of the Social Security and Medicare Trust Funds, became the twelfth president of the Forum. She recalled a decidedly activist tone, and a call for more meetings featuring Forum members, especially as they dealt with career and personal challenges.

Focus groups brought together a cross-section of the membership, and produced a questionnaire, the response to which created a predictable avalanche of opinion. As always, the hunt for consensus was on!

High on the list was a desire for programs that involved members themselves as principal speakers; the call for more
intimate events, and a keen interest in having the Forum take stands on issues of public policy, while maintaining our non-partisan character, for example, stating consensus in support of pro-choice, organizing interested members to lobby Congress on the Women’s Health Equity Act, and joining with existing organizations whose purpose was to promote women’s health issues.

Members were invited to be “contributing columnists” to the Newsletter to share thoughts about important issues; women’s health issues took center stage, and Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, who had co-sponsored the Women’s Health Equity Act and additional House bills dealing with specific issues of women’s health, addressed the Forum at a well-attended lunch.

The frequency of Small Dinners for members only was increased so that a growing membership could get to know each other better, and an exciting “across-the-pond mini-conference” was held with the Forum UK called “Building Bridges.”

A particularly compelling and provocative panel discussion and dialogue entitled “Art and Culture on The Urban Agenda: An Advisory to the President” brought together academic and cultural leaders to address how the arts should be integrated into the life of our cities, and how the process can be supported in the new administration. An advisory summarizing the discussion and including specific recommendations was prepared and presented to President Bill Clinton, who acknowledged it with his strong belief in support for the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute of Museum Services.

In 1994, a founding icon of the Forum, Mickie Siebert, the first woman member of the New York Stock Exchange, agreed to serve as president. That year, a spectacular IWF Conference and Gala was again hosted.
by New York at which Mickie was elected to the IWF Hall of Fame.

Powerful and diverse programs were offered to the membership:

We welcomed Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, one of the earliest Forum members, for a reception and conversation that “packed the hall.”

A cutting-edge panel on Breast Cancer was presented by Forum colleague Evelyn Lauder at which vital information was delivered by three experts from Memorial Sloan Kettering.

A major achievement of the Issues Committee, led with perseverance and fortitude by Madeline Amgott and Charlotte Klein, was a “Dialogue on Domestic Violence,” a subject that was gaining visibility and attention in the public domain. The Committee had established a “Hospital Brigade” of members who visited the Presidents of private hospitals throughout the city to determine if protocols were in place to protect and help the victims of domestic abuse.

With underwriting from Pfizer and Metlife, the “Dialogue on Domestic Violence” was held with Robert E. McAfee, MD, past president of the American Medical Association and Bonnie J. Campbell, Director of the Violence Against Women Office in the U.S. Department of Justice. More than 200 professionals in victim’s services attended; Dr. McAfee’s and Ms. Campbell’s speeches were reprinted and sent to Forum affiliates throughout the world. Subsequent efforts to support a Task Force on Violence Against Women at the international level of Forums were not successful.

In early 1995, Forum Vice President and Program Chair Caroline Goldsmith assembled a distinguished panel to explore a critical question: “Will America’s Children Be Cultural Illiterates?” The audience of business, arts and education leaders focused on the long range effect of popular culture, particularly on young people. Caroline’s Forum colleague, Lorie Slutsky, President of the New York Community Trust, moderated the panel which included David Denby,
move critic for New York Magazine; Kinshasha Holman Conwill, Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem; and Hollis Headrick, Executive Director of the Annenberg Grant program to schools. The discussion’s objective was to contribute to the then-current Presidential dialogue on education and the arts.

Last, but not least, we passed an important milestone in Forum history when a Certificate of Honorary Membership was presented to Randy Guggenheimer. Never let it be said that the Women’s Forum discriminated by gender!

Mickie continued to urge members to “be sure to have fun!” Her stature and leadership brought a period of tranquility and quiet building to the Forum.

When Gail Blanke, author, motivator and creator of “Life Designs”, took the reins of leadership in 1996, her passion for empowering women permeated Forum activities. She saw the Women’s Forum as “an ongoing source of energy and affirmation; the ultimate resource for meeting and befriending some of the most wonderful women in the world.” She believed in the power of a woman’s voice, the sustaining energy that a woman’s friendship can bring. Gail was reelected in 1998, and remains the only president to serve two terms!

We also believed that young women were driving a revolution in the culinary arts! Thanks to Forum board member and renowned chef, Anne Rosenzweig, a series of Salutes to Women Chefs was instituted at the famous James Beard House in Greenwich Village to showcase the talents of women who were becoming a force to reckon with in a field previously dominated by male chefs. By popular demand, this event was held annually for six years.

As we approached the famous “Millennium,” Gail left as her legacy a Long Range Planning Committee whose mission was to update where necessary and to ensure that the Forum
would remain relevant to a new generation of women leaders. An outside consultant was engaged and one-on-one telephone interviews were conducted with a cross-section of members to provide input on how the Forum was perceived by its members.

Two strategies emerged as most critical to satisfying the current members and attracting new members:

- Active Networking—both personal and professional
- Involvement in issues related to the self interest or broader social concerns of New York City women in leadership roles

Overarching these strategies was the matter of governance—specifically ensuring the ongoing relevance of the organization and the need to revisit the membership often.

In 1999, we celebrated the Forum’s 25th Anniversary at the end of Gail’s term—and Elly Guggenheimer was both thrilled and astonished!
As 2000 dawned, international lawyer Joni Lysett Nelson became the Forum’s fifteenth president. Joni had spent 20 years as a lawyer and shipowner in Europe and the Middle East, and was uniquely suited to lead the founding Forum of a recognized international force.

Joni instituted “Board Dinners” to encourage the leadership to delve into agenda items in depth, without the constraints of the clock; re-energized the Finance Committee; and instituted monthly “First Thursday” breakfasts. The latter remains a fixture in the Forum’s calendar of events.

After more than a year of meetings, the Long Range Planning Committee submitted recommendations to the Board. They dealt with everything from the Mission Statement to Programming, Membership, a Public Persona,
Issues Focus, Finances, Bylaws Review, the Roles and Responsibilities of both Board Members and Forum Members.

A newly approved Mission Statement read:

The Women’s Forum is a community where preeminent New York women leaders of diverse achievement come together to make a difference for each other and to take an active, leadership role in matters of importance to them.

A strategic Membership Plan was adopted to seek greater candidate diversity and representation, younger women in leadership in New York and from broader professional representation. The membership cap was raised to 400.

A strong internationalist, Joni created an email network with Forum presidents around the world!

Diane Perlmutter brought a corporate background in public relations and leadership of the non-profit “Gilda’s Club” to the table as she assumed the presidency in 2002. Based on the results of the extensive long range planning process, she noted that the membership was clear about what they wanted from the Forum. She committed her team of officers and directors to the pursuit of compelling, unique events and activities available only through the Women’s Forum, and encouraged members to not only participate and attend programs, but to bring exciting venues and events to their colleagues.

Two important innovations that greatly enhanced internal communications were adopted on Diane’s watch:

• a new Membership Directory, complete with pictures and bios of the entire membership
• a long-awaited website

A focus on long term financial viability encouraged value pric-
ing for major Forum events, and The Education Fund’s annual Awards to mature women received increasing visibility.

The popular Mid-Summer Reception to honor new members was instituted. For eight years, it has been hosted by Terry Lundgren, Chairman, President and CEO of Macy’s, on the company’s Executive Floor and terrace above 34th Street. At its inaugural gathering in 2002, the Forum’s website was unveiled and a Silent Auction was held to benefit The Education Fund!

Diane wanted one of the most significant achievements of her administration to be that the future women leaders of the city would all say “there is only one organization to which I aspire to be a member—and that is the Women’s Forum.”

In 2004, corporate executive Dede Thompson Bartlett enlisted the energy of her officers and board of directors to solidify the Forum’s three core strengths—membership, programs and financial stability—while at the same time strengthening the resources and scope of The Education Fund. They began a program to systematically identify and recruit pre-eminent women in the professions, business and the arts, and to create an exciting array of programs that could not be found anywhere else but at the Forum. More than 30 annual programs met the “Wow” criteria, and helped insure the retention of new members and the engagement of existing members.

Innovative approaches to programming included a new “Women in the Arts” Luncheon series kicked off by Forum colleague Wendy Wasserstein; an informal “Camaraderie and Conversation” Luncheon series that encouraged members to drop in; and continued “First Thursday” Breakfasts with Forum member Anna Quindlen, and Caroline Kennedy from the Fund for Public Schools. One of the most memorable events was a Saturday Brunch in February of 2005 at the home
of Judge Eve Preminger, overlooking “The Gates” installation in Central Park!

The Forum’s 30th (Pearl) Anniversary was celebrated at a dazzling Gala Event that opened the spectacular Allen Room of Jazz at Lincoln Center. Nearly 300 Forum members and friends applauded as 10 extraordinary women received Women’s Forum Educational Awards, and over $200,000 was raised for The Education Fund. Frequent surveys of the membership had indicated that the time was right to embrace The Fund as a “cause” that could gather a high degree of consensus!

Dede’s administration also put in place structural changes that established a separate corporate governance structure for The Education Fund of the Women’s Forum…thereby strengthening its stature as a 501(c) (3) tax exempt organization. Joan Leiman and Pamela Packard brought extraordinary leadership and expertise to the hammering out of the new structure.

In 2006, Westina Matthews Shatteen, a vice president of Merrill Lynch, took the reins of leadership and embraced the combination of conviction and compassion that she saw as defining the Forum. Her faith in the power of women “who think, who have opinions, who act, and who make things happen with their feet, their minds, their voices, their wallets, their laughter and their hearts” was boundless. In her first message to the membership as president, Westina quoted Sojourner Truth: “If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, these women together ought to be able to turn it right side up again.”

The Forum’s Education Fund became a focal point of Westina’s tenure, and she appointed Irene Cohen as its first president. A signature event to benefit The Fund, a colloquium entitled “Mastering Change—Taking the Inevitable Leap into the Future,” brought together Forum members who were
leaders in education, finance, public policy and corporate governance to discuss what their respective areas would look like 25 years hence. Designed by Amy Dorn Kopelan, moderated by Gail Collins of The New York Times, and keynoted by futurist Edie Weiner who outlined areas of the emerging “Virtual Economy,” it was provocative and mind-stretching!

Westina and Irene embarked upon a “campaign” to raise and solidify The Education Fund in the hearts and minds of the membership. Their goal was to achieve 75% participation by members and to position The Education Fund as a grantee for outside foundation support in the future.

In the summer of 2007, in recognition of Elly Guggenheimer’s contribution, advocacy and legacy, Westina proposed and the board of directors eagerly agreed to establish “Elly’s Club.” Beginning the following year, when a member reached her 35th Anniversary as a Forum Member, she was invited to join Elly’s Club, and elect to reduce her Forum dues by half!

Also in June of 2007, we celebrated the 90th birthday of Forum colleague Lucy Jarvis, a pioneer in the communications industry. Westina cited her as her personal “s/hero” who exemplified how to live one’s life filled with grace, beauty, honesty, intelligence and enthusiasm! Lucy remains our most senior, active, and revered member, and has just celebrated her 92nd year in style.

In 2008, when attorney Judy Fryer became the nineteenth and current president of the Women’s Forum, her goal was to build an even stronger community among the members and increase participation in Forum events, programs, committees and The Education Fund. She was joined in this effort by Rita Crotty—our energetic and tireless new executive director who succeeded Suzanne Dowling when she decided, after 22 years, to establish her own business as an independent consultant.

In September of 2008 a second stimulat-
ing colloquium on “Visions for the Future: What Will It Be Like to Be Human?” was produced by Amy Kopelan to benefit The Education Fund. An inspiring video about The Fund and its Award recipients was produced; and member support of The Fund rose to 66% in a quest to pursue grants in the near future.

“Little did I anticipate,” Judy said recently, “what a nosedive our economy would take and how critical this community-building effort would become.”

She is proudest of the response of members to the Outreach program she initiated to address various needs during the economic crisis: from the special series of programs spearheaded by Pam Packard on Navigating the Economic Crises, to the Job and Resource Boards added to the Forum’s website, to the individual outreach extended by members to colleagues with a need. Women helping women.

Notwithstanding the breakneck speed of unfolding events in the past twelve months, Judy provided the leadership to plan a 35th Anniversary event, chaired by immediate past president Dede Bartlett and produced by Lucy Jarvis, that celebrated our heritage and looked forward to another generation of women helping women.
Women’s Forum Inc. Presidents 1975–2010

1975
Elizabeth Harris

1976
Muriel Fox

1977
Betty Cott Ruder

1978
Elinor Guggenheimer

1979
Sister Colette Mahoney, RSHM

1980-1982
Karen Gerard

1982-1984
Ellen S. Straus

1984-1986
Donna E. Shalala

1986-1988
Ponchitta Pierce

1988-1990
Carol Bellamy

1990-1992
Susan Greenwood

1992-1994
Suzanne D. Jaffe

1994-1996
Muriel Siebert

1996-2000
Gail Blanke

2000-2002
Joni Lysettl Nelson

2002-2004
Diane F. Perlmutter

2004-2006
Dede Thompson Bartlett

2006-2008
Westina Matthews Shatteen

2008-2010
Judith D. Fryer
Excerpts from Elly’s Own
Words on the Occasion
of Her 88th Birthday
April 11, 2000

I arrived here at noon, not a minute too soon
Mother said, as she sang me a rock-a-by tune...

“She’s a positive pearl but her hair doesn’t curl and
I didn’t expect to give birth to a girl.

I’d have had much more joy if she’d just been a boy.
‘Well, perhaps she’ll grow up to be gentle and coy!’

Though my sex was deplorable I was adorable.
That’s what mother reported — her sister just snorted

Well my birth wasn’t news that was joyfully hailed.
The big news that day was Titanic had sailed…

The newspaper editors must have been manic,
They featured not me, but the SS Titanic…

Well, I lay there all wet in my new bassinet
Just sucking my thumb and appearing quite dumb.

Illusory, yes! Because right from the start
It was perfectly clear I was totally smart…

Time went past; I matured and had two charming boys
And the house was all full of their masculine toys.
But I didn’t produce, with my feminine lib
What Adam produced using only one rib…

What I wanted to add is today is a joy
And now I am glad that I wasn’t a boy…

As well as you wonderful friends whom I treasure.
Being female is, at least every eighty eight years, a definite pleasure.

Being female with friends? One is rarely alone;
Besides, being female is all I have known!

—Elinor C. Guggenheimer

Elly Guggenheimer, 1912–2008
The Education Fund of the Women’s Forum Inc.

The Education Fund is an educational and charitable arm of the Women’s Forum Inc., established under a separate corporate governance as a 501 (c)(3) tax deductible organization. Since 1987, the Fund has helped mature women pursue educational goals and enhance their capacities to provide productive and supportive service to their communities. The Award recognizes extraordinary and often heroic effort in overcoming adversity and the most daunting of odds in restructuring lives for success.

Grants are awarded to women over the age of 35 who, after an interruption in their education, are now pursuing undergraduate college degrees. Students in this population are often single parents, economically disadvantaged and struggling with the rising costs of a college education. Over the past 21 years, a total of 107 women have been honored. The Award recipients have provided inspiration to those who have come to know and admire their determination. Virtually all have successfully earned college degrees; many have gone on to Masters degrees, particularly in the fields of education and social work.

The Women's Forum is proud to have enabled women to realize their dreams and, as a result, become role models for their children and communities. The return on the investment is clear—educate a woman, and you impact generations.