

BRINGING *wards* TO LIFE:

The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project

The former first lady's wisdom goes global once again

BY CARRIE MADREN

Over half a century ago, Eleanor Roosevelt publicly defended her strong stances on issues of the times: human rights, women's rights, and racial justice.

"If you look at the issues that she confronted in the last years of her life, they're the same issues we're dealing with today," says Allida Black, Ph.D. '93, GW research professor of history and international affairs and director of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project. "She's the godmother of the modern human rights movement."

Yet the former first lady is largely an unsung heroine, mentioned only briefly in history books in conjunction with her presidential husband. That's something Dr. Black and her team hope to change.

Allida Black, director of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, stands in front of the Eleanor Roosevelt statue at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, D.C.

WILLIAM ATKINS





"In numbers there is strength, and we in America must help the women of the world."

—ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, 1946

Mrs. Roosevelt's prolific wisdom and words were personal, relevant to the times, and abundant: She composed 8,336 "My Day" columns, 27 books, and more than 586 articles; and she delivered some 75 speeches each year, recorded in transcriptions. The former first lady also wrote about 150 letters a day, responding to the arsenal of correspondence that arrived in her mail.

Now, Dr. Black and her staff, including three other editors, Mary Jo Binker, Christy Regenhardt, BA '95, and Chris Brick, BA '02, plus fellows and student assistants, are using Eleanor Roosevelt's midcentury words to teach modern lessons. As the second volume of the project's series goes to print, *GW Magazine* follows up with Dr. Black and her team to share the story of this history-illuminating venture.

BRINGING HUMAN RIGHTS HISTORY TO GW

"Eleanor's papers," Dr. Black exhales with awe, "they're monumental."

But before Dr. Black started publishing Mrs. Roosevelt's words, she herself traveled the long road of securing funding

and convincing others of her dream. Dr. Black's journey to bring Mrs. Roosevelt's writings to light started in the early 1990s while she was earning her Ph.D. in history from GW and holding a research position with the First Federal Congress Project at the university.

"As I was doing my own work on Eleanor, I kept thinking, 'why is no one looking at this,' because this is so incredibly rich and relevant," she recalls. "The more I thought about it, and the more I began to get to know her, the more determined I became to make this happen."

So Dr. Black, who's on the Roosevelt Institute board of directors and had worked with the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site in New York, appealed to Mrs. Roosevelt's family. The family waived hundreds of thousands of dollars of copyright fees to make the project possible.

Dr. Black's next challenge was convincing the National Archives that hers was a worthy project. To win over the Archives, Dr. Black had to persuade the nation's record keeper to trust her project to select the documents that most reflected Mrs. Roosevelt's voice. With more than 8,000 "My Day" columns, hundreds of articles, and thousands of letters, "the paper trail is about 5 miles long," Dr. Black says. "There's no way we could publish everything."

The Archives has now supported the project for 11 years; additional grants have come from GW, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and both private and federal foundations, including the highest award from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Finally, the project needed a D.C. home. Dr. Black appealed to both GW's history department and to then-President Stephen Trachtenberg, who immediately jumped on board.

With the structure in place, it was time to unlock history.

REDISCOVERING ELEANOR

Mrs. Roosevelt, a major architect of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was appointed to the first American delegation to the United Nations by former President Harry Truman.

"She believed that food is the fundamental human right followed closely by shelter," Dr. Black says. "So as people began to argue in famine-torn countries about how best to appeal within their countries and world, people within the United Nations often cited Eleanor as the American voice at the table when the declaration was drawn up."

Mrs. Roosevelt argued repeatedly for racial justice, saying that if U.S. administrations were hesitant, it undermined our image. "We're all on trial to show what democracy means," says Dr. Black, quoting Mrs. Roosevelt. "When I've quoted that to different groups around the world, they've taken that timeless statement and incorporated it into their own vision of what democracy means."

Taking a risk for one's country often means hanging yourself out to dry. "Eleanor did that every day, without a safety net," Dr. Black explains. Mrs. Roosevelt's public stance on human rights nearly put her in harm's way on more than a dozen occasions. There were 14 documented assassination attempts, and she refused Secret Service protection.

"Every day I'm increasingly enthralled with Eleanor, because she saw every day the worst of democracy and worldwide violence, and she didn't give up," Dr. Black says. "Every day I learn a new tactic or way to approach a conversation, and ways to keep people at the table."

SHEDDING LIGHT ON A LEADER

Mrs. Roosevelt's role in history books is often limited to a photo of her holding the Declaration of Human Rights or a brief mention. "We're trying to get her back into the history books," Dr. Black says.

Making her writings accessible to teachers, students, and leaders has meant getting her words out by book, Internet, and spoken word.

Dr. Black and her editorial team published the first volume of Mrs. Roosevelt's writings in 2009; a foreword by Hillary Clinton brought it recognition. The second volume, with a foreword by former President Bill Clinton, will be published this spring. In time, the project will publish a total of five volumes of selected texts from Mrs. Roosevelt's post-White House years. The five volumes are meant to be five conver-

sations that Eleanor has with the world on human rights, American politics, and foreign policy.

These tomes aren't meant to gather dust on historians' shelves, however—Dr. Black and her team organized the writings by topic, and included reader-friendly introductions that explain the events surrounding Mrs. Roosevelt's comments, with annotated footnotes that offer clues for readers.

"If Eleanor thought that we were just going to do a library book that would stay on the shelf, she would haunt me for the rest of my life," says Dr. Black, who hopes that each volume will make it easier for teachers, legislators, activists, and others to find and use Mrs. Roosevelt's wisdom on specific topics. Photocopy-friendly page layouts make it easier for teachers to copy specific texts for students. "We had no idea that the material would become so popular or that so many people around the world would want to hear her voice," Dr. Black says.

In addition to the volumes, all 8,000-plus "My Day" columns are catalogued online at the project's website (www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/) by year. Teachers can also find complete lesson plans and lecture notes online. In the future, online editions of the volumes will include recordings of Mrs. Roosevelt speaking.

Project editors have also trained more than 6,000 teachers in how to teach and incorporate Mrs. Roosevelt's writings into classrooms across the country. These sessions help primary through high school teachers learn how to teach Mrs. Roosevelt's wisdom and history in a meaningful way.

"They feel like they can tell her stories to their students," says project editor Chris Brick, who led a Florida teaching institute for middle and high school history teachers in 2010.

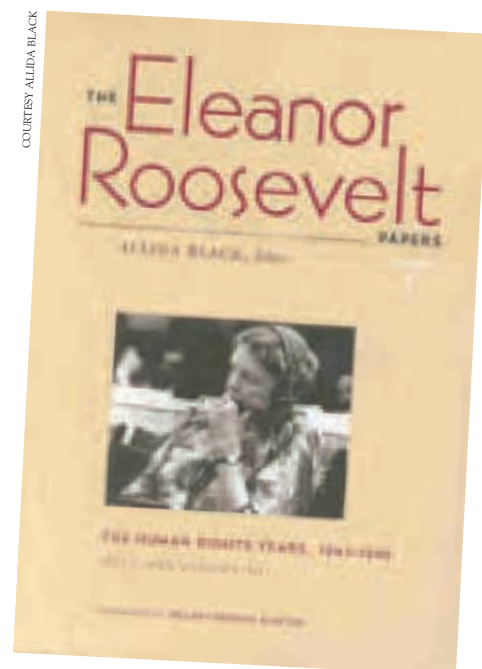
The project also trains all the female congressional fellows on Capitol Hill on how Mrs. Roosevelt's material relates to current issues such as health care, labor policy, or foreign policy. "It's not just content, it's how Eleanor kept people at the table.

There's so much negotiating strategy there, and we use that to help train the fellows," Dr. Black says.

She often gets requests from congressional members who ask for historical assistance on human rights or foreign policies. In addition, she works closely with the U.S. State Department and its educational exchange programs.

Internationally, Dr. Black and her team have worked with more

The first volume of The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers



COURTESY ALLIDA BLACK

than 600 elected officials and traveled as far as Argentina and Albania to meet with members of parliament.

“My job is to help facilitate their conversations,” says Dr. Black, who offers America’s mistakes and successes to leaders finding their own way. “It’s like taking Eleanor into the real world today.”

LIVING LEGACY

Younger generations were extremely important in helping Mrs. Roosevelt develop her message and delivery. “Eleanor would meet with young people all over the world,” Dr. Black says.

That’s one reason Dr. Black and her staff put so much energy into bringing Mrs. Roosevelt into schools. In November, 15 high school juniors from Indian Hills High School in Oakland, N.J., dressed in conservative suits and gray skirts, surrounded a conference table topped with pizza and soda. They listened to an introduction from Dr. Black, who said, “If Eleanor were here, she would not only be going and getting the pizza, she would be serving the pizza,” illustrating Mrs. Roosevelt’s heart for service.

For these students, part of an international relations magnet program, the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project was one stop on a whirlwind four-day immersion in D.C. that included a visit to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in addition to GW. Back at their school, Dr. Black makes an annual visit to teach Mrs. Roosevelt on their own turf.

After pizza and a talk from Dr. Black that set the stage for the Great Depression and Mrs. Roosevelt’s personal experiences, the New Jersey students split into small groups to investigate a political cartoon about McCarthyism and a column Mrs. Roosevelt had written on the subject. In one small group, project editor Mary Jo Binker helped students interpret the historical document: “Eleanor is the voice of sweet reason in a time of hysteria,” Ms. Binker says.

Not only is the visit a boost to their historical knowledge, students also are introduced to GW. “It’s a successful recruiting tool for the university,” Dr. Black says. A few of

(Right) Allida Black welcomes human rights workers at the Geneva Summit in December 2009.

the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project fellows are former New Jersey students who found out about GW through this visit.

The week before, Dr. Black and her team had hosted a group of 10 students from the Life Learning Academy in San Francisco. At this school, students come from backgrounds of surviving drugs, abuse, or juvenile halls. “Many of these kids have never even been out of their neighborhood,” Dr. Black explains. When they travel to D.C., Dr. Black takes them on a journey that helps them understand how history relates to them.

“Kids can relate to Eleanor,” Dr. Black says, especially her message about the basic human rights of food and shelter. One inspired young woman from the San Francisco school returned home and began organizing neighborhood students to raise money for student programs.

COMING TOGETHER

Among the project’s international accomplishments was the December 2009 summit in Geneva, Switzerland, which gathered 80 female human rights workers to share experiences and discuss how to face challenges both as a global community and as individual nations.

The summit, held in collaboration with the Vital Voices Global Partnership, honored Mrs. Roosevelt’s 125th birthday and the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It was also the first international two-way satellite town hall in the history of the State Department, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton conversed from D.C. with 500 conference attendees in Geneva. Kyung-Wha Kang, the United Nations deputy high commissioner for human rights, not only gave the keynote but also casually chatted with human rights workers throughout the day.

“I think many of them risk their lives every day,” Dr. Black says of the human rights workers. Some of the women realized for the first time that other women around the world were striving toward the same goals and going through similar struggles. “There was an amazing exchange of ideas and support,” Dr. Black says. About 20 projects came out of the summit, including cross-collaborations such as a project to address rape as a crime of war in Uganda and Kosovo.

Mrs. Roosevelt’s strong support for human rights and the courage she displayed representing women make her a role model to all female leaders, Dr. Black said at the Geneva summit.

MENTORING STUDENTS

Perhaps from years of studying and researching Mrs. Roosevelt, Dr. Black is becoming a little like the former first lady herself. She talks as earnestly and easily with a group of teenagers as she does with elected officials. Dr. Black has been a mentor to dozens of students finding their way.

Swathi Veeravalli, BA ’05, worked on the Eleanor Roosevelt project for three years as an undergraduate. The international



On a November visit to D.C. and GW, students from the Life Learning Academy in San Francisco adopted a quote from Mrs. Roosevelt as their school motto.



“We are all on trial to show what democracy means.”

—ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, 1946

affairs major had heard Dr. Black speak at a symposium for the Women’s Leadership Program and approached Dr. Black after the talk. “Her passion for the project was just so inspiring,” Ms. Veeravalli says of her mentor. “She’s been a huge part of why I do the things I do now.”

As a student, part of Ms. Veeravalli’s job was reading, coding, and filing documents; researching for the books; and helping synthesize the database. The Declaration of Human Rights inspired Ms. Veeravalli on her own life’s path: a master’s in water science from Oxford University, a water/conflict resolution job with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and now the establishment of a research institute that will examine the impact of climate change on water sources.

“I believe in the human right to water, and the necessity to have a constitutional right to certain things—that’s something I learned and carried with me,” she says.

Each semester, about 15 undergraduates and three graduate fellows find inspiration in Mrs. Roosevelt’s words, earning class credit, work-study pay, or volunteer kudos. With supervision and training, each student contributes to the project in a meaningful way. “We push them hard,” Dr. Black says, and students must prove that they can pay attention to the clerical detail and minutiae that are required for meticulous research. “They take this work to heart, they really get it.”

Alumni have gone on to start nongovernmental organizations, join human rights campaigns such as Amnesty International, or work for the Peace Corps or the U.S. Agency for International Development around the world. In all, nearly 150 students have worked with the program, and most for more than one year.

It’s not just history majors taking part—literature, international studies, accounting, anthropology, and economics majors have joined the project, honing research skills and learning how to be a part of a larger team, as well as learning the relevance of history. “Human minds are multidisciplinary,” Dr. Black says. In the summer, university students from all over the U.S. come to GW to work with Mrs. Roosevelt’s words; in lieu of payment for these summer workers, Dr. Black makes introductions with her extensive contacts in government agencies and on the Hill, according to the students’ interests.

Allison Salisbury, an international affairs major, started working with the project as a freshman, helping sort through and lightly edit Mrs. Roosevelt’s “My Day” columns with one of the graduate students. “We would sit down and literally read the column out loud,” Ms. Salisbury recalls. Since Mrs. Roosevelt was such a prolific writer, spelling mistakes were not uncommon. “We’d have to go through to catch her errors and clarify things that might not be clear to readers,” she says.

“You read so much of her primary-source work that you really feel like you get to know her as a person,” says Ms. Salisbury, who graduated in December and completed an internship at USAID’s Afghanistan and Pakistan office. “You’ll be reading and think, ‘Oh Eleanor.’”

Ms. Salisbury hopes to help the human rights cause around the world based on Mrs. Roosevelt’s principles. “For me, she’s probably one of the most important people of the 20th century,” says Ms. Salisbury, “and working for a federal government agency, I find myself thinking a lot about Eleanor Roosevelt, how she wanted human rights for everyone and how everyone deserves to be treated equally.” **GW**