

WOMEN'S Times

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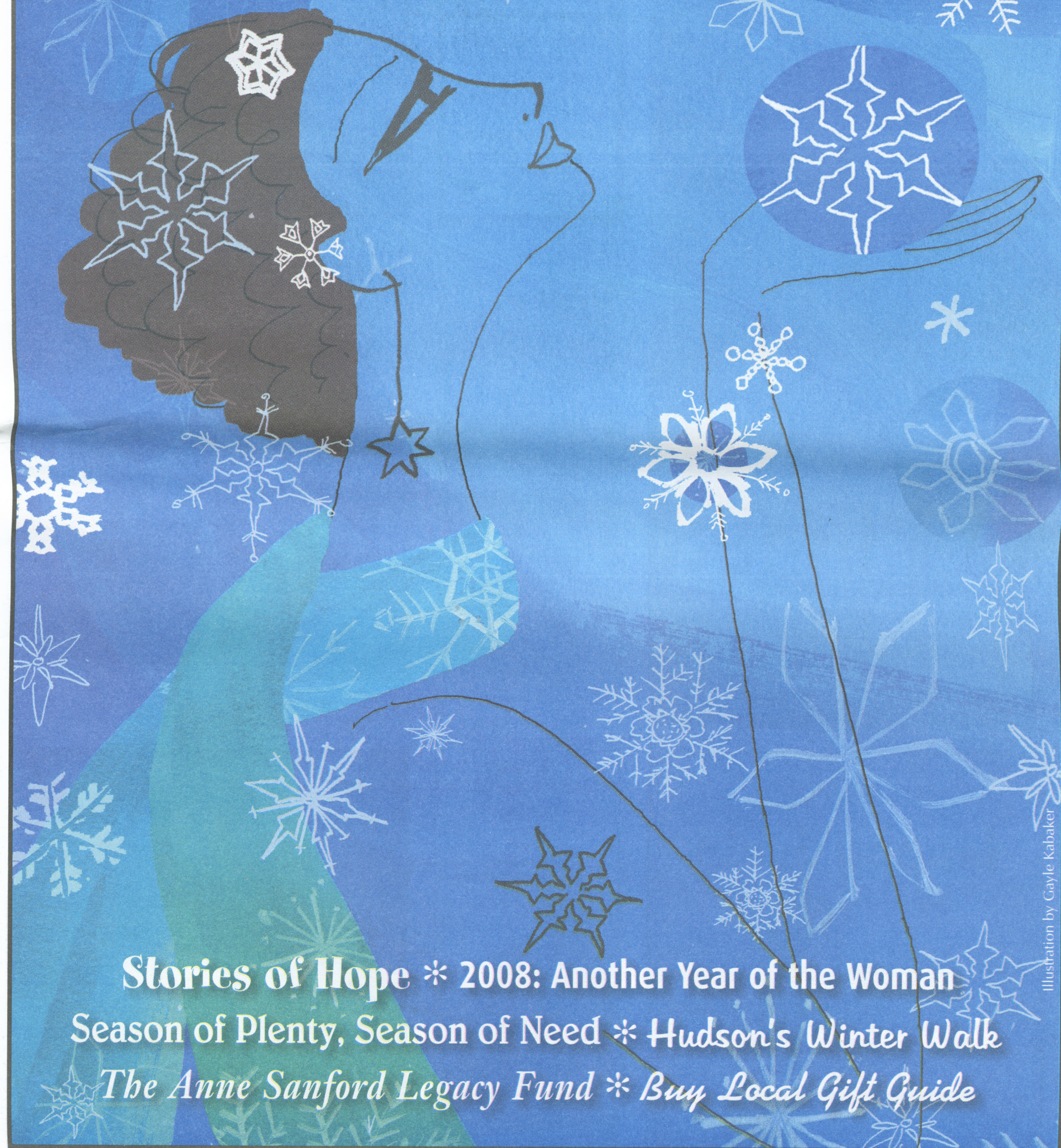


Illustration by Gayle Kabaker

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Stories of Hope

"Be the change you wish to see in the world"—Ghandi

An Enduring Passion

Jean Dillard has been working to reform America's health care system since the Truman era—and she's just as passionate at age 90 as she was at 25.

When the Berkshire resident trained as a nurse in Boston in the late 1920s and early '30s, health insurance didn't exist; people paid their medical bills out of their own pockets. Health insurance companies came on the scene in the late '30s and early '40s, and, at first, Dillard welcomed them. "We thought it was a better idea, because people were poor," she explains.

Dillard and her then-husband, a neurosurgeon, cheered when Harry Truman pushed for a national health plan in 1945. Their cheers were reserved, however—"In those days we weren't very political," Dillard says—and disappointingly short-lived. Fears of socialized medicine led to widespread resistance by legislators, the American Medical Association and the general public. (Although, Dillard says, "If you looked up 'socialized' in the dictionary, you'd think it was a good word.") Dillard was crestfallen when Truman's efforts came to naught. "I thought it was such a sensible idea that I was sort of shocked when it didn't pass," she says.

Taking matters into her own hands, Dillard taught herself to type and embarked on letter-writing campaigns to newspapers, legislators—even presidents. "I've probably written to every one of them," she says matter-of-factly about local and state officials. As a nurse in charge of the health services at Berkshire Community College for 13 years in the 1950s and '60s, she started a group in which people met regularly to talk about health care reform strategy.

At that time, Dillard also turned her attention to another pressing matter: providing reproductive health care services to college



students. In the days before Massachusetts college students had easy access to such services, she begged the college's administration to allow her to provide counseling on sexual health, birth control and unplanned pregnancies. "They were a little shocked at first," Dillard recalls. "But I said, 'This is what [the students] need, and there's nothing wrong with it.'" The administration finally agreed. After she launched the program, she began to receive calls from nurses at other community colleges in the Commonwealth, leading Dillard to set up regular meetings to share ideas and information. As a result, many of the nurses created similar programs at their own colleges.

Dillard's passion did not let up after she retired. She gathered like-minded people in the region to form Berkshire Mass-Care, a new chapter of a state-wide advocacy group dedicated to bringing a single-payer health care system to Massachusetts. She also volunteered to make public speeches on behalf of

the local chapter of Physicians for a National Health Program (PNHP).

Today, Dillard admits she's slowed down a bit—she doesn't make speeches anymore, and she hasn't attended a PNHP meeting for a couple of months—but she still writes letters (now using a computer instead of a typewriter) and follows the health care reform movement very closely. She can fluidly recite the latest news, polls and statistics and she's concerned that powerful special-interest lobbyists will continue to thwart progress. But what does give her hope is that the majority of Americans—some 69 percent, she says—now support universal health care.

"It's fueled my life, really," Dillard says of her eight decades of championing the cause. "Health care [reform] means a lot to me," she says.

Eco-girl in Action

As a freshman at her Western Massachusetts high school and a member of its environmental club, Abbe Hamilton was irked by the

amount of plastic, paper and Styrofoam that was dumped daily into the cafeteria trash bins. So Hamilton—also a musician and an athlete—decided to do something about it.

Inspired by a composting program she'd read about at another high school, she created one for her own. Today, Hamilton's initiative—now in its second year—has been so successful it's considered a model for other Massachusetts schools. Styrofoam and disposable plastic utensils have been banished from the cafeteria, while all food and paper waste is efficiently dispatched to a nearby farm for composting. School-wide compliance has been measured at a whopping 98 percent.

"Everyone has really contributed something to this program," says the now-17-year-old senior, who met with other students, teachers, administrators, cafeteria employees and state and local officials for six months to fine-tune the plan before kicking off the pilot program in February 2007.

While everyone directly involved in the planning was enthusiastic, Hamilton says, she knew the program would be a harder sell to the greater student body. To garner support, her team embarked on a public relations campaign involving posters, intercom announcements and an informational video that circulated among classes. "We had a lot of publicity," she says. "It was a really talked-up program."

The pilot program, designed to last two months, called for new products as well as new processes. Through a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, the school purchased biodegradable cups and plates to replace Styrofoam and non-recyclable plastic materials. (Compartmental-

ized trays later replaced the biodegradable plates.) Three bins were set up in the cafeteria: one for utensils, one for recycling, and one for food and paper waste.

The pilot program was an immediate success. "We were supposed to re-evaluate in two months, but it was going so well, we haven't stopped since," says Hamilton.

Funding the program beyond the initial phase, however, proved challenging: the school carved some money from its overall budget, but it wasn't enough to sustain the \$3,000 tab for an entire school year. (Having less trash should yield cost savings, but it hasn't yet worked that way: the town's current contract with the trash company is based on a flat fee.) Whole Foods came to the rescue; the whole and organic food retailer is currently covering all costs.

Hamilton, who will be graduating in the spring, hopes the school can pick up the costs next year, and that the town can eventually renegotiate its trash contract. She's carefully laid the groundwork so that her successors—one of whom is now running the program—can keep it running smoothly.

Ann McGovern, the composting specialist and consumer waste reduction coordinator at the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection who worked closely with the project's team, was impressed by Hamilton's ability to "get other people involved and working together." So, apparently, was the Girl Scouts of the USA, which recently named Hamilton a "2008 National Young Woman of Distinction"—an honor bestowed on just 10 young women who have shown extraordinary leadership through noteworthy community action projects.

"I can't say enough good things about her," says McGov-

ern. "If every school had an Abbe, we'd be in great shape." Next fall, Hamilton will be headed for college to study environmental science.

WomenBuild Marks 10 Years

When Susan Sewell put out the call to women in her Charlotte, North Carolina, community to participate in Habitat for Humanity's first all-women house building team, she had no idea she was laying the foundation for WomenBuild, a now-10-year-old program that has produced homes for needy families around the world.

Sewell, who was at the time the executive director for Habitat for Humanity in Charlotte, remembers the moment a friend voiced the idea of an all-female team. It was just after they'd finished building a house in 24 hours and Sewell was exhausted. "I went home and tried to sleep, but I couldn't," she says. "I got so excited about the potential of building a house with just women."

At the time, more than 50 percent of the people who owned Habitat for Humanity houses in Charlotte were single women with children. "To me, that made a huge statement," Sewell says. "Women need to build [houses] for women."

To organize and promote the effort, Sewell gathered together an impressive all-female cast that included Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, a prominent North Carolina architect and public relations specialists. The team raised \$100,000 and collected donations for 90 percent of the building materials needed to create a new house for a single woman with children.

Sewell then asked women in the Charlotte community to serve on the construction team. The response was over-

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■ *"The only thing we didn't have were women who knew how to build a foundation...so we [put on] our boots and we learned!"*

—Susan Sewell

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whelming, with over 500 volunteers signing up. Though most of the women didn't have construction experience, enough female plumbers and engineers stepped up to the plate to ensure the range of expertise necessary to build a house—with the exception of one critical area. "The only thing we didn't have were women who knew how to build a foundation," says Sewell. But the construction team quickly solved that problem. "We [put on] our boots and we learned!" says Sewell.

The entire construction process took three months. The project was dubbed with the theme, "Look, Look, See Jane Build." The Porta-Johns on the site were ceremoniously renamed Porta-Janes, and the urinals inside were transformed into flower vases. "We didn't have one guy on [the site]," Sewell says with pride.

The project attracted significant publicity and before long, Sewell was getting calls from other Habitat for Humanity affiliates asking for advice about how to put together their own all-women teams. Denver and Atlanta initiated programs based on the Charlotte model. In May 1998, Habitat International officially formed the Women-Build department. Today, recipients of WomenBuild homes—over 1,400 homes to date—are both women and men. More than 21,000 women across the globe have volunteered.

"It's such a great way to build, with like-minded women," says Lisa Marie Nickerson, associate director of the WomenBuild department of Habitat for Humanity. "[Women] learn so much better with one another."

Sewell has fond memories of her all-women team efforts. "I can look back and still smile," she says. "We were all working together. To be part of that just makes me feel good."

Christine Triantos is a freelance writer and Guest Features Editor of this issue.