



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Heroes and Role Models: Sally Fox”

by Abigail Cheskis

April 28, 2007

For my bat mitzvah I had to explore my heroes and role models. A hero and a role model are different. The dictionary’s definition of a hero is: A person noted or admired for nobility, courage, and outstanding achievements. The dictionary’s definition of a role model is: A person on whom others model themselves. I agree with both of these definitions.

A hero is someone who does amazing and challenging tasks that you might not see yourself doing, while a role model is someone you look up to and want to be like.

Someone can still be a hero or role model if they have flaws. Everyone has flaws, but if the flaws don’t affect what the hero or role model does, then the flaws don’t matter. Someone can stop being a hero or role model if his or her beliefs or behaviors change.

I really don’t think I have a hero, but there are many people who I would love to be like. A role model of mine would have to have the following values: Be kind, act on behalf of women’s rights, be generous, be charitable, care for others in the world, and promote education.

The person I have chosen to be my role model is Sally Fox, who I had never even heard of before this project. She was a preserver of the visual history of women. She was born in 1929 and died in February of 2006. Sally died from lung cancer at the age of 76. I learned about Sally from visiting a website called the Jewish Women’s Archives. She had recently died when I was trying to find a role model. My favorite teacher’s last name is also Fox, so her name grabbed my attention when I saw it. Once I started reading about Sally I knew she was my perfect role model. She was also a non-practicing secular Jew who would have probably fit in at The City Congregation.

She was born in Hollywood, California, but grew up in New York City. She graduated from New York High School for Music and Art and Performing Arts. Sally graduated from Queens College in 1950 with a bachelor’s degree in painting and art history. From 1950 to 1961 she lived in New York City, and in 1962 she moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

A preserver of the visual history of women is someone who collects prints, posters, magazine covers, advertisements, trade cards, post cards, and photographs about women to document their lives. Trade cards are small, illustrated advertising cards used mostly in the Victorian era. It is important that Sally preserved the visual history of women because it teaches a lesson. Not only do men contribute to society but women do too. In the past women have only been credited for stereotypical activities. Sally wanted people to know that women did and do a lot more than you think.

With all of the art that Sally collected she made three different calendars. Her first calendar book was called The Medieval Woman: An Illuminated Book of Days, published in 1985. Illumination is an art form that was used in the medieval times. This calendar book has many pictures of women doing things that people think women wouldn’t have ordinarily done in medieval times. To help Sally make this calendar book she used letters, wills, business and legal documents, convent, manor, and census

records. But the thing that helped her most was manuscript illuminations and wood cuts from the first printed books. I will show you a few examples of pictures from this book. One of my favorites is a picture of women defending a castle using crossbows. Another example is a woman writer. A third is of a woman sculptor. Sally included the illuminations in her collection because she had a desire to uncover the work that women actually did in the past.

The second calendar book she made was called The Victorian Woman: A Book of Days, published in 1987. In this book there are illustrations from late nineteenth-century advertising ephemera. The word ephemera means everyday documents that were intended to be used and then thrown away. Some forms of ephemera in this calendar book are trade and advertising cards, posters, labels, magazine insets, and other items. One of my favorite advertisements is about a new type of lawn mower. It shows a girl pushing the lawn mower. It implies that it's so easy to use that even a girl can use it, but it also shows that not only boys can mow the lawn but girls can too.

Sally's last calendar book was called The Sporting Woman: a Book of Days, published in 1989. In this calendar book there are pictures of women doing sports from ancient Egyptian times to the present. Historians have never recorded these activities. Therefore people today never knew that women participated in these sports. I have two favorite pictures in this calendar book. One of them is a picture of women doing archery. The caption says "Archery, a favorite open-air sport of fashionable women, was always considered a "feminine" sport of skill suitable for both married and single women." The other picture that I like in this calendar book is a picture of three Roman gymnasts, a mosaic from the fourth century A.D.

I knew that Sally had three sons from reading her obituary. To help us locate someone in her family we contacted Jacalyn Blume who currently works in the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College. All of Sally's collection is held in this library. She put us in contact with Michael Fox, one of Sally's sons. He was very generous with his time and gave me a lot of important information, especially about Sally's values. I also attended an exhibit put together by The Schlesinger Library, and a tribute to Sally by her colleagues. At this exhibit I met many people, one of whom was the director of the Jewish Women's Archives website. I had a conversation with her and we took a few pictures. This all led to the mention of my project in the Jewish Women's Archives newsletter.

The first of Sally's values that I would like to mention is activism. As Michael said "she voted with her feet". An example of this is she started an organization called *Parents against the Draft* founded when a peace time draft was proposed by President Reagan. This organization not only attempted to help her kids but helped others too. Also, she was a founding member of the American Society of Picture Professionals. This organization brought together people like Sally, who collected pictures to try to make a point. The people who were members of the society benefited from being part of it because they could learn from each other. Lastly, Sally's main work as an activist was that she documented women's lives from past and present times to make a point of how women really did more than they were given credit for.

Sally's next value is education. She tried to educate people by putting her work out in the world for everyone to see, not just historians who study medieval women or Victorian women. She made calendars, address books, and cards. When she created her book The Sporting Woman she arranged an exhibit that went to many colleges over a nine-year period.

Sally was especially creative. For example, she once found a very old menu. She wanted to figure out what restaurant and what time period it was from. She figured this out by researching the font that was used on the menu.

Sally believed in being a good student. She also believed in studying hard and ended up being a mentor for many people. She once hired a Swedish au pair and generously arranged for her to go to college.

As you may have guessed already, Sally was a feminist who made big changes. She worked as a house wife *and* as a preserver of the visual history of women. Her combination of work and family was uncommon for women in the 50's. Sally started out working at the Museum of Modern Art and then worked at Houghton Mifflin. Eventually Sally rose to the position of coordinator of picture research and picture editor. Other young women looked up to Sally as a role model. They believed they could work in and out of the house too. When Sally did her work, since she had three kids and a husband, she would take them to wherever she needed to go to get her work done. The more obvious part of Sally's work as a feminist was that she devoted a large part of her career to promote a greater understanding of the role of women.

Sally had a lot of cultural sensitivity. When she visited places she wouldn't stay at fancy hotels, she would try to learn how the people lived. On one trip she wanted to experience Mexico, so she asked a farmer if she could camp on his land. She felt she should give him something in return, so she offered him a sack of either salt or sugar. She gave the farmer not money, but something that would probably last longer, and was needed to survive.

Sally's work was difficult and she experienced a number of obstacles. When searching for her pictures Sally had to go through many different categories because nothing was specifically indexed under the category "women". Today she could have just googled "women", or gone to the Schlesinger Library where she could have found thousands of pictures and documents.

Sally was a great person and in my opinion made a positive impact on the world. It seems like I am a clone of her because of how much we are alike. We have the same values, especially feminism and the importance of being a good student. Sally stands out for me as a role model because she did something unusual in her time. I also admire Sally because she started a new field of research. She made pictures equally important to text. I hope someday I can make as big a contribution to the world as she did.