

## PROFILE

# ellen cooperperson: *how hard can it be?*

by Marcia Byalick

Photography by Elizabeth Glasgow

*a*s I wait to meet Ellen Cooperperson — trailblazing activist, renowned corporate trainer, pioneering women’s center founder, feminist filmmaker, creative entrepreneur — I glance at the photograph above the couch. It’s a wedding, albeit one having more in common with romantic Edwardian London than 20th-century Long Island, complete

with a sublimely happy bride dressed in an Erté-inspired white lace gown and her handsome beloved. I wondered if this could possibly be a photo of the recent marriage of the aggressive, Bella Abzug-like woman I imagined I had come to interview. As Ellen came down the stairs and introduced herself, my mother’s warning about “assuming” rang in my ears. Her story was as

powerfully dramatic as I expected but it was narrated, not by the intimidating presence one who stars in such a scenario might demand but by her focused, determined sister.

By the age of 26, Brooklyn-born Ellen married, had a son, divorced and, with a degree in psychology from Brooklyn College, started building a resumé that includes working as a buyer in the garment center, managing her then-husband’s air conditioning and refrigeration business and working as a community school administrator. She moved to Long Island 30 years ago when she, along with millions of other women, re-entered the job market in earnest, working as the regional manager of the coffee division of Hershey Corporation — the only woman among 105 men.

As the beginning of the women’s movement started to resonate within her, Ellen joined South Shore National Organization of Women (NOW). There she saw the difference between the strident bra burners the media portrayed and the hard-working, committed women attending the meetings with her. In the first of dozens of “How hard can

*Ellen Cooperperson, president of Corporate Performance Consultants, Inc. and founder of the Center 4 Leadership Excellence.*



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it be?” challenges in her life, she became a filmmaker, creating a critically praised documentary about real women and their struggles that was distributed by NOW nationwide. Its success gave her the courage to leave Hershey and start her own Multimedia Productions.

With a heightened awareness of what language was saying about women, Ellen tried opening a bank account, changing her name from Cooperman to Cooperson. When the court’s 15-page decision denied her petition, saying men have a right to identity — inferring that one of those rights was to name women — the first shot was fired. A two-year battle, won with the help of attorney Susan LeBow and the support of the ACLU and NOW, reached the state supreme court and garnered headlines world wide.

“It was a life-changing decision, my wanting a name to reflect human equality,” Ellen remembers. “As I worked on my next film, *Yes, Baby, She’s My Sir*, I received hate mail, watched cars pass with Legalize Cooperson stickers, saw someone come up with gingerperson cookies and lived through my son’s life being threatened. Sisterhood was more than a concept in those days. Using the extraordinary resources of the burgeoning women’s



movement, including Gloria Steinem and *Ms.* magazine, my life’s work became traveling to colleges and women’s organizations to speak about women and language and showing the films.”

By 1978 Ellen’s reputation led SUNY Farmingdale to ask her help in creating an environment of safety and trust that might entice women to lose their fear of technology and encourage them to take courses in the school’s non-traditional curriculum.

“The biggest barrier to women’s career advancement was their perception of themselves, their lack of confidence to venture out of the realm of their roles,” says Ellen. Now partnering her “How hard can it be?” philosophy with another mantra she says separates the more successful among us from the rest — “knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do” — she founded The Women’s Educational and Counseling Center at SUNY Farmingdale.

For the next 10 years Ellen saw Farmingdale, formerly known for its agricultural, mortuary science and veterinary programs, become a mecca for women. During that time, 17,000 women took

*Stages of a career (from top to bottom) — Ellen Cooperperson has moved from founder of the Women’s Center at SUNY Farmingdale and conference organizer to successful entrepreneur.*

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advantage of 27 programs dealing with everything from issues surrounding re-entering the job market to math anxiety to introducing computers. When Ellen decided to go back to Goddard College for her master's degree in human resource development, she did her thesis on the factors preventing women from advancing in their careers. "Then I called it a brick wall," she says smiling, "not realizing it was indeed a glass ceiling."

Without warning, as the pressures of running an entrepreneurial business on a college campus mounted and her graduate courses became more demanding, Ellen's son Brian developed a malignant tumor the size of softball in his chest, permeating his spine. Two unbelievable years followed, filled with chemo, radiation, long hospital stays and a bone marrow transplant. Ellen lived at the Ronald McDonald House in Manhattan during that time, listening with her son to the theme from *Rocky* and planning for the future they were sure would follow.

By the time Ellen returned to work, the grant money for women's programs began drying up. In 1985 she ran a ground-breaking diversity

conference on Long Island, then a series of programs at Newsday, the Postal Service and Lumex, for the first time concentrating on the communication problems between men and the women managers who had gone through the Women's Center's programs during the previous 10 years. A brand new entity was born at Farmingdale, the Human Resource Development and Training Center, and with it a new vocabulary: inclusion, empowerment and corporate culture.

After a career developing programs for women, it was time for

Ellen to decide what she wanted to do with the rest of her own life.

"My work at the Center was done. It was time for me to walk the talk, to investigate the gap between knowing and doing in my own life. It was then I came up with the title of my book, *Take My Advice, I'm Not Using It*.

So without the "proper" credentials, employing the same mix of guts, intelligence and intuition she used to tap dance her way through careers as a workshop leader, filmmaker, business manager, school administrator and buyer, in 1986 Ellen started her

*Members of the Corporate Performance Consultants team led by Ellen Cooperson include (left to right); Sharon Cole, senior learning officer; Nick Maslovs, general manager and Ellen's husband; Kim Dzienius, executive assistant; Micheal Fraum, director of training and development.*



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first for-profit business, Corporate Performance Management. Bringing together a team of highly skilled professionals, she dedicated herself to creeping into the heads of CEOs and talking to them about their struggles and fantasies. Now her concerns went beyond training solutions; she and her team would assess what the problem was, then come up with a prescription to fix it.

“The genius is in the execution,

not just diagnosing what’s wrong,” she explains. “Our motto became ‘Helping good companies get even better.’”

The business grew. Then in 1990 came word that the blood transfusions that cured Brian of cancer gave him AIDS. Once again mother and son, now a district sales manager for Newsday, were embroiled in a life-and-death battle. Years filled with clinical trials, fungal meningitis, experimental medications, hepatitis C,

and treatment by doctors all over the world followed. So, incredibly, did Brian’s wedding to his college sweetheart 11 years ago and, last June, the birth of their son.

Today Corporate Performance Consultants Inc. employs eight full-time people helping an impressive client list improve performance and achieve significant growth. This spring, in partnership with Briarcliffe College, they launch the Center 4 Leadership Excellence, a learning environment offering certificate programs, led by business training and development experts. They intend to give two percent of the profits they earn to charity . . . sort of bringing Ellen full circle.

Oh, and after 26 years of single life, Ellen met Nick Maslovs, her soul mate. After a three-year courtship as romantic as the photo above the couch, they married in June 2001, a year before she became Samuel’s grandma.

“The best part of what I do is knowing that at the end of the day I’ve made a difference. I’ve done something that makes the world a better place,” states Ellen Cooperperson. And, although she might make light of it, we know just how hard that can be.



*Marcia Byalick of Searingtown is a freelance writer and Distinction columnist.*

*After a three-year courtship, Ellen Cooperperson put the single life aside to marry Nick Maslovs in June 2001.*

