



KATHLEEN PARKER

New movie shows women really have come a long way

Gloria Steinem is unmistakable. Across the room surrounded by a clutch of admirers, she is utterly ageless — sleek and svelte in black form-fitting pants and top, a gold braided belt with sparkly fleurettes draped

along her slender hips. At 78, she looks, well, fabulous. “I suppose it’s not very feminist of us to comment on how great she looks,” says the woman next to me, apparently feeling compelled to inject the appropri-

ate corrective. But at a certain age, isn’t a woman happy to accept a compliment?

And haven’t we come a long way, baby?

Judging by the current debate in some Republican circles, one has occasion to pause and wonder.

The purpose of the Thursday evening gathering in a private home was to celebrate “Makers: The Women Who Make America,” a multiplatform video production from PBS, AOL and Makers.com, which launched earlier this year.

The documentary chronicles the history of the

women’s movement and features women who have, indeed, made things happen so that subsequent generations could do what women were not allowed to do not so long ago — to become doctors, lawyers, legislators, secretaries of state and, perhaps, even president.

Among those assembled were seven of the Makers who appear in the film, including, in addition to Steinem, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, actress Marlo “That Girl” Thomas, Rebecca Adamson (founder of First Peoples Worldwide), Karen Nussbaum (executive director of

Working America and founder of 9to5), Malika Saada Saar (executive director, Human Rights Project for Girls) and Muriel Siebert (the first woman to earn a seat on the New York Stock Exchange and namesake of the investment firm Siebert & Co.).

That’s quite a lot of feminine — and feminist — power in one room.

Quoting John F. Kennedy, Steinem said there hasn’t been so much talent in one place since Thomas Jefferson was alone in a room.

“Except now,” she cracked, “we know Sally Hemings was probably do-

ing the writing.”

The centerpiece of the evening was a preview of excerpts from the documentary, which is scheduled for release in February, the 50th anniversary of Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique.”

In one interview, Ginsburg recalls being one of nine women in a class of 500 men at Harvard Law School. Ginsburg remembered being herded into a room with the other women where a professor asked why they were taking up seats that could be filled with men. She later transferred to Columbia University, where she finished

first in her class.

Other women tell similar, barrier-breaking tales. All remind us that women really have come a long way, often, one hastens to mention, with the help of enlightened men.

Ginsburg paid homage to her husband, who gave up his own successful law practice to follow her to Washington so that she could accept her place on the Supreme Court. He never felt slighted, she said, noting that he was also an excellent cook.

The film, which deserves to be a family event and is certain to spark animated

conversations, provides recognition along with reminders that women’s rights didn’t just happen. They were earned by generations of women who refused to accept that they were limited by their sex.

Being demure wasn’t part of the strategy. Sometimes, one of the interviewees said, you have to kick down the door.

The value of the film can’t be overstated. We have lived in a feminist world for decades, yet younger generations have no sense of the struggle. And though we are correctly horrified at the disenfranchisement of women

in other parts of the world, it is useful to recall that American women’s freedoms are relatively fresh.

Steinem, her fire somewhat tempered by time and grace, noted that loss of memory is the source of oppression. For centuries, women’s stories weren’t told. Women had no place at the campfire, as she put it.

Had there been a “Makers” initiative earlier in our history, said Steinem, we might have known that Mozart had a sister, whom Mozart called “the talented one.”

We might have known that before there was Martin

Luther King, there was Ella Baker, the African-American civil and human rights activist from the 1930s.

That the guide and translator for Lewis and Clark was a woman who made the same trip the men did while pregnant, nursing and carrying a toddler.

The story of women’s struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist, Steinem insists, nor to any one organization but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights.

Here’s to memory.

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