

Inspired by the past

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Ann Toback with Rita Margulies, daughter of Clara Lemlich. Lemlich organized what came to be known as the Uprising of the 20,000 in 1909, which had its genesis in Cooper Union. Photo: Women's Circle



“One of our family rules was we never crossed a picket line,” Ann Toback said about growing up in New York as a third-generation trade union activist. The labor movement is literally in her genes, as her grandparents actually met at a union hall.

Part of her family’s ideology, she recognizes, can be traced back to heritage. “And for me, so much of my lifelong activist calling was connected to my Jewish identity,” the Turtle Bay resident explained. So when she found out that the Workmen’s Circle, a social justice organization rooted in the Jewish tradition, was looking for an executive director, she thought it was a good fit. And although women have held significant roles at the nonprofit, Toback, 50, is the first woman to have been appointed to the executive director post, which she’s held since 2008.

She was to be honored on March 15 with the Clara Lemlich Award from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Memorial for her dedication to workers’ rights. Toback calls Lemlich, who galvanized shirtwaist workers to strike in 1909, her hero. “She’s somebody who literally inspires me and has inspired me for decades,” she said. “So to receive an award in her name is so very meaningful to me and it’s so very meaningful today.”

You graduated from BU Law and was hired as in-house counsel for the Writers Guild of America East.

Immediately after law school, I spent two years in a small boutique practice. And then I moved back to New York City and was with the Writers Guild of America East and was an in-house counsel with them. I quickly found a calling in union leadership, so by the time I left the Writers Guild, after nine years, I was the assistant executive director. I loved the work I did for this amazing 21st century labor union, started in the 20th century. As I was leaving, we were becoming very interconnected with the new world of new media and how to organize. And they’ve continued that in very impressive ways.

Tell us about your role in the Writers Guild strike.

It started in November of 2007 and ended in February of 2008. I was the person who really directed the on-the-ground, day-to-day activities for the Writers Guild staff in New York.

How did your job at the Workmen's Circle come about?

I saw the Workmen's Circle, this legendary organization so connected to the roots of the labor movement, was looking for an executive director, and thought, "This is the place for me." It was just a very meaningful connection that I made and that they made with me. And together, we reshaped the Workmen's Circle into a 21st century social justice organization. While I was in the labor movement, I really became aware of an opening in the progressive world, which was teaching activism and engaging people collectively. And for me, so much of my lifelong activist calling was connected to my Jewish identity. And I felt like there was a real opportunity to start engaging people around our activist traditions and become a real partner to the labor movement.

How can you describe the organization's mission?

It's a social justice organization that powers progressive Jewish identity through Jewish cultural engagement, Yiddish language learning, multigenerational education and social justice activism. It's really reconnecting to the roots of the Jewish people in the United States.... The 20th century roots, where we were a backbone to the labor movement. Hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jews were pouring into the United States and reenvisioning their lives and place in the world and reframing the cultural landscape here.

In what way did religion play a part in your upbringing?

I had a traditional Jewish upbringing in that my family belonged to a conservative synagogue and I went to a Hebrew school. But actually, my Jewish identity has been much more connected to traditional values.

Explain your family's ties to the labor movement.

My great grandfather, David, who came to the United States from Russia, now the Ukraine, was a tailor and involved in the growing garment workers union in the early 1900s. My grandfather, Morris Toback, who was also born in Russia, was a member of the Pocketbook Framers Guild. He was an activist with the union and a shop steward in many of his shops. My grandmother, Elsie Toback, was part of a Millinery Workers Local. Her union hall burned down and they were given space by my grandfather's union in their hall. That is how they met and married. My father was a member for over four decades in the Newspaper Guild of CWA, now the NewsGuild of New York, at times serving a leadership role in his Local. My sister, Eileen Toback, was the executive director of the New York Professional Nurses' Union.

Tell us about Clara Lemlich, whose award you are winning.

She was an immigrant who came to the United States in 1905 from the Ukraine. She was 19 when she came to New York and immediately went to work in a shirtwaist factory. Immigrant workers came and they were horribly exploited. They could work upwards of seven days a week in unsafe conditions.... Women typically earned three to four dollars a week compared to the fifteen, even \$25 that men earned. Lemlich immediately started protesting these conditions and also demanding equality.

What was her role in the Uprising of the 20,000?

In 1909, Lemlich and other women gathered together in Cooper Union. There were hours of speeches. Ultimately, she took the stage and called for a strike. And it appears she was the catalyst for over 20,000 women going on strike. It's called the Uprising of the 20,000. These women walked off their jobs in shirtwaist factories. One of the major oppositions to them was the Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory, which of course, would have a very serious outcome, with a terrible fire in 1911 and 146 people would die from it.

www.circle.org

www.trianglememorial.org