

By Michelle Moya



A MATTER OF JUSTICE

Bari-Ellen Roberts—winner of the 2003 Speaking Out for Justice Award from the AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund—thought she had cracked the proverbial glass ceiling. Then she hit two obstacles: sex and race discrimination.

She was on her way up. Bari-Ellen Roberts graduated with honors in business management and landed on the fast track in banking. She was soon a vice president at Chase Manhattan, one of the world's biggest and most prestigious banks, and entrusted with the accounts of General Foods, Colgate Palmolive, and Texaco. Then oil giant Texaco recruited her as a senior financial analyst. She accepted the job with high hopes—both for the opportunities the job offered her and the doors it could open for other women and people of color.

“Dec. 17, 1990: My first day on the Texaco payroll,” remembers Roberts. “I checked my appearance in the car’s rearview mirror before pulling out of the driveway: dark blue business suit, single string of pearls, straightened hair at shoulder length arranged in a conservative flip. The perfect invisible corporate uniform.”

But her hopes were dashed when she walked into her new office. Her colleagues glared at her with hostility and attacked her credentials. She learned the cause when a white male colleague burst into her office and accused her of taking his job and being there only because of affirmative action.

That racist environment continued, she says, but when she spoke out, upper management ignored her complaints and denied any bigotry in the company.

Still, despite excellent job reviews and the leadership’s accolades, she was never promoted. Four years later, her supervisor’s position became available. Instead of offering her the position, management asked her to train the new, inexperienced hire.

Roberts grew up during the civil rights movement. Those years gave her the spirit to fight for what was right, even if that meant standing alone.

“My first inclination was to leave the company, but I knew I had to stay,” says Roberts. “I had read the works of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Ghandi, and both credit their success to being able to focus their efforts to bring about the greater good. I had to do the same thing.”

She sued Texaco for racial discrimination. But Roberts didn’t need to stand alone. She became the lead plaintiff in a class action suit on behalf of 1,400 African American Texaco workers.

“It wasn’t enough to fight by myself,” says Roberts. “If Texaco was going to change, others who had faced the same thing had to be included.”

The legal battle exposed gross pay disparities, denial of promotions, and tape recordings of a management meeting. An employee who took minutes at the meetings revealed he had taped the sessions to back up his notes. When Texaco forced him to retire at age 55, he approached Roberts’ attorney to file an age discrimination suit. At the same time, he passed on

the tapes, in which senior management denigrated blacks and Jews.

Says Roberts in her book about the case:

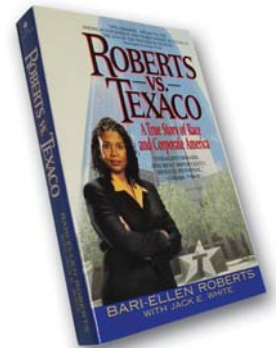
“Here were white male managers I had worked with for years, who sat only a few yards from me in Texaco’s finance department ... tearing me down in words more suited to a Ku Klux Klan rally.”

There ended Texaco’s years of ignoring, denying, stonewalling, and legal fighting. In 1996 Roberts and her co-plaintiffs won the largest settlement ever awarded in a racial discrimination suit: \$176 million.

Roberts is no longer in corporate America. Now she runs a firm that educates people about workplace diversity, because some people aren’t purposefully racist.

“It was ignorance: not knowing and being afraid to know,” she says. “At least I can open their eyes to new possibilities and teach them new skills. Inclusiveness and tolerance are skills.” □

Michelle Moye is program assistant for the AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund.



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