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Joan Blades: Fortune Cookie

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**PROFILES
IN
PROMINENCE
2009**

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GOLDEN GATE UNIVERSITY

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DAN AND PATRICIA ANGEL

*“Online communication
is like the telephone
on steroids.”*

- Joan Blades

JOAN BLADES

Fortune Cookie

By Alan Ramo

Sometimes law schools provide a clear career track that is predictable as well as satisfying. One gets a degree, practices law, rises in the firm; maybe runs for political office, serves in government, becomes a judge, law professor, corporate counsel, or non-profit attorney. For others, law school opens doors and is a way station to a career or life that is far from predictable.

Joan Blades, a co-founder of MoveOn.org and MomsRising.org, is one of those surprising Golden Gate University School of Law graduates, whose life has jumped from one unpredictable or unanticipated step to another. Enrolling at Golden Gate was one of those steps. That choice started her on a road that led to becoming a pioneering family mediator, which gave her insights that she still uses as one of the nation's most well-known and influential political organizers. And in a strange karmic coincidence which reflects her Berkeley background, the mediation experience subtly contributed to the moment that ultimately changed her life.

Back in 1998, she and her husband Wes Boyd were in a Chinese restaurant in Albany, a small town near Berkeley. Overhearing conversations at other tables, it seemed nearly everyone in that liberal bastion was complaining about the Clinton impeachment. They all were exhausted with the impeachment effort, wishing the focus were on important policy issues rather than the President's sexual misadventures.

Joan and Wes, co-founders of Berkeley Systems—probably

best remembered as the developer of the “flying toasters” screensaver—came together on a single concept: It was time for the nation to move on. Being familiar with the potential of the Internet, they thought a simple petition that people could sign online could be significant. The resulting petition stated: “Congress must immediately censure President Clinton and move on to pressing issues facing the nation.”

Today, MoveOn.org, the organization that blossomed from that petition, has more than 5 million members and is a powerful, albeit controversial, progressive citizen-engagement organization, and a force in American politics. Joan Blades, who was named the 2003 Woman of the Year by *Ms Magazine* as the “mother of cyberspace mobilization,” is considered one of the top grassroots organizers in the country and is currently “moving on” to new territory with a new organization, MomsRising.org, “a virtual organization to speak to the needs of mothers and families.”

What few know is that MoveOn was no mere accident. It was a deeply rooted natural response by a woman who had built a career in family mediation. Joan’s precedent-setting book, *Family Mediation, Cooperative Divorce Settlement* (published in 1985) describes a client who had been married for fifteen years but was having trouble accepting the reality of the separation and not sure he wanted to participate in mediation. Realizing this, the mediator decided to confront the situation head-on. The mediator heard that Dan (the client) wasn’t yet ready to mediate. The mediator decided to share his insight with his client who could then choose to “move on” and mediate or recognize that he wanted to fight. Joan and Wes were, in effect, asking the country: “Do you want to sit around and fight, or move on and resolve real problems?” That challenge worked for the client; it

Joan's pre- and post-law school experience also falls into unpredictable terrain. She graduated a year early from Berkeley High School, then went to a community college before transferring to UC Berkeley. After graduating, Joan had an abiding concern with social issues relating to juvenile psychology, which led her to Golden Gate University's School of Law.

At law school, Joan did not find the adversary process to be her style. However, she was able to land a clerkship with an Alaska Supreme Court justice for her final semester. "We had a lot of fun," she says of her time in Alaska, where she shared an apartment with a few women friends. After graduation and passing her bar exams, she hooked up with a family law firm in Alaska. It was at that firm where she made the connection between the divorce process and its impacts on children, and became enamored with the possibilities of mediation. "It was clear that many young lives were destroyed by destructive adversarial divorce processes."

Eventually Joan authored *Mediate Your Divorce* and a text, *Family Mediation, Cooperative Divorce Settlement*. "It is hard to believe now, but at the time there were serious questions about whether divorce mediation was ethical for attorneys," she recalls.

Eventually Joan returned to California, where she focused on mediation, as well as electrical work. "Mediation was still so new it could not be a full-time job." She also returned to Golden Gate to teach mediation as an adjunct professor for two or three years.

Joan's serendipity repeated when she was playing soccer one afternoon. "I met my future husband Wes during a game," she remembers. "He was this brilliant guy who was also a fine soc-

cer player.” In addition to getting married, they also co-founded Berkeley Systems, best known for the screensaver “After Dark,” which included old-fashioned toasters with wings—an early and highly popular program in the then-fledgling screensaver market.

Variouly reported as Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Joan and Wes actually live in the Berkeley Hills and work from home, except when they are traveling and organizing. Joan was not the software whiz, though. Indeed, she jokes, “One of my jobs initially was to read software manuals, because if I could understand them, we figured anyone could.” She soon served in almost every other capacity in the business, including as vice president of marketing.

Joan and Wes eventually sold Berkeley Systems, reportedly for \$13.8 million. It has been a successful company, grossing \$30 million a year with 150 employees. They were working on educational software in 1998 when they went to that fate-filled dinner at the Chinese restaurant in Albany.

Joan’s previous life as a mediator had given her a simple and straightforward view of how to solve problems, whether in divorce or in politics. When there is no lasting relationship to preserve, mediation may not be the most effective form of resolution; but when there will be some kind of a continuing relationship, mediation can be vastly superior to the alternatives.

Where there are ongoing relationships, “feelings can be very important,” Joan explains. “Even in the United States as a whole, we have to learn that we are interdependent and will be living with each other a long time.” That is when mediation and other forms of constructive, respectful engagement are essential.

“In America, most of us share the ‘big-picture agreement’: a healthy environment, healthcare for all who need it, a robust

economy, the desire for physical and financial security. And those make a good starting place. It's working out how to get there that is challenging," she observes.

"There are different dynamics at place in the public sphere—the media and often politicians focus on the differences rather than our shared values." In her view it is important to define areas of agreement when parties disagree. "It is helpful to identify what people have in common." Getting agreement on basic facts and principles can be helpful. As she observed years ago in her book: "When issues are clearly stated and needs and feelings are aired, agreements are more easily reached."

So with perspective, the whole Clinton impeachment debacle could be seen as two parties (in this case *political* parties) with each seemingly more interested in winning power than in serving the citizenry that put them there. It was time to move on to the real issues—the internal and external problems of the United States that needed attention.

Joan did not set out to start a political organization. "We were just businesspeople struck by the opportunities that were being lost. The government and the media were so obsessed with that scandal when there were more important things the government should have been doing."

Joan and Wes used a tool they knew: online computer connectivity. They put up a website for eighty-nine dollars, and sent out a note with a one-line petition and a link to sign it, and encouragement to pass it on to one hundred friends and family members. Like a virus, (hence the phrase "viral marketing"), word of the petition spread. Within a week, 100,000 people had signed the online petition—eventually the number grew to a half million. At one point, MoveOn.org organized volunteers to carry the petitions and comments to congressional representatives of

219 districts from members in their district. “We felt an obligation to help those people—most of whom had never done anything political—be heard.”

Despite their efforts and the 1998 elections, which returned Democrats who opposed impeachment in ever greater numbers, Republicans pressed ahead with the impeachment process. MoveOn.org was born. “We felt we had to empower citizens to be heard by their government,” Joan says.

Today’s MoveOn.org is actually a number of organizations under the same banner. Moveon.org Civic Action is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit that focuses upon advocacy and education about national issues. MoveOn.org Political Action, a federal political action committee, advocates on specific national issues and supports legislation and political candidates who reflect MoveOn members’ values.

The response to these efforts has been phenomenal and ushered in a new style of political organizing. The Internet offers unparalleled opportunities for citizens to amplify each others’ voices in contacting elected leaders, mobilizing citizens to vote and reaching out to small donors, resulting in an accumulation of donations far greater than ever seen before. The success of the Obama campaign—both in raising donations and building grassroots participation through the Internet—owes much of its success to the pioneering work of MoveOn.org.

The accomplishment is astounding for a grassroots staff of twenty people. By 2004, MoveOn.org Political Action had raised approximately \$11 million from some 300,000 donors for eighty-one candidates. By the next year it had grown to 3.2 million

Howard Dean in his surprising upstart campaign in 2004 borrowed the MoveOn.org approach, including its organizing director, Zack Exley. In the most recent election, Joan estimates that MoveOn members contributed 20 million volunteer hours, and made \$83 million in small contributions. Along the way, following its philosophy of listening to its members, MoveOn held its own primary which Obama won. The rest is history.

MoveOn.org's views are considered to be strongly to the left of the mainstream by Republicans. Joan, however, insists that what has made MoveOn so successful is that members ultimately set the policy for the organization. In 2006 their top priorities were exiting the Iraq war, healthcare for all, clean renewable energy, and restoring democracy. By 2009, the economy had become a top priority as well. With the election of Barack Obama, it seems more accurate to say that MoveOn caught the pulse of an emerging consensus in American society.

A visit to the MoveOn.org website in April 2009 lays out the organization's chief concerns, its philosophy, and the capability of its methodology. Across the top are links to the organization's campaigns, to sign-up, to donate, and to find information about the organization. A banner headline with a picture of Howard Dean reads: "Stand with Dr. Dean for healthcare for all." It goes on, "Today we draw a line in the sand. A public health-insurance option is the only way to guarantee healthcare for all Americans. And to show that we mean business, we all need to tell Congress we won't settle for less." Just below are the now-classic MoveOn words: "Sign the petition." Other issues include: "New ads support Obama's budget." and "AIG: Make you want to throw something?"

The personal participatory process through the website is dem-

onstrated in another headline: "MoveOn's 2009 Agenda Process: Hundreds of thousands of us voted, and now the results are in. We now know what to focus on in 2009: universal healthcare, economic recovery and job creation, building a green economy and stopping climate change, and ending the war in Iraq." Visitors are then encouraged to "Read why MoveOn members chose these goals."

Joan in person is different from the fire-breathing leftist one might expect from the website. For an interview for this profile she arrived on her bicycle. Small and thin, with her glasses and long hair, she looks more like a Berkeley graduate student. At fifty-two, she can be passionate about issues and clear and firm in her views, yet there is a gentleness and willingness to listen that reflect her talents as a mediator. She mixes understated humor with her outrage over the many problems she wants solved. Her husband Wes is personally also surprising, if one is expecting a wild-eyed radical. One published article described him as a "balding, slow-talking, crunchy-granola software coder and former CEO who's more at ease with the lingo of enterprise than with that of movement politics."

Joan has stepped back to a board role at MoveOn, giving her more time to co-found MomsRising, an organization focused on a set of unifying issues that cross partisan, cultural and economic lines. The mediator in Joan recognized that all Americans will continue to be living together in the same country; and to live together, Americans need to realize that "we have a great deal more in common than what separates us. I needed to return to that spot."

On Mothers Day 2006, she co-founded MomsRising.org, "a

lican who was a state senator for more than a decade. "Some things are meant to be," Joan says of their first meeting. "I met Kristin because she sent me her manuscript for 'The F Word.'" When I read about the profound bias against mothers in hiring and wages, I was shocked. For example, a mother is 79 percent less likely to be hired than a non-mom given equal resumes. This explains so much about why there are so many women and children in poverty . . . and so few women in leadership. I'm still amazed that Kristin agreed to write the 'Motherhood Manifesto' with me and then to co-found MomsRising with me!" Joan says she was amazed that many younger women did not really understand feminism and was impressed with Kristin's writing.

Joan convinced Kristin to collaborate. Working together over many months and communicating online, they developed *The Motherhood Manifesto: What America's Moms Want—and What To Do About It*, which argues that national politics have not addressed the fact that three in four mothers work outside the home. The book also notes that mothers are 44 percent less likely to be hired than non-mothers for the same job, given the same resume and experience.

After the book was published, the organization ensued. Joan's inspiration for the organization is partly rooted in her own life experience as a working mom, her early inspiration during law school to address children's issues, her desire to find those common interests and values, and a realization that so many social issues radiate out of the way society treats mothers.

"We have thirteen women CEOs in the Fortune 500, that's pathetic," she explains. "There is discrimination against mothers in hiring, wages and career advancement—in effect, maternal profiling. We make people work overtime, when it would be

better for business to have two people doing the same job, but for healthcare costs. In more than 173 countries in the world, only four have no national required paid leave for new mothers, the USA being one of them. Just days after birth, some women have to go back to work. There are 14 million unsupervised children after school. We are in denial on a grand scale.”

Joan likes to zero in on American society’s structure of work, complaining that workplaces are not taking advantage of the benefits of technology. In a recent column for the *Huffington Post* on March 24, 2009, she wrote: “Yesterday the *Washington Post* fed the insecurities of American workers with the headline, ‘As Cuts Loom, Will Working from Home Lead to a Layoff?’ My response: Only if we are committed to a work model inspired by the 1950s and ‘working stupid’ by rigidly adhering to old work models that are less effective. I’ve been working in a virtual work environment for more than 10 years. This means I work at home or wherever I happen to be, and so does everyone else I work with at MoveOn.org and MomsRising.org. It is hard for me to imagine a more efficient, effective, family-friendly and environmentally sound model for my work. I am amazed by how much gets done every day, and how well-balanced my life is overall. If my daughter gets sick, I don’t miss work. I’m still able to do what needs to be done and also take care of her. I walk downstairs to work. I have great relationships with my co-workers; I just don’t actually see them in-person often.”

Joan explains that at MomsRising.org, she can work within the limits placed upon her by having two children (who are now

While much smaller than MoveOn, she believes there is potential for it to become far larger. By focusing on mothers, Joan finds that she is able to engage in a widespread set of issues from toxics in toys to healthcare and wages. She believes the focus on motherhood does not mean she is not working with men. "If mothers are making less, it affects the whole family." As she has also pointed out, "Everyone has a mother."

The organization has gathered as allies more than a hundred national and state organizations including faith-based groups, child-advocacy groups, unions, healthcare organizations, parenting groups, family advocacy groups, women's organizations, and mothers' organizations. This kind of alliance is an example of what can be built using online communication and techniques.

The organization is mainly funded by foundations and donors. "I had to learn about fundraising—which is not my forte—but I can be persistent when I care about issues."

Joan considers herself to be a feminist. She acknowledges that women who are feminists may have discrete views as to what that term may mean. For her, it means equal opportunity. "Most Americans agree with equal pay for equal work."

Years ago in her *Family Mediation* text, Joan noted that fathers were becoming increasingly liberated, and that joint custody was good for everyone, easing the burden on the single working parent, improving the lives of children, avoiding the nasty fights and the devastation for the parent who loses custody, and the trauma of a child snatching. Men can be good allies.

A significant sub-group of MomsRising.org's members are young mothers who all of a sudden "hit the maternal wall." For

example, doctors urge mothers to breastfeed exclusively for six months, a practice that has been proven to reduce such illnesses as asthma and allergies and reduce obesity. However, only 2 percent of low-income workers have accommodations in the workplace for nursing mothers. It's ironic, she says, that there are more breast pumps in this country than in any other in the world—a symbol of how women are trying to adjust to a work world that refuses to adjust to them.

The breadth of the MomsRising.org agenda is shown by the banner across their website. Using the letters for Motherhood, the agenda is:

Maternity and Paternity Leave.
Open and Flexible Work.
TV and After School.
Healthcare for All Kids.
Excellent Childcare.
Realistic and Fair Wages.
Hood Visit the Neighborhood

Below this banner, the classic MoveOn.org technique is apparent. Next to color, rotating photos of families and mothers, an appeal encourages: "Tell Congress—We can't afford to wait for healthcare reform! Right now Congress is deciding whether to allocate money for healthcare reform in this year's budget. Send a letter to Congress now!" Already more than a hundred house parties have been conducted by MomsRising.org members.

ment, in particular, and parents in general prioritize the needs of the next generation.

Even now Joan believes her mediation technique remains crucial for political progress. She remembers how MomsRising.org was championing a new law requiring toxic testing of toys and other consumer products. Yet many toys and crafts are made in small businesses, often led by women, who were worried testing might be too expensive. Joan says that no one wanted to make toxic toys and poison children. Once everyone was able to talk about their concerns and come to agreement over fundamental values, like protecting children, they could build a coalition.

Her journey was indeed not the traditional pathway for a law graduate. Today Joan laughs about actually becoming a traditional lawyer. "I would not want to do it and do not know why anyone would." She laments that firms make it difficult to be a mother and succeed in the firm, and how counterproductive that is if it denies the firm the best, talented lawyers. At the same time, she recognizes that her law school education led to a series of connections that resulted in her finding family mediation, publishing and having experiences and insights that would help form her views of life and politics. For example, she acknowledges that her legal degree was crucial for getting the contract with the publisher, Prentice Hall. "Having the law degree gave me the additional *gravitas* I needed to persuade them to publish my book."

Long after the political battles are forgotten, Joan Blades and her husband will be remembered for designing a technologically new approach to political organizing and public participation. "I'm an online organizer. I do believe in getting people involved

in the political process. It's good for our democracy. We had a bunch of people turned off by the partisanship. If we can find the space and work together, it is possible to change things. We need to build bridges, build trust. I chose the tool I know the best, and it is a great tool. Online communication is like the telephone on steroids: It is instant mass communication and another way to be connected, a part of the continuum."

*Joan Blades was interviewed on February 26, 2009 by
Golden Gate University School of Law
Acting Dean Alan Ramo.*

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