

Joan Minieri's Comments At Gail Aska's Memorial Service 11/29/05

I met Gail at the first CVH organizing meeting at Goddard Riverside over ten years ago. There were probably 50 people there. Gail sat in the middle of a small group of women from Graham Wyndham where she was just beginning her activism. She was clearly the leader. She didn't raise her voice or wave a fist, but when she spoke, everyone sort of moved closer to listen. She was a presence. Mostly, I remember her smile. She was angry about the welfare policy changes that were coming down, but she was hopeful. She talked about a better way. We connected first through the issues and over the years we became friends. We connected as women. We connected as mothers. Gail liked to tell me, "You know Joanie, nothing is more dangerous than an angry mother."

Gail was proud to declare herself a founder of CVH, though she resisted calling herself a "leader." To me, she was a partner in a world where true partnership is hard to come by.

Three years ago, our first funder, Maddy Lee from the New York Foundation interviewed Gail and I. She was retiring and was creating a video archive about some of the groups the foundation had helped to seed. Gail and I talked for about an hour about how CVH trains women to speak truth to power and about some of the highlights of our work over the years. Gail spoke proudly of going to the White House with a group of CVH members in the mid-90's and having the opportunity to tell Clinton's chief of staff what was what.

At the end of the interview, Maddy asked the guy who was filming the interview if he had any questions for us. He said he did. He asked Gail directly:

"You talk about training members [of CVH] to speak to power and to articulate their needs. You are remarkably articulate. Is that a gift you brought to this, is it part of the training?"

Now, keep in mind, Gail has never met this man in her life, but she looked at him with that very sweet smile of hers and said:

"Ok. Because I absolutely love you, I'm going to let the articulate word go. Usually when people use that word with me, I become particularly irate. But because I love you, I'm not going to jump all over you."

Gail then graciously answered his question. She said:

"I acquired these skills through CVH, but I was an avid reader. I learned to express myself and take things I read and pass them on."

She went on though, to make her real point:

“I don’t care for the word articulate because particularly the way it’s been used in the past...I tell this story with Paul [Paul Getsos, who, along with Gail and I is the other co-founder of CVH]. Paul will hear that word “articulate” and say “Oh my God, we have to get Gail out of here.” Because he knows the response. He’ll hear that word and say, “Gail, maybe you should just go that way.” He’ll do anything to distract me. And the reason for that is, some people would say to Paul “Where ever did you find her? She’s so articulate.” And we’d both get the chills and stuff, you know. The point being what makes you think I couldn’t be articulate? And I think most of the time, it’s pointed because I’m a woman of color. So that angers me still. But I accept the word, I think it’s a beautiful word for what it means. But when it’s used in the way it’s been used with me and other members, I don’t accept it.”

Thank you.