

## PROFILE

### ellen cooperperson: *how hard can it be?*

by Marcia Byalick  
Photography by Elizabeth Glasgow

As I wait to meet Ellen Cooperperson — trailblazing activist, renowned corporate trainer, pioneering women's center founder, feminist filmmaker, creative entrepreneur — I glance at the photograph above the couch. It's a wedding, albeit one having more in common with romantic Edwardian London than 20th-century Long Island, complete

with a sublimely happy bride dressed in an Erté-inspired white lace gown and her handsome beloved. I wondered if this could possibly be a photo of the recent marriage of the aggressive, Bella Abzug-like woman I imagined I had come to interview. As Ellen came down the stairs and introduced herself, my mother's warning about "assuming" rang in my ears. Her story was as

powerfully dramatic as I expected but it was narrated, not by the intimidating presence one who stars in such a scenario might demand but by her focused, determined sister.

By the age of 26, Brooklyn-born Ellen married, had a son, divorced and, with a degree in psychology from Brooklyn College, started building a resumé that includes working as a buyer in the garment center, managing her then-husband's air conditioning and refrigeration business and working as a community school administrator. She moved to Long Island 30 years ago when she, along with millions of other women, re-entered the job market in earnest, working as the regional manager of the coffee division of Hershey Corporation — the only woman among 105 men.

As the beginning of the women's movement started to resonate within her, Ellen joined South Shore National Organization of Women (NOW). There she saw the difference between the strident bra bumers the media portrayed and the hard-working, committed women attending the meetings with her. In the first of dozens of "How hard can

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### ...cooperperson

it be?" challenges in her life, she became a filmmaker, creating a critically praised documentary about real women and their struggles that was distributed by NOW nationwide. Its success gave her the courage to leave Hershey and start her own Multimedia Productions.

With a heightened awareness of what language was saying about women, Ellen tried opening a bank account, changing her name from Cooperman to Cooperperson. When the court's 15-page decision denied her petition, saying men have a right to identity — inferring that one of those rights was to name women — the first shot was fired. A two-year battle, won with the help of attorney Susan LeBow and the support of the ACLU and NOW, reached the state supreme court and garnered headlines world wide.

"It was a life-changing decision, my wanting a name to reflect human equality," Ellen remembers. "As I worked on my next film, *Yes, Baby, She's My Sir*, I received hate mail, watched cars pass with Legalize Cooperperson stickers, saw someone come up with gingerperson cookies and lived through my son's life being threatened. Sisterhood was more than a concept in those days. Using the extraordinary resources of the burgeoning women's

movement, including Gloria Steinem and Ms. magazine, my life's work became traveling to colleges and women's organizations to speak about women and language and showing the films."

By 1978 Ellen's reputation led SUNY Farmingdale to ask her help in creating an environment of safety and trust that might entice women to lose their fear of technology and encourage them to take courses in the school's non-traditional curriculum.

"The biggest barrier to women's career advancement was their perception of themselves, their lack of confidence to venture out of the realm of their roles," says Ellen. Now partnering her "How hard can it be?" philosophy with another mantra she says separates the more successful among us from the rest — "knowing what to do when you don't know what to do" — she founded The Women's Educational and Counseling Center at SUNY Farmingdale.

For the next 10 years Ellen saw Farmingdale, formerly known for its agricultural, mortuary science and veterinary programs, become a mecca for women. During that time, 17,000 women took

*Stages of a career (from top to bottom) — Ellen Cooperperson has moved from founder of the Women's Center at SUNY Farmingdale and conference organizer to successful entrepreneur.*



Ellen Cooperperson, president of Corporate Performance Consultants, Inc. and founder of the Center 4 Leadership Excellence.