

National Bulletin on Domestic Violence Prevention

Legacy Snapshots

Leading advocates reflect or recalled

Debby Tucker
by Barbara Hart

Debby Tucker is the most flamboyant advocate in the battered women's movement. She has the most delightful chuckle. Her lips are always brilliant red. Her mane now more salt than pepper. Her ovaries still enormous and solid brass. Her speech always colorful. Her mind incisive. Her walk a strut. A legacy column could not be fairly written without offering a visual/auditory picture.

Debby has been advocating for women her entire life. In 1974, she began work with victims of sexual assault and, soon after, battered women.

Debby was a premier leader in crafting the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Her lobbying was instrumental in VAWA's enactment. An illustrative (true) story of Debby's lobbying acumen is as follows: In 1993 to 1994, Debby made monthly trips to the Congress from Texas; talking with every senator, representative, staffer and anyone else who might help move the VAWA legislation. Then-Senator Biden knew he could shepherd VAWA through the Senate, but there was no movement in the House Judiciary Committee. He beseeched Debby to convince Representative Jack Brooks from Galveston, Texas, Chair of the House Judiciary Committee, to hold hearings on the House version of VAWA. She called, visited, pled for an audience, making friends with his staff in DC and in Texas. One day as she arrived at his office, the door opened and Rep-

resentative Brooks exited, and Debby said, "Oh Mr. Brooks, I'm delighted you are here for our meeting!" and as he walked down the corridor, he said, "Debby Tucker, Mighty Fine." He never returned that day!

Debby had enlisted the help of Liz Carpenter, press secretary for Lady Bird Johnson; Barbara Jordan, the first Southern black woman elected to Congress; and Governor Ann Richards, the foremost in political leadership of Texas women, in urging Representative Brooks to hold a hearing on VAWA. Debby persisted in requests for an audience. Months passed. Mr. Brooks' staff finally called; a hearing was set. As Debby entered the hearing room, she noted large signs prohibiting smoking. Shortly thereafter, this "banty rooster" of a man entered the room puffing on a gigantic cigar. The smoke trailed behind as he strutted to the Chair's chair as everyone raced for their seats. Debby approached him, thanking him on behalf of NNEDV and the movement for convening the hearing. He retorted, "God damn it! Debby Tucker, I have had everyone but my first grade teacher calling to ask that a hearing be set. I just want to know one thing." The room stretched to listen. "What the fuck! Why don't prosecutors help these women? Why don't they put these men in jail so women and children don't have to leave their homes and come to your shelters?" Debby replied, "Well sir, I don't fucking know." Representative Brooks leaned over to hug Debby's neck and set her hair on fire. A three by three inch section of the hair on her head was consumed when Representative Brooks finally put out the flames by repeated hits to her head. He then said, "Don't worry, we'll get your little bill out of Committee." Debby spaced out for a while, but when she focused again, she heard that representatives were debating the "self-petitioning" provision that would permit immigrant

battered women to seek U.S. citizenship without the application or consent of their abusive husbands. Chairman Brooks directed Debby to go into a corner of the room with several representatives who strongly supported or opposed the provision to try to work out a compromise. While they were negotiating, Representative Brooks regaled the room with stories about President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Consensus was reached in the corner. The bill amended and voted out of committee. VAWA 1994 was shortly enacted, as were VAWA 2000 and 2005 (and, I am confident, 2012 by the publication of this issue of the *Bulletin*), always with Debby diligently laboring with colleagues nationwide to achieve this culture-transforming, policy promoting, intervention enhancing, collaboration expanding, and justice-seeking legislation for women and their families.

Debby acknowledges that a significant omission in the initial versions of VAWA was *prevention*. Legislators and activists crafting VAWA focused on criminal legal and community interventions as the principal strategies for ending domestic, sexual, and dating violence and stalking. However, Debby has been a vital part of the DELTA (DV Prevention Enhancement and Leadership Through Alliance) Project composed of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and 14 state coalitions. She has also worked with CDC, the CDC Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to engage another 19 coalitions in this remarkable *prevention* campaign through DELTA PREP. An example of a state *prevention* plan (Virginia's) can be found at http://www.ncdsv.org/images/VSDVAA_Summary_IPVPreventionPlan_2009.pdf.

Debby is an incredible organizer of battered women and the advocates who serve them. A complete rendition would fill an encyclopedia. Debby's clarity about organizing as a group

process that always and continually attracts passionate people to collaborate in building robust and nuanced initiatives to end violence against women is unequalled. A short list of organizing accomplishments include: the Austin Center for Battered Women, the Texas Council on Family Violence, the National Domestic Violence Hotline, the National Network to End Domestic Violence, and the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence. She co-chaired the Defense Task Force on Domestic Violence and continues to work closely with DoD and the military services, including the Coast Guard with the Department of Homeland Security.

Just a slice of detail about one of Debby's organizing efforts: From its inception, the Battered Women's Task Force of the TCFV enlisted membership of survivors who were leaders in local faith, health, business, agriculture, and sisterhood groups, as well as government agencies, and educational institutions, and survivors who were current or former program participants and staff or volunteers of DV shelters. Leadership of the Battered Women's Task Force came from its membership. Activities of the Task Force often were collaborative with TCFV, but sometimes were independent. Battered women were recognized as the founding leaders of the movement and their continuing leadership was honored. Debby Tucker and Toby Myers, TCDV co-founders, facilitated early organizing of the Task Force and consistently herald the leadership of battered women in all phases of the movement.

Debby is a delightful friend, always assisting those of us with obvious deficits. I, for one, have not worn lipstick for 40+ years. When Debby and I happen to be at auspicious events, she routinely corrects my appearance by adding lipstick to my plain, narrow lips through firm and sufficiently lengthy kisses that then partially reflect the bold and brilliant red of her lips on mine. In despair, she purchased a bountiful set of plastic lips for me, and I carry them in my computer bag for emergency application, as appropriate.

Debby Tucker—friend, visionary, organizer, lobbyist, mediator, futurist, innovator globally-focused advocate, comprehensive Web site provider (www.ncdsv.org) and lover of dogs and Ike—is a treasured leader of the movement to end violence against women.