



Making Women Visible and Powerful in the Media



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WMC Exclusive

Patsy Mink: Paving the Way

by Emily Wilson

Kimberlee Bassford discovers a subject for her documentary who had crafted the laws that made it possible for the filmmaker to achieve her education and career.

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Growing up in Honolulu, 32-year-old filmmaker Kimberlee Bassford had heard about U.S. Representative Patsy Takemoto Mink, but it wasn't till Mink died in 2002 that Bassford realized the Hawaii congresswoman's impact.



Patsy Mink campaigning with LBJ

"I found out she was the first woman of color in Congress," Bassford says. "I had no idea. And she co-authored Title IX, which gives women equal access to higher education. As an Asian American woman in grad school at the time, those things immediately popped out at me." Bassford, who had grown up feeling she could go into any career she wanted, learned Mink had opened the doors for her.

At the time of Mink's death, Bassford was studying documentary film at the University of California at Berkeley. This month she was back in the Bay Area for a screening of her film, *Patsy Mink: Ahead of the Majority*, at the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival, where I spoke to her.

Having worked on movies about the social significance of food, and how race and socioeconomics affect health, Bassford approached Mink's husband John and daughter Gwendolyn and got their support to make the film, which will air nationally on PBS in May. When she delved into Mink's political career, she found out many more things she didn't know—for example, that Mink had entered the Oregon Democratic presidential primary as an anti-Vietnam war candidate in 1972, and that often her own party hadn't supported her, seeing her as too liberal or too independent.

Bassford says Mink's commitment to fighting for the underdog and her legislation in support of girls and woman impressed her. Along with Title IX, Mink introduced the nation's first comprehensive Early Childhood Education Act in 1971, and authored Hawaii's "equal pay

Also at the Festival—a Deepa Mehta Film

Another offering at the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival (March 12 to 22) is a new movie from Indian Canadian director Deepa Mehta, known for taking on gender issues and patriarchy, particularly in her Elements trilogy (*Fire, Earth, Water*). In *Heaven on Earth*, she explores immigration, community, and the power of imagination. Bollywood star Preity Zinta plays Chand, a Punjabi woman who comes to Canada to marry an abusive husband, Rocky.

Before leaving to meet her husband, Chand's mother tells her pretty, vivacious daughter a fable she's told many times before, about the King Cobra. The moral of the tale is "You can protect yourself without

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for equal work" law in 1957. The national law was passed six years later.

"She was a true public servant," Bassford says. "She served the people and was really about making life better for everyone."

The film explores how difficult it was for Mink as a Japanese American during World War II. When she went to the University of Nebraska, she was assigned to the International Students dormitory. When she asked why, the administration told her the policy was not to have "colored" students in the main dorms. Mink challenged the policy, and the next year, the school rescinded it.

But pursuing her lifelong goal of being a doctor, Mink found it was her gender that held her back. She applied to more than a dozen medical schools, all of which rejected her because she was a woman. Deciding laws needed to

be changed, Mink applied to law school and was one of two women in her class at the University of Chicago. In 1965, she was elected to Congress and served six consecutive terms. She lost her seat when she ran for the Senate in 1976, and resumed her law practice in Honolulu. But she came back to the House in 1991, and she served in Congress until her death.

The film demonstrates how the national press treated Mink, often describing her as "pretty," "pert" or "diminutive." There is a clip from *The Mike Douglas Show* showing Mink, with an uncomfortable look on her face, dancing the hula.

"It's quite offensive that a congresswoman was asked to do the hula," Bassford says. "But as a filmmaker, it's a great clip because it shows how exoticized she was both because she was from Hawaii and because she was Asian American."

Bassford says she wanted to make a balanced film, not just do a tribute to Mink. Some of Mink's colleagues recall her as difficult to work, mentioning her staff's "morbid fear" of black construction paper, which Mink cut into tabs to mark items she considered urgent.

"She could be a real taskmaster," Bassford says. "She had pretty high staff turnover. But she never asked anything of anyone she wouldn't do herself. She was right there with them. She was consumed with getting the job done."

Bassford says she would like the film to introduce Mink to a national audience beyond Hawaii, especially to younger women.

"We take a lot of opportunities for granted," Bassford says. "And that's a good thing, in a lot of ways. But I want to remind us that a lot of opportunities are there because of people like Patsy Mink."

hurting anyone else." Leaving the love of her family and community, Chand finds the need for protection in the Ontario suburb where she and her husband share a two-bedroom house with his parents, and his sister and her husband and kids. Instead of closeness, this just translates into a lack of privacy and frustration.

It's a mark of Mehta's talent that none of her characters—not even the husband who is both indifferent and violent to Chand—are portrayed as pure villains, but rather as trapped by obligations. The movie veers off into fantasy and allegory when Chand's friend from her job at a laundry gives her a magical root to make her husband fall in love with her. Instead it brings the King Cobra who appears as the loving husband she desires.—
Emily Wilson