

Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Things

by Ethel M. Johnson

We all strive to attain a certain level of greatness in our lives. Some of us have achieved it while others are still trying. One universal truth, however, is that if you quit pressing, you will never reach your goal. It is easy to complain that the reason some people become so successful is because they have certain privileges or favor, but the reality is that celebrity is earned. No one is born that way. Greatness is an attitude, a way of thinking. The saying, "Your attitude determines your altitude" has never been truer in reference to the following women. Ironically, black women have stereotypically been branded as having much "attitude," but it is exactly that which has propelled these women from the ordinary to the extraordinary. They do have an attitude, an attitude of success. Failure was not, is not an option for them. These "ordinary" women have gone ahead through an uncharted wilderness and cleared a path for others to follow. They are visionaries, and most importantly, they are just like you and me.

CATHY HARRIS, FORMER UNITED STATES CUSTOMS INSPECTOR

The term whistleblower places Cathy Harris in the company of some very courageous people. All it takes is one person willing to speak out for what's right to make a difference, and make a difference is just what Harris has. After 15 years as a customs inspector, Harris decided she could no longer sit idly by and watch as African-American women were unfairly targeted by her mostly white, male coworkers. According to Harris, her co-workers would handcuff African-American women to chairs and force them to submit to unjustified searches. Harris' claims were verified by the U.S. General Accounting Office, who said, among other things, that African American women were nearly three times as likely as white men and women to be subjected to a customs strip search. After noticing a disparity in the racial ethnicity of the women subject to these searches, Harris began to protest, and that's when her trouble began. "I almost had a nervous breakdown," Harris says of the experience. Harris claims that her work environment became hostile and at one point, she even feared for her safety. Harris eventually lost her job and nearly lost her home, but all things considered, she says she would do it all over again.

"It was worth it," she proclaims. "I've brought light to a dark situation." But don't believe it has always been so. "Yes, I've wanted to quit several times," she says, "but when I read letters from women who thought they had no recourse for the injustices they experienced, it makes me want to fight harder."



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