

Finding Her Way

by Andrew Matthews



It was a big deal to testify before Congress!

Eleanor's involvement with the League of Women Voters introduced her to Esther Lape, with whom she appeared in front of a Congressional committee in 1924.

Having been taught that to whom much had been given much was expected, Eleanor Roosevelt believed that she had an obligation and a responsibility to give back. She also felt genuine concern about the misfortunes of others, particularly those who were in the minority. So she sought meaningful things to do and ways to be useful.

Although her mother-in-law, Sara Delano Roosevelt, frowned upon it, Eleanor found satisfaction volunteering outside the home during

World War I (1914–1918). She divided her time between serving at a soldiers' canteen, visiting the wounded, working for the Navy Red Cross, volunteering at the International Congress of Working Women, and running her own large household in Washington, D.C.

After the Roosevelts returned to their home in New York City in 1920, Eleanor became active in several organizations. These included the League of Women Voters (1920), in which Eleanor became the chair of its legislative



affairs committee; the Women's Trade Union League (1922); the Women's Division of the New York State Democratic Committee (1922), in which she became the chair of its platform committee; and the Women's City Club (1923), to which she was elected a director.

Fellow members in each of these groups quickly recognized Eleanor's warmth, intelligence, and organizational skills. Rising to leadership positions in these organizations, Eleanor worked to make women better informed in their roles as voters and to give their voices weight when it came to influencing state and local politics. She organized, wrote, lectured, and campaigned. She also met and developed firm friendships and networks with other smart, reform-minded women (see page 28).

Many social injustices existed in the United States, a country that prided itself on freedom and equality. Women could vote, but they still lacked equal opportunity. Children spent 12 hours a day working in factory sweatshops. Eleanor became a voice for justice in these cases. She campaigned for fair wages and labor standards and shorter working hours, and she pushed hard for the passage of child labor laws.

Eleanor's long career as a writer and radio broadcaster began in the 1920s. She published her first article, "Common Sense Versus Party Regularity," in 1921. In 1925, she spoke over the airways about the Women's City Club.


"A woman is like a tea bag—you can't tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water."

—Eleanor Roosevelt

As editor and writer for the monthly Women's Democratic News, Eleanor developed a reputation as a person with strong views and the ability to thoughtfully express them. She became sought after to speak to different groups.

She appeared in front of a Congressional committee in 1924, which gave Eleanor her first taste of publicly and successfully defending a politically unpopular decision. She took on the men in New York's Democratic party who were dismissive of the women delegates chosen to attend the state Democratic convention in 1924. She testified before the New York State legislature for a shorter workday in 1925. She got involved with peace activists. She mobilized Democratic women across New York to become politically active. She campaigned for Al Smith in his bids for governor and president.

And she enjoyed it.

By 1928, Eleanor had become a chair of the Bureau of Women's Activities for the Democratic National Convention. She had earned a name for herself as one of the most powerful and respected women in national politics. Not only was she finding ways to be useful and making a difference, but she also was leading the way to help other women do the same. 

Eleanor volunteered as a translator at the first International Congress of Working Women in 1919.

