



## EXCLUSIVE – Giffords Tragedy: What's the Message to Young Women? By Gloria Feldt



*Sworn in by Bruce Babbitt in January 2007, Gabrielle Giffords was the youngest woman to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.*

When an angry young man aimed his semiautomatic handgun at Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in a Tucson Safeway store on Saturday, he didn't just critically wound her and kill or wound 19 others. He fired a shot through the heart of American democracy.

It will fall to rising leaders like Giffords—and girls like nine-year-old Christina Green, killed by the assailant's

gunfire just days after she was elected to her school's student council—to transform our political community to one where differences can be debated safely and policies decided without fear for anything but re-election prospects.

I feel a deeply personal connection to those horrendous events that occurred during the latest "Congress on Your Corner" public meeting the third-term Democratic congresswoman has held routinely in her district. Though I was witnessing them from New York, I'm a resident of Scottsdale, 120 miles north of Tucson, and from 1978 to 1996 was CEO of Planned Parenthood in Arizona. I know the state's wild-west politics quite well. And I'm so familiar with violent extremist attacks upon reproductive health providers that my first reaction was to swing reflexively into "how can I keep colleagues safe and courageous" mode.

Ironically, a moment before the carnage, I was urging Arizona Democratic party activists via Facebook to stop arguing about arcane party rules and get on with fixing the state: to stand firm against roiling bigotry toward immigrants, slashing public education funds while advancing legislation to allow guns in schools, and other retrograde policies that threaten to make the state an object of derision throughout the country.

Almost immediately after the shootings, I received messages inviting me to a candlelight vigil at the state Capitol. It's important for people to come together to share their grief while they are absorbing the reality of an unspeakable crime.

But as important as a candlelight vigil might be to heal the rips in our individual souls, healing the social fabric requires infinitely stronger threads.

Nor is it sufficient for public officials to issue statements of shock and condolence, or to lament the decline in civility. No, they should be joining hands together with other community leaders in massive outrage. They should be challenging and changing the systemic dysfunctions that allow the loudest, angriest, most disruptive voices to dominate the airwaves, define the public debate, and heat up the rhetoric to the point that unstable personalities like Jared Loughner inevitably boil over.

We can't depend on the current leadership of the hypermasculinized political culture that Jessica Valenti, Feministing executive editor, describes in [The Guardian](#). Our idealization of violent masculinity she says spills over into the political discourse, and is emulated by right-wing women like Sarah Palin, whose electoral target map placed Giffords in her gunsight. It's a problem Addie Stan described in [Alternet](#) as the "Tea Party culture of political intimidation." But the real problem is that the rest of us speak up too little.

Meaningful change will come only if the response to this rupture of democratic process is for those of us who have been underrepresented to multiply our engagement with it. "Hatred can't be cured," said a politically active Tucson friend in one of the many e-mails and calls I received over the weekend. Perhaps that's true, but if we have a chance to remake a civic culture in which such vitriol is at least neutralized, the change will come from leaders like Gabby and what Christina might have become. And they must have the visible, vocal support of the rest of us.

The natural human tendency is to back away from public service after such a frightening episode. But the best way to honor the sacrifices of public servants like Gabrielle Giffords—as well as [Judge John Roll who was killed in the attack and all the others](#)—is to create a culture that lifts up and protects leaders who won't be deterred by anti-government ranting.

Giffords was one of the youngest woman to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives when she took office January, 2007. I attended her swearing in that day—both of them. The first one was by the first woman speaker of the House, newly elected to that role; the second a symbolic oath administered by former Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt in the Capitol rotunda.

"I am very cognizant of those women who made it possible for me to be here," she told me later in a phone interview. "There is much work still to do. We have not yet achieved full equality... Because I know the work of other women pulled me up, I want to mentor other women and get more women into the pipeline to run for office at all levels."

I don't know if Gabby had a chance to meet Christina Green, who came to that meeting at Safeway to learn more about politics. In an [MSNBC interview](#), Christina's mother Roxanna Green described her daughter—born on 9/11/01 and featured in a book called *Faces of Hope*, picturing babies born that day. "She's the face of hope, face of change, the face of coming together as a country to stop the this violence.... She wanted us all to be strong and courageous and brave like she was."

If there is a lesson to learn from the horrible episode, it is less about decrying our declining civility and more about teaching everyone from their earliest years how a democratic government works. How to debate and discuss issues vigorously, how to embrace controversy in a positive way to elevate public awareness of the issues. To let the passion for public service that drives Gabby Giffords inspire us to emulate her leadership until there are so many of us we cannot be silenced. And to hold close the American values of tolerance and pluralism, of optimism that we can solve problems, and believe that though we are many, we can come together as one to do so. That we *are* the government.

Actually Gabrielle Giffords herself said it best last year at a [Holocaust memorial event](#), the month after her office was vandalized in apparent retaliation for her vote to support the health reform bill: "We know that silence equals consent when atrocities are committed against innocent men, women and children. We know that indifference equals complicity when bigotry, hatred and intolerance are allowed to take root. And we know that education and hope are the most effective ways to combat ignorance and despair."

*The views expressed in this commentary are those of the author alone and do not represent WMC. WMC is a 501(c)(3) organization and does not endorse candidates.*

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