

COVER STORY

NINA SZLOSBERG

"It's not easy being green..."

Meet Nina Szlosberg, champion for environment, the land, transportation and the economic consequences. She and others are changing the face of environmental issues in the Triangle. A believer in partnerships and collaboration, Nina shines a brilliant light in her quest for improvement.

ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCATE

When questioned about the importance of the environment, Nina expounds, "The environment is our life support system. Protecting it is essential to the health of pretty much everything we care about. If you care about education: it doesn't matter if we have world class schools if children are in the hospital because of ozone induced asthma. If you care about business: world class companies live and die by the talent they are able to attract and retain. Talented people care about where they live. If given a choice between a community with ozone warnings, traffic congestion and no open space for jogging trails, biking, etc. and a city that is clean with amenities, they will choose the 'green' city. So, protecting the environment is important on many fronts."

EARLY INSPIRATIONS

A first generation American, Nina's parents were both World War II survivors. Her father was 16 and lived in Warsaw when the Nazis invaded in September 1939. His father gave him and his brother about \$500 and sent them to join the Polish Calvary gathering at the border. They thought the conflict might last a few weeks. Instead, they were arrested at the border and taken to a labor camp in Siberia. The family left behind in Warsaw was later taken from their homes and eventually perished in the concentration camp Treblinka. In 1941, Hitler broke the non-aggression pact and invaded the Soviet Union. When he did, Stalin released the Polish prisoners from the camps. Her father, along with others, walked through Siberia and eventually connected with a battalion of the British Army. A Polish contingent of the Royal Air Force was formed and my father trained as a fighter pilot. They navigated through U Boats to Baghdad first, and eventually he was stationed in England. He flew a Spitfire aircraft on fighter missions over Europe until the end of the war.

Her mother was a teenager living with her parents and sister in London when the war began. As the blitzkrieg began, incendiary bombings were carried out on London. The British government attempted to protect the next generation by shipping all of the young people out of the cities and into the countryside. Her mother and her sister were bussed into a small town to live with a volunteer family. She was miserable and begged her family to return to London. And so she came back and finished high school with a gas mask by her side, taught by a dedicated small group of Catholic nuns. She tells the story of the family sleeping under

continued ➔





NINA SZLOSBERG

the billiards table every night as bombs went off. Everyone in her neighborhood ran to the bomb shelter one night when she and her parents were out. The whole neighborhood died from the blast. She eventually finished school and joined the British Army where she met Nina's father in the last days of the war. They came to America in 1948 with nothing but a few suitcases and a dream. Her father became a successful marketing executive in the textile industry and instilled in Nina a great sense of the importance of democracy and good government.

"The story of my parents has given me strength to roll up my sleeves and do battle. In every strand of my DNA I understand how important good government is in our lives," Nina reflects.

A PATTERN FOR SUCCESS

Twenty-five years ago, Nina worked for an all-talk news station in Columbia, South Carolina. She went to Charlotte to attend an industry meeting and met the general manager from Capitol Broadcasting at WRAL in Raleigh. He expressed an interest in talking with her about television work. Soon after, she climbed into her Datsun, drove to Raleigh and did a Teleprompter reading on the set. Her eyes were wide open; she was a little nervous and didn't know what to think.

At the time Jim Goodman of Capitol Broadcasting owned a satellite news channel which was an early competitor to CNN. Nina remembers, "They offered me a position to do regional anchoring in between 24-hour news for North and South Carolina. I would write, produce and be on-air with one million viewers in two states. It was a huge opportunity for someone so young."

Nina's career at Capitol Broadcasting included various roles such as reporter, producer and investigative and documentary work. It was at Capitol Broadcasting that Nina realized what a

wonderful foundation it was for her career, not only professionally, but personally. "Jim and Barbara Goodman are certainly the most philanthropic business people in the community. I would not be as involved today if I had not had that mentoring from both of them. Their passion and loyalty to the area had a strong impact on me in my early years. Jim's philosophy of commitment to the community cascaded into the company. If he was interested, you as a reporter covered it. He was truly a supporter all the way around."

A NEW PASSION

Nina left in 1989 to start her own company, Circle Squared Media, dedicated to work that contributes to the betterment of our community. One of her first clients was Kelly News and Entertainment located in California. Nina became the east

"It can be a little scary, but it is so important to reinvent yourself at times and to grow."

coast correspondent for a show called *In America*. For over two years she got a plane ticket on Saturday, flew out to Sacramento on Sunday, shot the show on Monday, left Tuesday and traveled across America the rest of the week putting together new stories. Each Saturday there was a new packet from the researchers and a plane ticket.

"As I look back, it was such an unbelievable opportunity. I got to see so many places in this country. I did things ordinary folks don't get to do such as hang out with coal miners 700 ft. underground. I met many interesting people whose paths would never have crossed mine," she remembers. "I had the opportunity to interview a woman who had spent her life in an Iron Lung, a singing African American cardiologist who wanted to be a country singer and people involved in the natural gas controversy in Kentucky. We covered stories about the deadly dangers associated with getting a manicure and pedicure in establishments that were not careful with bacteria and germs."

There was one story in particular called the *Circle of Poison*. It was an investigative report that involved toxic and harmful pesticides manufactured in the U.S. and exported for sale in other countries. The food that these foreign farmers grew was imported by the U.S. full of the harmful pesticides. Nina shares, "It was quite an eye opener for me and this was how I became interested in the environment. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. I came back to N.C. to build my client base here and found that I began to move more towards advocacy journalism with non-profit organizations. I was able to publicly be an advocate for the environment."

MENTORS

There have been two people in particular who were true inspirations and influential in her career. The first was Dr. Isabella Cannon who was involved in public service her whole life. She became the first female mayor of Raleigh at the age of 73. Known as the "little old lady in tennis shoes," she had never run for office before. Isabella took Nina under her wing and emphasized the importance of getting involved in the community and neighborhoods.

The second strong influence and inspiration to Nina is Smedes York. Ironically it was Smedes who ran against Isabella in her quest for reelection in 1979 and became the next mayor. "Smedes is a great example of a corporate leader who encouraged me to give back to the com-

"Every voice affects our environment."

munity," she explains. "He has been another very strong influence and I owe him a debt of gratitude. I wouldn't have had a lot of the experiences I have had if he hadn't had faith in me."

In 2003 Smedes nominated her for the Eisenhower Fellowship and Nina became one of the ten recipients in the U.S. She studied transportation-land use policy in Europe, with an emphasis on environmental protection and sustainability.

When asked what inspires and motivates her today she replies, "Nothing is as rewarding as doing work for the community. Knowing you make a difference is an inspiration."



Nina directing the multimedia show, Medical Crossfire, in Miami

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST

A board member of the Conservation Council of North Carolina (CCNC) since 1996, Nina has been president for the past six years. CCNC is a conservation and environmental advocacy organization established in 1970, dedicated to protect, preserve and enhance North Carolina's natural environment. With members

statewide, CCNC advocates for positive changes in environmental policies through educating and mobilizing citizens, taking a leadership role in initiatives to promote sound environmental management, and making the environment a priority for legislators and the public. Its vision for the future of North Carolina includes an educated citizenry that understands and appreciates North Carolina's unique natural environment, actively works to protect it, and takes responsibility for creating better public policy regarding the environment.

Among other accomplishments, Nina led the organization in an initiative to increase membership through the establishment of an advisory council of conservation, environmental and citizen groups and other outreach efforts. She was also instrumental in starting the state's first environmental political action committee to raise money for candidates with good environmental records.

TRANSPORTATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In 2001 Nina was appointed by Governor Mike Easley as the state's first At-Large representative on the North Carolina Board of Transportation and chairs the Environmental Planning and Policy committee. She serves statewide on all matters involving the environment and is a member serving locally, in Division Five with responsibilities in Durham, Franklin, Granville, Person, Vance, Wake, and Warren Counties.

Nina shares, "When Jim Hunt was in the Governor's office he had concerns with corruption on the Board that included road projects that served people's self interests. He made the changes to the Board to add environmental representation."

continued ➤



Nina's father in front of WWII plane (RAF/Spitfire)

NINA SZLOSBERG

"I remember to this day when I received the call from Franklin Freeman in 2001. This booming voice asked me if I would be willing to serve. All I could think of was what an unbelievable honor it was to be asked. I came in to the boardroom excited and ready to go do this work. I met with the staff and decided one of the things we wanted to do was have an environment committee on the Board."

"At our meetings I thought we should have some educational materials. I went around and handed out a magazine at the first committee meeting. A Senator from Eastern North Carolina who is no longer there took that magazine out of my hand and threw it on the board table. He said, 'If it is environmental, I am against it.' He had had problems with getting projects done for environmental concerns. This showed me that this was not going to be easy. We needed to reach around the table to find solutions together. Now we all have a lot to be proud of: an ecosystem enhancement program, compensatory mitigation for adverse transportation projects, preservation of almost 50,000 acres of land in North Carolina, wetlands preservation and restoration that is beautiful in western North Carolina and being looked at as a federal model."

"Nancy Dunn is the only other woman on the board and we work a lot together. Our strategic planning initiatives now take us in a much more modern transit direction. These include bridges, roads, bicycle facilities and greenways."

Nina sits on another board as a result of this appointment – the Triangle Transportation Authority (TTA) board. The focus is on getting transit in the Triangle to where it should be with choices for people and economic development.

LEADERSHIP MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Progress is being made every day and Nina feels the time has never been better. With \$4 per gallon for gas, people are looking around and scrutinizing their leaders. The public's concern consistently ranks higher than politicians regarding transit with about 70 percent on board for change. She explains, "It is all



about having the right leaders in office at the time. Nothing happens without leadership. We have to be invested in the political process. Either nothing happens or the wrong thing happens. It is important for voter registration and for us to know who our legislators are. If we fail to act now we will fall so far behind. This affects our ability to attract jobs, education, public health, environment – it affects everything."

"There are examples of big retailers who had to change their business plan because employees couldn't get to work in some cities. They had to put their businesses near transit lines. Many Triangle companies believe we need to have transit to continue to attract creative class workers and have livable communities. The unsolved part of the puzzle is getting politicians comfortable enough to raise their hand to fund transportation."

Nina continues, "There comes a time when you begin to experience growing pains. With growth comes air pollution, traffic, loss of open space and air quality issues. All of these affect

"In every strand of my DNA I understand how important good government is in our lives."

our environment. We have to find out how to manage growth. Now more than ever we must step up and make the environment a priority. Climate change is real. Even those who disputed that it was happening are coming around. So we have to get serious about seeking alternatives. Oil prices are threatening our economy and our national security. We just have to begin aggressively investing in other technologies to fuel our society. The good news is that it can be done. Other countries have made that commitment. I was just in Brazil where I learned about that country's energy transformation. Now most of their energy comes from sugar cane based ethanol. Petrobras, their country's largest energy producer, is the third largest in the world (after Exxon Mobile and GE). So we can do it. It will just take leadership and innovation."



Nina on Board of Transportation (There were only 2 women on the board of 19!)

Nina with a family in Eastern NC. The family was the focus of her first documentary about children living in poverty in 1984. She remains in touch with them today.



EVERY VOICE COUNTS

Triangle residents can make a difference. Nina believes, "There is the saying about 'the power of one.' I think so many people are busy and haven't been involved with politics and civics. They don't understand that they do make a difference. My first

"Nothing is as rewarding as doing work for the community. Knowing you make a difference is an inspiration."

involvements were in my neighborhood and I learned the power of one letter, one phone call, adding a voice to a planning process. If politicians receive ten letters on a subject it gets their attention, especially if it comes from their home district. People are not very involved, but when they are, they are heard. Every voice affects our environment."

"Decide what is important to you – learn something about it and then add your voice. Go to the city council and show them a problem to solve. You do have the power to make a difference."

From an environmental standpoint she explains, "My bias is on the political side. It is great that we recycle, conserve energy with our cars and in our homes. But when you think about it, what makes the difference? It is when government implements a policy. We need to have a legislature that is friendly to the environment. Be involved in elections. Ask where candidates stand on transit, energy efficiency standards and the environment. Together we will get the results."

ASSET TO THE COMMUNITY

Nina's tireless commitment to the Triangle and North Carolina is evident by her involvement. Her community and civic associations include being a member of Women in Transportation, N.C. Chapter, Sierra Club of North Carolina, Audubon of N.C., Board Member Emeritus, Sustainable North Carolina, Wake County Democratic Party, N.C. League of Women Voters, Raleigh City Museum and the N.C. Museum of Art. She is also an award-winning journalist and public speaker.

NEXT UP

"Right now what I am doing is to make a decision to move my professional life in a direction with the community," says Nina. "The life I was living and the content of my work was not spe-

cific to my passion. I am changing my business to do more around communication and political strategy as it applies to transportation and environment."

Currently, Circle Squared Media is in the development of a transformational, national campaign to increase awareness of and the support for transportation choices and livable communities. The campaign includes a multi-media presentation, strategic communications and governmental relations guidance for communities to move transit initiatives and planning forward.

As Nina heads off to explore new endeavors she feels, "It can be a little scary, but it is so important to reinvent yourself at times and to grow. It is exciting and interesting for me as a 48 year-old person who has spent much of her life in front of an audience to have butterflies in my stomach as I stand up and pitch a whole new company and concept. It is easy for us to sit back and do what we have always done, but it sure can be exciting if you push your limits and explore. Remember Hermit the Frog singing 'It's not easy being Green?' Fortunately it is getting easier, but until now it's been no picnic working in the world of politics, transportation and the environment. Not everyone embraces you with open arms!"

