

A month to celebrate the women around us

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FOR Women's History Month, you'll see the usual celebrations honoring people with familiar names like Michelle, Hillary and Oprah.

This March, I honor women closer to home: Eugenia, Grace, Digna, Mitzi and Orode.

First is my mother, Eugenia. In 1986, she took the biggest gamble of her life when she uprooted her two young daughters from the Dominican Republic after marrying my stepfather. From our very first day in a crammed one-bedroom apartment in the South Bronx, my mother — who spoke exactly zero English — took charge of our new lives.

She fearlessly navigated the public school system, refusing to let administrators hold my sister and me back because of our lack of English skills. She networked with neighbors, church friends and co-workers to land a succession of factory and service jobs that would often keep her through the night.

Somehow, she still managed to strictly monitor our grades, loyally attend every parent-teacher conference and be there for every talent show or

sporting event.

Like mine, there are 83 million mothers — single, married and otherwise — who make big and small sacrifices to give their children every opportunity.

Second on my list is my mother-in-law, Grace Alele-Williams, who was the first African woman to earn a doctorate in mathematics in Nigeria, and became the first-ever woman president of a university in Africa.

My mother-in-law is a brilliant example of the women who populate academia in increasing numbers. According to the American Council on Education, women hold 23 percent of presidential positions at colleges and universities in our country. They lead four of the eight Ivy League universities.

Next is my dear friend Mitzi Miller, who has lived with a transplanted liver for more than 10 years. During this time, she has never let her medical condition get her down, as she has become a successful journalist, editor and best-selling author.

Like Mitzi, about half a million people have received organ transplants in the last two decades. Still, not enough people designate themselves as organ donors, and as of last July, there were 107,960 people awaiting a life-saving transplant.

Fourth is my cousin Digna, who was a successful dentist in the Dominican Republic before coming to the United States 16 years ago. Not licensed to practice here, she enrolled in night classes to become certified as a dental assistant and then to prepare for the dentistry board exams. Today, she is the director of two state-of-the-art dental practices in California. All of this she accomplished while raising three charming girls.

By 2018, women entrepreneurs like my cousin will create more than half of the new jobs generated by small business, according to the Guardian Life Business Research Institute.

Closing the list is my sister-in-law, Orode Doherty, a Harvard-educated pediatrician and mother of three, who has dedicated her illustrious career to caring for children infected with HIV/AIDS.

Like my sister-in-law, more and more women are becoming pediatricians. Women represent two-thirds of pediatric trainees, says the Association of American Medical Colleges.

So, look around you this Women's History Month. Find the women who are heroes in your life. Let's recognize them, along with the famous ones.

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