

“My whole life was civil rights and connecting with people of all races and religions. . . . The women’s movement gave my life purpose.”
— Sonia Pressman Fuentes

happened without Sonia. While being interviewed in her Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) office by author and activist Betty Friedan, Sonia stated that what women needed was their own version of the NAACP. Friedan agreed, and NOW was born with Sonia among its earliest and most influential members.

She was the first female lawyer in the General Counsel’s Office at the EEOC, hired in 1965 after the passage of the Equal Pay Act and Title VII. Among her many accomplishments during 25 years with the government, Sonia brought radical concepts such as sex discrimination and women’s rights to the fore, drafting the lead decision declaring that airlines’ weight and anti-marriage policies for stewardesses were unlawful, and helping to push for gender equity in athletic programs. Sonia was on the battle lines of many of the changes that revolutionized the status of women in America: abortion rights, divorce, alimony, child custody and more.

As a refugee of the Holocaust, Sonia lived the immigrant experience and developed an affinity for the rights of minorities. Born in Berlin in 1928, she and her older brother, Hermann, fled with their Polish parents to Belgium to escape Hitler when she was 5. In 1934, they were able to enter the U.S. “My whole life was civil rights and connecting with people of all races and religions,” she has written. Her activist outlook was shaped by the experience of seeing women constantly put down and

lacking the opportunities often taken for granted by men. “The women’s movement gave my life purpose,” she says.

Her glory days are far from forgotten. Sonia’s been asked to be a rotating panelist on “Retirement Living TV — Wise Words,” which is due to start taping soon in Baltimore, for broadcast in the northeastern U.S. and then nationwide.

The journal of HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) recently featured Sonia in “They Made Her Story,” telling her story along with that of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Cecilia Greenstone, all of whom had connections to HIAS. Filmmaker Jennifer Lee is making a documentary about feminism called “Wavelength” that will also highlight Sonia’s contributions. Before relocating from Potomac, Md. to Sarasota after her retirement, Sonia donated her personal records of the women’s movement to the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America in Cambridge, Mass.

A natural raconteur, she says she probably takes after her maternal grandfather who was a marshalik — one who entertained at bar mitzvahs and other social gatherings in his native Poland. “I always told funny stories,” Sonia notes. Her tales are peppered with Yiddishisms and borscht-belt irony, probably attributable to growing up in the Catskills, where her parents owned a bungalow colony, and frequent vacations to Miami. Sonia’s wit is quite evident in her 1999 book, “Eat First — You