



Dear Neighbors,

Each March we celebrate the fierce and unwavering courage of women who have broken barrier after barrier and have inspired generations. It is a time again to pause take note, and celebrate women who have shaped our communities through their vision, resilience, and unwavering love.

For the first four decades of my life I felt a sense of responsibility to build on the strong foundation of equity and inclusion of those who have come before me. In recent years I have felt a fire building in my heart more and more to speak out against the dismantling of this gorgeous pillar by continuing the fight against fascism, misogyny, and the discontinuation of services that have allowed women to thrive in our society. Quoting something I read recently that I think needed, and needs to be said daily for all women in our lives, “What is a badass woman? Whatever the heck she wants to be!” And another, “In the future, there will be no female leaders. There will just be leaders.” [Sheryl Sandberg](#). That future is now and forever.

Oppression is, as its nature, when those in power are afraid to share that power. Whether conscious or unconscious, in a reality of oppression life is seen as a zero sum game with a core belief that there is not enough power, not enough resources to go around. We don’t collectively stop to ask how much is enough in a traditional hierarchical patriarchal society but rather how much can I get for myself. The feminine says that there is no self without a society to uphold it and give it context and purpose. The feminine says there must be a balance and that this recognition is a defining trait of emotional intelligence. This month, in these times, let us celebrate this intentional balance between self identity and purpose and care for the collective and know in our hearts that if each of us holds this commitment as a core value we all rise.

### **A Special Introduction for Women’s History Month**



In this month of March when the struggle for true gender equality intersecting with race, class, and sexuality is even more poignant, I think it is critical that we take a few moments to celebrate what the fight for this kind of equality has brought into our lives, the gifts, the people, the heart, the love. Let's each remember who has and continues to fight for us!

Last week I had the honor to introduce one of my own inspirations on the floor of the Assembly chamber, Paula Jacobs, long standing Ithaca resident, therapist, spiritual mentor, and my mother. [Here is a video](#) of my introduction. I love you mom.

### **This Year's Woman of Distinction**



Each year I ask for nominations from the community for a Women of Distinction award. This year my office was overwhelmed by an astounding list of 23 women that each in their own right have changed our world for the better. Over the next few newsletters I will be highlighting a few women each so we can celebrate them together for all their spark, spunk, sass, heart, love, brilliance, and fire.

Although an almost impossible feat, my staff collectively selected a nominee as the woman of distinction to bring to Albany to represent our district. This year, I am honored to recognize Josephine Gibson, a woman whose leadership has transformed mental health services in Tompkins County, providing hope and support to thousands in our community.

For 25 years, Josephine Gibson has been instrumental in the growth and enduring impact of the [Mental Health Association in Tompkins County](#). As Chief Executive Officer for the past decade, she has championed a peer support model that has become a lifeline for people, expanding community support and advocacy while fostering a workplace culture that prioritizes the well-being of her staff. As the prevalence of co-occurring mental health and substance use disorder continues to grow, Josephine has integrated substance use and recovery services into the MHA peer advocacy model collaborating with other healthcare agencies and workforce development programs, and has become an indispensable resource and partner to the Tompkins County Court, the Family Treatment Court, and office of Probation as well as the City of Ithaca Wellness and Recovery Court. At a time where mental health support is more critical than ever — especially as we continue to navigate the long-term effects of COVID-19 — Josephine's community leadership has literally saved lives and kept families together.

Our state and country are facing an escalating mental health crisis, worsened by a declining number of mental health professionals. Compounding this challenge is a demographic gap that can occur between providers and the communities they serve—an issue that can affect trust and the success of treatment. Peer support helps bridge this gap by connecting individuals with peer specialists who share similar lived experiences and backgrounds. This approach fosters empathy and validation creating a foundation of trust for meaningful long-term support and recovery. In fact, many who have benefited from peer support at MHA return as mentors. The model, offering no-cost mental health services, demonstrates that recovery is accessible to everyone, especially when barriers to care are removed and lived experience is valued. During her tenure Josephine has built an organization that goes beyond providing services—it truly empowers.

This Women's History Month, we celebrate Josephine Gibson—not just for her leadership, but for her commitment to a future where mental health care is inclusive, compassionate, and transformative. Josephine, your work has changed lives. Our community is stronger because of you. We see you, we celebrate you, and we thank you.

### **United We Rise**

“More and more women are realizing that only collective strength and action will allow us to be free to fight for the kind of society that meets basic human needs.” [Roxanne Dunbar](#).

No one can be left behind in the pursuit of true lasting freedom and no matter how right we think we are, the act of believing we are right without question sullies the rightness because it lets in the seeds of arrogance, separation, and othering. Holding the recognition that one may not have the whole truth keeps us curious, keeps us listening, keeps us empathic, keeps us fearless to all that is. This is what it means to me to embrace and entwine both the feminine and the masculine within each of us and call it simply strength. May we each find this balance within ourselves and embrace it in each other.

Happy Women's History Month everyone!

Anna