

Anita Hill: changing the landscape for women at the workplace

By Lisa Reisman
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Anita Hill. It's a name that evokes an image of the unassuming, soft-spoken law professor from Oklahoma who, when called to testify about alleged sexual comments made by her former boss, Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, was thrown into a media firestorm, in 1991.

Or the Yale Law School graduate mercilessly smeared by Republican members of Congress in front of more than 20 million television viewers in the United States and around the world as a pathological liar, would-be political assassin, and prude.

For Kay Wilson, a trial lawyer with Crumbie Law Group in Hartford, though, "she was brilliant, brave, courageous." Wilson, who, along with an audience of sixty, was on hand for Hill's visit to Yale's Berkeley College last week to discuss her book "Reimagining Equality" at an event co-sponsored by R.J. Julia Booksellers of Madison

and the NAACP, recalled "her poise and ability to hold her ground while being roundly attacked by a group of old, white men."

In her own quiet way, said Wilson, "she changed the landscape for women in the workplace by bringing sexual harassment to the forefront."

No wonder. While Clarence Thomas squeaked into the Supreme Court by the narrowest of margins, these "old, white men" failed to recognize one crucial factor: considering what her family had to endure, this was not a woman who would be pushed around. Her parents were the grandchildren of slaves on all sides. Married in their mid-teens, they started working on an Oklahoma farm for 75 cents a day and raised 13 children, Anita being the youngest. Even for such a large, poor African-American family, high aspirations were not an option; they were required.

Which was what had Hill, in August 1973, "three weeks past her seventeenth birthday," pack-

ing her clothes in three hand-me-down Samsonite suitcases and leaving "the only place she had ever called home," she writes in "Reimagining Equality," her first book since the 1998 best-selling "Speaking Truth to Power," an account of her experience in the national spotlight. She was heading to college but, even at that age, she saw it as her first step on the road to "that better place—wherever it was."

Hill's grandparents experienced this firsthand. In "Reimagining Equality," she eloquently recounts their grand journey "from being property" in antebellum Arkansas to "owning property" in rural Oklahoma in the space of one generation as beneficiaries of the Homestead Act. Part personal, part analysis, the book also profiles families across the nation, particularly in inner-city communities, who have lost their homes and their stake in the American dream in the wake of the mortgage crisis.

From this exploration, she reaches a troubling conclusion. "When you

think about it, the place where we call home really decides for many of us our access to jobs," said the 55-year-old whose bright red cardigan sweater, pearls, and polished delivery had, 40 years after she first left home, nothing hand-me-down about them. "It decides for many people what kind of schools they're going to send their children." Not to mention "things as simple as what kind of food you have readily available to you, whether you have access to transportation to get to your job, and whether your garbage is picked up."

Hill, who began her research after revisiting the letters she had received in the years following her 1991 testimony—roughly 25,000 in number, she has said—letters that have "come from all over the country, from men and women and people of all walks of life," letters that inspired her to continue to give voice to those whose concerns have not been articulated in the public debate. They also moved her "to feel more at home

in America."

And that was not always the case, particularly in the wake of the 1991 hearings, she acknowledged.

Beyond enduring public fallout, Hill, back home in Oklahoma, found her job threatened. She endured random rude remarks from strangers and condemnations to hell. Some African-Americans accused her of betraying her race by challenging the promotion of a black man. Some, at the same time, confessed their painful stories. "I felt boxed into an identity someone had assigned for me," she said.

Home, Hill realized, is an evolving definition. "It's a physical place, of course, because we all need shelter. It's also a state of being, a state of actually feeling that we belong in the place and we're welcome."

Since 1998, home for Hill has been Brandeis University right on the outskirts of Boston, where she teaches social policy and law. There, she's found an intellectual home and a physical home. It's a place where



Anita Hill changed how corporate American viewed sexual harassment.

she feels very secure, she said. "One of the things I have discovered is that home is really as much a state of being and state of mind as it is a physical location. And I believe I have found both."

There was no discussion on whether Hill felt at home while being grilled by members of Congress over 20 years ago or, for that matter, any mention of Justice Thomas himself.

For Kay Wilson, that was irrelevant. "Her testimony shifted the way people viewed the workplace and came to understand that everyone has a right to work in an environment free from abuse and harassment." As evidence, the trial lawyer added, "Women have told me they came forward because of Anita Hill."