

Twenty Years Later: Covering the Anita Hill Story

Cinny Kennard

Senior Fellow, Annenberg Center at
the University of Southern California

GET UPDATES FROM Cinny Kennard

..

Posted: 10/13/11 03:00 PM ET

Twenty years ago Oct. 15, I was standing on the front steps of Anita Hill's home in Norman, Okla. In Washington, the U.S. Senate was taking up the Supreme Court nomination of Clarence Thomas. I was a TV reporter for a Dallas, Texas, station, and my assignment was to get Hill's reaction to the Senate's vote.

As the senators debated Thomas' fate, Hill was in her bungalow cooking dinner for her mother. Outside, I and other reporters pleaded with her to talk. She refused.

After Thomas' was narrowly confirmed, I knocked on the door again. Hill finally opened it and came outside. I begged her to say something. America's women, I said, wanted to hear from her on this historic night.

"Do you have anything to say to Justice Thomas?" I asked.

"I have no comment on that really, " she replied.

But then she suddenly seemed to realize the significance of what she had testified to at Thomas' confirmation hearings.

"It is almost as though a silence has been broken, and women are talking about experiences that they never have spoken about before, and that should not die," Hill said.

Far from dying, the experiences of that week set off an electoral revolution and brought unprecedented protection to working women in America. Anita Hill made it all possible by naming a "beast" that had long been untamed in the workplace - sexual harassment.

At Thomas' confirmation hearings, Hill had accused the Supreme Court nominee of making sexually provocative comments to her when she worked for him at the U.S. Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Broadcast live on television, the drama surrounding her testimony was heightened by the fact that it was unfolding in the presence of a skeptical, sometimes dismissive all-white male Senate Judiciary Committee. Days earlier, another powerful image had imprinted itself on the public's mind: A group of women House members had charged up the Senate steps to demand that Hill's claims against Thomas be aired.

The political fallout of the hearings was monumental. Ruth Mandel, who developed and directed the Center for American Women in Politics in the Eagleton Institute of Politics' at Rutgers University, said the controversy "called the country's attention to the absence of women in high political office."

That changed the following year. Six women were elected to the Senate, bringing the total to eight. Leo McCarthy, who lost to then-Rep. Barbara Boxer in the Democratic senatorial primary in California, said he had "got caught up in a tidal wave without a surfboard."

Many factors contributed to the political upheaval known as the Year of the Woman. But CBS News exit polls also revealed that many voters supporting female candidates were still angry over the disrespect and near-ridicule that Hill had experienced in giving her Senate testimony the previous year.

Hill's testimony not only shook up the political class. It also dramatically changed the working lives of ordinary women. By identifying the beast as sexual harassment, said Mandel, Hill "gave women the ammunition they needed to confront it in the workplace."

Legislatures across the country passed laws prohibiting and punishing sexual harassment. California's law provided for suspension, even expulsion, of a perpetrator as early as the 4th grade. Meanwhile, businesses, governmental agencies and universities all put tough anti-sexual harassment policies in place.

The result was immediate. Sexual harassment cases more than doubled from 1991 to 1996, according to filings by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

In Norman that Oct. 15 night, I asked Hill if she would do it all over again. "I'm not sure if I could have lived with myself if I had answered those questions any differently," she replied.

America's working women should be thankful that Hill answered the way she did, because her brave testimony 20 years ago helped forever change the workplace for them.....