

Front Row for History

BY AMANDA COSNER '02BA/H&S

"I had a front row seat for history. I realize it more and more every day," says Ann Cottrell Free '36, of her experiences as a reporter during and after WWII. Most recently, Free contributed several articles and two photos to the *Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, published in 2001. Free wrote about ER's "women-only" press conferences and fellow journalists Ruby Black and Mary Hornaday.

As a 24-year-old reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Free was the youngest member of Eleanor Roosevelt's Press Conference Association in 1941 and chaired it in 1943. (Free didn't always get a front row seat. She remembers racing other reporters upstairs to the Monroe Room. "I was never able to outrun the older women and had to settle for the second row," she says ruefully.) Free reports, "After ER's customary 'Good Morning, Ladies,' the First Lady shook each woman's hand, announced her schedule of activities, and entertained questions on a variety of subjects, ranging from her wardrobe and her children to her own personal and women's general role in war and peace." Like her husband, ER limited direct quotes, at first requiring reporters to get her permission and check their notes against her secretary's.

ER intended that her weekly, women-only press conferences would expand opportunities for women journalists—then often limited to covering society news, fashion and homemaking. And ER could highlight the social and human rights issues she supported so intensely.

Free shared those passionate concerns. "Even in Richmond, growing up, I felt horrible about the second-class citizenship of African-American people. I felt like I was a lonely voice at the time. Finally, Eleanor Roosevelt spoke up and gave a lot of support to African-Americans." When the president's wife spoke and acted, Free was inspired to fight for what she believed in. "You need people like Mrs. Roosevelt to galvanize you."

After the war, Free continued to cover ER and movements calling for equal opportunities for people all over the world. Most thrilling for Free was witnessing the shaping of the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a response to the world's horror at the Holocaust. ER maneuvered past thickets of conflicting national values and practice, convincing her colleagues on the U.N. Commission on Human Rights that binding treaties on civil rights and economic justice should be separate from the declaration, which became part of the U.N. Charter in 1948. "I feel so lucky to have experienced that," Free says.

Later, Free fought for humane treatment of animals and protection of the environment, with books like *Animals, Nature and Albert Schweitzer*. She led a successful drive to name a wildlife refuge in Maine for her friend and comrade-in-Nature, Rachel Carson. "That's where my heart is, with the animals and nature."

She adds, "I wish I could have done more than that. You look back at your life and realize you haven't done a thing and you wish you could do it all over again." Perhaps. But Free hasn't stopped yet. Besides, people like Ann Cottrell Free galvanize the rest of us.

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