



KAY PRESTO

VICTORIOUS WOMAN MARCH 2009 WOMEN'S HERITAGE MONTH HONOREE

I literally had to start from scratch. I didn't know the names of the drivers, the way the cars performed, the rules – absolutely not *one thing*.” That's the way Kay Presto describes the beginning of her career as an award-winning auto-racing photo-journalist and broadcaster.

The year was 1971. Kay's daughter, Deb, was named “queen” of the Ontario California annual Motor Sports Competition. The family got free tickets, so they all went. Kay wanted to understand what the event was about so she started asking the people in the nearby seats to explain things, and she wrote down their answers. Her note-taking caught the attention of sports editor Jim Bryant, who asked Kay what she was writing. When she told him, he asked her to write a column for his paper, the Daily Report. Though she said she had no experience, Bryant insisted, advising her to simply to share her viewpoint with the readers. Finally, Kay said, “Okay.”

For her first article, Kay wrote about a group of visiting blind children and how they experienced racing. Obviously they couldn't see what was happening, Kay wrote about how excited they got about everything from the vibrations of the cars as they passed and the thunderous roar the crowd to the smell of the fuel. Kay's second column was closer to home. She wrote about the race queen's hectic schedule, which described from her unique “queen mother” vantage point. It was something different for the sports page, car racing from a woman's perspective. The editor published both columns, *and paid her*. Published and paid – Kay knew that meant she was in the race car world for real! “*Now what?*” she thought, scared to the core.

Over the next few months, armed with pen, paper and tape recorder, Kay went to the track and talked to everyone who would talk to her. She learned about how cars handled, how drivers qualified to race, what the pit crew did, the importance of fuel, tires, flags...everything. Within a few months, Kay was jazzed, admitting, “I fell in love with the challenge of motorsports.” Then, because no one else was from the newspaper was doing it, she bought a 35mm camera, so she could capture the sights as well as the sounds of the race track. When she submitted the pictures along with her column, her editor printed the pictures and paid her for them. Unwittingly, Kay became the first women photo-journalist in motorsports. Her articles and pictures weren't only printed in the Daily Report, they were hitting the pages of national auto magazines too!

Engrossed in doing her job and doing it well, Kay Presto was unaware of any discrimination toward women...until she was asked to cover NASCAR stock car races. Kay was nearly overwhelmed by the challenge but recognized the opportunity. When she got there, Kay found out that NASCAR was “*very blocked to women*.” She couldn't even get into the garages to interview drivers. Her only shot with them was on their way to their race cars for practices or races. Of course, by then the drivers had no time for distracting interviews; they had to get into their cars.

Frustrated, but refusing to give up, Kay looked for another way. She got friendly with the flagmen and started asking questions about the flagging system. She was intrigued by how the flagging decisions were made, and by whom, and started writing an article explaining it. She found out that everyone seemed have their own spin on the method, so she talked to drivers and got their take. As the article evolved, in order to really give a 360° picture, Kay realized she needed more information. Though filled with trepidation, she made the very gutsy decision to apply for permission to go to NASCAR's tower to talk to top officials. Much to her surprise, she got it! Even more surprised was Bill Gazaway, the head official. He couldn't figure out why Kay was so interested in the flagging system. Though he mostly dismissed Kay's curiosity, he gave her an interview and the information she needed to complete her article.

Shortly after the article was published, Kay laughs as she recalls, “I went to cover a NASCAR race and I was told to ‘be sure to pick up my NASCAR garage pass.’ I almost dropped over in astonishment...I felt then that I was *really accepted into that male-oriented field of motorsports reporting*.”

However, in those early days, acceptance didn't mean welcomed with opened arms. At different times, she “was ordered out of pits, threatened, laughed at, and harassed.” Once, on assignment for a national magazine, a fellow reporter took her credentials so she couldn't get in to do her job. During another race, a security guard hit her on the shoulder just as she snapped a picture, ruining her shot. Kay threatened to file charges for assault and battery; the incident was never repeated. People who felt threatened did what they could to stifle Kay's success.

“I had to be strong and fearless,” Kay admits, even when it wasn’t comfortable. Still, Kay never backed down and did everything she could to make sure she always stood toe-to-toe with her male colleagues.

Over the years, not only was Kay accepted in the garages and by journalistic colleagues, she also became friends with racing greats like Richard Petty. Her interview with pioneering women racer Janet Guthrie became an award-winning cover story for a national magazine. In fact, during her career, Kay Presto won over sixty awards for her writing, photos and broadcasting work.

As her confidence and reputation grew, Kay approached a local radio station and proposed doing broadcasting racing events for them. The station hired her for a few short segments a week. Later, that gig morphed into a job with the Mutual Broadcasting System, one of the “big four” radio networks, and the one with the largest number of affiliates. MBS not only produced shows like *The Lone Ranger*, *Superman* and *The Shadow*, it also aired the All-Star Game and the World Series. She was soon doing radio for all the major networks.

Kay then networked her way to a meeting with ESPN bigwigs. She offered to do some racing spots for them, and they accepted. She learned how and where to hire a television crew. She began producing her own segments and shipping them to ESPN television for broadcast, then added CNN. Kay’s challenges and the victories didn’t end there. As Kay describes, “I was the first woman, possibly first person, to broadcast “live” back to the United States from the Baja 1000 Off-Road Races in Mexico, which was a logistical challenge. For that entire weekend, I was the interviewer, broadcaster, editor, engineer, and statistician, working completely by myself.”

In addition to covering races, Kay was elected to and served as Western Vice-President of the American Racing Writers & Broadcasters Association for seven years. For them she compiled a White Paper for Photographers, listing the dangers of and safety rules for photographing motorsports. Her recommendations have been taught in racing seminars, including the Indy 500.

One might think Kay would want to retire into a restful life with spouse, Leon, her children and her grandchildren. **Wrong!** Besides still race reporting, Kay founded a new company that makes “I’M A SENSATIONAL SENIOR!” apparel and products for people over 50, and high school and college seniors. She’s as busy and engaged as ever!

As a frontrunner of gender barriers breakthroughs, Kay gives advice to women in today’s workplace:

- **Always believe in yourself, no matter what you are told.** Kay believed she could accomplish what she wanted, even if it discovering what she didn’t know and learning something new every day.
- **If something is done wrong to you, find the fairest and most honest way to handle it.** Kay didn’t always get a fair shake from the people she met, especially during her early years. Yet she found ways to handle the challenges and become friends with the persons causing those hardships.
- **Keep your options open. Don’t be afraid to open new doors.** Kay not only accepted the opportunities that were offered, she looked for and created some on her own. If she didn’t, she would have missed some of her most exciting and rewarding challenges.
- **Use mentors whenever you can. They can speed your success.** Kay tells women, “Don’t hesitate to ask for their help in any way needed.” “And,” Kay adds, making another important point, “reward their help in some way too.”

***Whoo-Hoo, Kay! You paved the way for so many of us
who sometimes forget how challenging it was for women
to be accepted in sports, business management and
other so-called non-traditional roles for women.
We honor your courage and fearlessness
as we admire your determination to keep seeking
challenges that excite you and make your life happy.***

You can see some of Kay’s photos at carsandcompetition.com.

Also, look for Kay’s Sensational Senior shirts and gifts at www.shirts4seniors.com