

RECLAIMING MOTHER'S DAY

BY CONNIE JESKE CRANE



Instead of sending a cheesy card this Mother's Day, why not take a more traditional approach and attend a peace march with your mom. (Photo: iStock)

Overpriced brunch. Cheesy cards. Impossible expectations. Made your plans for Mother's Day yet?

Mother's Day has betrayed its feminist origins to become yet another bloated consumer contest. In 2012, a BMO Financial Group Mother's Day survey reported that the day typically generates the second-highest volume of weekend shopping in the year. It's bigger than Valentine's Day and second only to spending leading up to the Christmas holidays.

This commercialization is hardly new. After Mother's Day was established in 1914, one of its founders, Anna Jarvis, began to protest its takeover by florists and card makers. "A maudlin, insincere printed card or ready-made telegram means nothing except that you're too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone else in the world," she fumed,

according to Jonathan Mulinix, writing in *Mental Floss* magazine.

In North America, Mother's Day founders were American abolitionists, suffragettes and pacifists. The day was "really not meant to celebrate women's domestic work within the family as mothers, which is how it's commonly understood," according to Samantha McGavin, communications director for the Canadian NGO Inter Pares and developer of the organization's Mother's Day campaign, Take Back the Day. "The origin was to celebrate them as political actors and as contributors to their society."

So, if Hallmark and FTD don't do it for you, take heart. All across the country, the drumbeat is getting louder. Hard-working activists are fighting to return Mother's Day to its social-activist roots.

(Continued on page 10)



MALALA TO RISE AGAIN

Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani woman who survived an assassination attempt last fall linked to her relentless effort to promote equal education rights for girls, is expected to stay in Britain for two years with her family as she receives outpatient treatment for injuries related to a gunshot wound to her head.

Fortunately, the bullet only grazed her brain and did not pass through it. Pakistani doctors removed the bullet, and she was then flown to Britain for further treatment with the support of Pakistan's government.

Currently deaf in one ear from the gunshot, Malala was fitted with a titanium plate in February to repair damage to her skull and will have a cochlear implant to restore her hearing. The 15-year-old has vowed to "rise again" and continue her fight on behalf of Pakistani girls and against the brutality of the Taliban.

Malala's father has been appointed an education attaché with the Pakistan consulate in Birmingham, England, a move that will ensure the family can remain in Britain while Malala's recovery is monitored by health officials.

Millions of people around the world have signed petitions demanding equal education for girls in Pakistan, and Malala has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Pakistani militants, meanwhile, continue to attack female health workers and educators in Pakistan. Naila ul-Hadi was one of seven health workers and teachers murdered by gunmen in the district of Swabi in January. The incident came after the killing of nine people working on UN-backed anti-polio vaccination teams during a string of attacks in December.

Rahimullah Yousafzai, a journalist based in Peshawar who has been covering the attacks, said, "They take it for granted that if you work for an NGO you are funded by the West, that you are trying to change local traditions and customs, you are doing something that is secular."

Said another observer, "They are trying to kill as many Malalas as possible."

Women's groups, students and other reformers are demanding that the government take stronger measures to thwart the terror of militants.



INDIA VOWS TO REFORM RAPE LAWS

Women's rights activists in India say the rape and murder of a 23 year old physiotherapy student in Delhi two weeks after she was brutally assaulted December 16 on a chartered bus could mark a turning point for women's rights in the country.

After the rape victim died from internal injuries, protests throughout India took place to demand stronger justice for victims of violence against women. The woman was gang raped after boarding a bus with a male companion after they watched the movie *Life of Pi*.

Media attention to rape has increased since the event, and politicians have called for tougher laws. The government is examining wide scale reforms in its criminal justice system in response to sexual assault. Already, the government has set up a special fast track court to deal with crimes against woman. There are plans to open four more courts like it in Delhi.

The woman's companion was assaulted, knocked unconscious and thrown from the bus along with her. He survived, but she died as a result of internal damage believed to have been caused by

(Continued from page 9)

Before Jarvis, there was Julia Ward Howe. Boston based, Howe penned the words to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" in the 1872. After the U.S. Civil War, she called on mothers to embrace anti war activism.

Later, in West Virginia, Ann Reeves Jarvis organized "Mother's Day work clubs to improve sanitary conditions and try to lower infant mortality by fighting disease and curbing milk contamination," according to *National Geographic*. These clubs also nursed wounded soldiers on both sides of the U.S. Civil War. After her mother's death in 1905, Jarvis saw Mother's Day established—albeit a less political observance than the elder Jarvis or Howe envisioned.

Mother's Day founders may have differed in vision, but all gave us poetry that raged—unlike the pallid sentiments we see today. ("I never needed a fairy godmother—I had you.") Jarvis had her anti consumer rants, and Howe's famous 1870 "Mothers' Day Proclamation" roared anti war sentiment:

"Our husbands will not come to us,
reeking with carnage,
For caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to
unlearn
All that we have been able to teach
them of charity, mercy and patience."

Mother's Day's radical roots, says McGavin, are underpublicized. Her feminist organization uses Mother's Day as a chance to share that history. To shake things up, last year included a new "feminist heritage minute" on Mother's Day history. Note that this doesn't signal a war on brunch. "As a mother I will be certainly marking [Mother's Day], in part with my family," McGavin said. But she also aims to "encourage Canadians to contribute to the social justice action of women around the world, as well as in Canada."

The old fires are returning. More NGOs are linking Mother's Day with activism. In the U.S., where some \$18 billion a year is spent on Mother's Day, former supermodel Christy Turlington founded Every Mother Counts in 2010. Promos have celebrities like Debra Messing sharing: "One thousand. That is how many women will die this Mother's Day. Not from old age. Not from cancer. But because these women were about to become mothers. That's 360,000 deaths every single year."

In Canada, Save the Mothers has championed this same issue of maternal health in the developing world since 2005. Founded by Canadian gynecologist Jean Chamberlain Froese, the group holds annual Mother's Day walks nationwide. Chamberlain Froese works

most of the year in Uganda but makes periodic visits home to raise funds and awareness. Last year, she wrote in the *National Post*. "There really is a distinct difference in the care available for men versus women in the developing world. Male procedures that potentially reduce HIV/AIDS receive unlimited and sustained international support, while health interventions to categorically save mothers' (and their babies') lives still take a back seat."

Also on board are Me to We founders Craig and Marc Kielburger, who described why Mother's Day got political for them. "We felt an advertising induced urge to buy something to express love for our mom on Mother's Day," the Kielburgers explained in an online statement, "but she doesn't need a sappy greeting card, sweets or roses tied with pink ribbon." Instead, the brothers said, they hope "women—and men—will open their eyes to the suffering we've witnessed in countries where rape is a weapon of war, wives are chattel to their husbands and girls ... are silenced. Our Mother's Day gift is our fierce feminist resolve."

Me to We's Kenya programs director Robin Wiszowaty spoke from Masai country about alternative gifting. With spotty phone reception and bleating goats in the background, Wiszowaty said alternative gifts are of value, "whether it is donating a goat in the name of [your] mother, or the gift of health care for a mom and her new baby."

Me to We also offers handcrafted gifts from local artisans. "One of their cultural art forms is to bead jewelry," explained Wiszowaty. "And they've been doing this, mothers passing on this tradition to their daughters, generation after generation."

"Not only do these women who make these pieces get a fair wage ... it also comes back into the larger picture of educating their children through better schools in their community and providing clean water."

With more and more meaningful ways to show mom you care, dyed carnations may just become a thing of the past. And Anna Jarvis might just be able to rest in peace.

FOR MORE ABOUT ALTERNATIVE MOTHER'S DAY EVENTS AND GIFTS CHECK OUT:

- Canadian Voice of Women for Peace (VOW) Mother's Day for Peace events: vowpeace.org/event/mothers-day-for-peace
- Inter Pares: takebacktheday.ca/her-story.php
- Save the Mothers: savethemothers.org
- Me to We: metowe.com/shop/the-me-to-we-store
- Every Mother Counts: everymothercounts.org ❁