



Role Model: Sarah McClendon

"We're just going to have to push our way in"

BY [ROBERTA OSTER SACHS](#)

Her booming voice — shouting "Mr. President! Mr. President!" — is a sound White House reporters who worked with Sarah McClendon over the fifty-seven years she was there are unlikely to forget. What will also be remembered is how, with every question, she embodied the very idea of a free press in a democracy. When a Texas battle-ax in comfortable shoes, armed only with her personality and a press pass, can shout down presidents on behalf of her readers, something is right. McClendon never forgot whom she was working for.



White House reporter McClendon. © Bob Daugherty /AP WideWorld

Nor did many of the young women she trained as interns. I was one of them. I remember her shaking her finger in my face, and barking in her East Texas drawl, "Don't be afraid to ask the president a question. It's his job to answer your questions, and your responsibility to ask them." The citizens, she would say, including veterans, minorities, welfare mothers, and children, have a right to know what their government is doing.

Back in 1981 I was a Georgetown University senior struggling to keep up with a seventy-one-year-old McClendon, who raced around town in a broken-down Toyota and never missed a news event or a cocktail party where she could work her sources. She was the only full-time employee in her one-person news bureau, McClendon News Service. Sarah often worked past midnight pounding out stories that were syndicated to newspapers across the country. She wrote stories about real people struggling with real issues and problems, from veterans' and women's rights to racism and unemployment. She often got results.

For me, this was a kind of journalistic boot camp. A typical day began with a phone call from the boss at 6:30 a.m. with marching orders. Basically, I was to cover nearly every news event in town, from a briefing in an obscure office of the Agriculture Department to a presidential press conference. Long before mentors were in fashion, McClendon fashioned herself as mine. "Women can make a difference and you must use your education to be a voice for the little people," she used to say. "The men don't want us in here, so we're just going to have to push our way in."

A Texas battle-ax in comfortable shoes, armed with her personality and a press pass.

When she was five, Sarah's mother would take her to women's suffrage rallies; she taught her daughter, the youngest of nine children, to stand up on the kitchen table and belt out suffragette speeches. The family was poor, but one of Sarah's sisters scraped together the tuition for Sarah to attend Tyler Junior College. She went on to get a journalism degree from the University of Missouri. Sarah married and joined the Women's Army Corps, serving as a public relations lieutenant during World War II. Her husband abandoned his pregnant wife, and she was honorably discharged when her daughter, Sally, was born. McClendon then headed to Washington as a single mother, and in 1946, she started the McClendon News Service. She often took her daughter to work — at the White House, the capitol, even to political conventions.

I recall Sarah saying she was shy when she covered her first president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but soon she realized she had to shout questions to be heard. The press corps was nearly all male, and some colleagues didn't take her seriously. But that didn't stop her. McClendon broke new ground at many press conferences; in 1974 she asked President Nixon a question the mainstream press was ignoring about delays in processing tuition checks for Vietnam veterans. The president fixed the problem immediately and publicly thanked Sarah.

I am a student again now, but when I was teaching journalism at Columbia I honored Sarah by starting every class I taught with a few McClendon principles, in hopes that my students would come to believe that they wouldn't have to be part of the pack, that they could ask questions that might be unpopular, or unsexy, or, good heavens, embarrassing to the administration. I recall one student who said she couldn't get her idea across in an all-male editorial board meeting. It was Sarah's voice I heard inside of me telling this frightened young woman to fight for her story.

At ninety-two, McClendon was still working on her weekly column in a nursing home just weeks before she died, in January. Her tenacity, commitment to her readers, and fearlessness inspired me to become a journalist and, I expect, other women as well. Women journalists know they can make a difference, and we're a chorus now. When I read Jill Abramson or watch Andrea Mitchell or Christiane Amanpour, or take in the solid journalism of any number of less famous but equally dedicated women, I think of Sarah McClendon shouting to be heard.

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