

BREAKING THROUGH THE GLASS CEILING,  
TRAVELING THE WORLD,  
AND OTHER ADVENTURES

by Bonny Robinson Cook

Breaking Through the Glass, Ceiling,  
Traveling the World,  
and Other Adventures

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## DEDICATION

To my mother, Ellen Robinson Robinson, my hero, who struggled to raise her children, often under dire circumstances, but never complained, and who became an enthusiastic traveler and explorer.

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## FOREWORD

I've been married to Bonny for over fifty years. We have lived exciting lives together that neither of us had envisioned. I've been bugging her to write this book ever since she retired from Xerox in 2003, because I feel her story is not only interesting but instructive.

When I first met Bonny in 1964 she was a teacher. I knew she was bright and ambitious, but I didn't recognize her full potential, and of course I didn't know she would one day become a vice president at Xerox.

She told me how she had started the Hi-Folks Guild in her hometown of Old Saybrook, Connecticut and that one of her students called her Miss Tiger. Those were clues to what she would do in the future, but I was paying more attention to the present because I was head over heels in love with her.

The Hi-Folks Guild made Bonny an activist at an early age. She started it when she was in high school to counter adults who were bad-mouthing young people, and the resulting publicity got her and several of her friends a meeting with Katherine Hepburn, Old Saybrook's most prominent citizen.

Two years after we were married she stopped teaching, partly because of bad principals and partly because she had suffered a back injury. I knew she could find another job if she wanted to, but I was surprised when she said she wanted to become a programmer. I was working at IBM in a technical position, and had done programming, system design, and other kinds of customer support, so I gave her a programming manual to read.

Bonny got a job as a programmer with no experience and no formal training, another clue to what she was capable of. She survived being fired and/or laid off from two companies, and went to work for Xerox where she stayed for thirty years and became a vice president, although she almost didn't last the first week.

Her rise in the ranks at Xerox is a remarkable story, but it's more than that. It happened against the background of the

women's movement, as told by Gail Collins in the book, *When Everything Changed*. Bonny and other women shattered the glass ceiling and paved the path for young women of the future.

Starting with our first date, Bonny and I have traveled extensively, first within North America, and then internationally. She logged well over a million air miles flying for business. The experiences she had in her travels and the insights into other cultures add another layer of interest and understanding of how human beings behave.

It's time to let you read about Bonny's adventure in her own words. As they say, the rest is herstory.

—Alan Cook

February 2016

## CHAPTER 1 LESSONS AND PEAK EXPERIENCES

“Forget about gender, race, or family background barriers. Continually work on building your own self-esteem. Make an effort to become a more interesting person. Have fun in your work and personal life. Gain business experience in a broad set of areas; don’t just stay in one, comfortable environment. Alternate between leadership positions and follower positions. Keep your eyes and ears open and look for new ideas and opportunities.”

When I was a vice president at Xerox I gave this advice to the Women’s Information Network, which included all the women who worked at Xerox throughout the world, and it was published in their newsletter.

In one of the mystery novels written by my husband, Alan (*Catch a Falling Knife*) the lead character who is a senior citizen, says, “When do we get old enough so that we’ve learned all the lessons?” Unfortunately, the answer appears to be “never,” but I’ve certainly learned a lot in my life, and writing this book has brought some of these lessons to mind.

Interwoven with the lessons have been many of what psychologist Wayne Dyer calls “peak experiences,” and I’ve included them too. After all, don’t we live for peak experiences?

An early lesson I learned was that if you want something done you probably have to do it yourself. That’s why I started the Hi-Folks Guild in my hometown of Old Saybrook, Connecticut. It gave me experience in leading a group of people and it led to a peak experience—spending an afternoon in the home of Katherine Hepburn.

When I was a teacher I learned that your principals won’t necessarily support you. That was one of the reasons I quit teaching, but it also helped prepare me for being a manager. As a manager, I always tried to support my people.

A definite peak experience was meeting Alan. On our first date we drove over a hundred miles to the San Diego Zoo, the prelude to many wonderful trips all over the world. Having our

son, Andy, was a peak experience, but we had many anxious moments until he became healthy.

After I quit teaching I became a programmer with no formal education in computers and no experience in programming or business. If there's a lesson here, it's to keep your options open when you're young, and don't shut yourself off from possible opportunities.

During my first week working at Xerox I almost got fired. If I *had* been fired I probably wouldn't have become a vice president, and certainly not at Xerox. I would never have had responsibility for a fifty-million dollar budget. I hate to think what the lesson is here, but it's probably something about what part fate plays in our lives.

I took a class introducing me to the Xerox way of doing things. The instructor invited some members to his home to go skinny-dipping in his hot tub. I was glad I wasn't invited. Not everybody at Xerox was like that, but when I was still new at the company I was kissed by a vice president. I punched him in the nose, which, as it turned out, was probably the right thing to do. He never tried anything again.

I traveled all over the world for business and had many interesting experiences, including eating a twenty-nine course meal in Japan, practicing for a presentation in a simulated coal mine, and being protected by the mob.

When I won the Xerox President's Award the ceremony started out badly for me because members of the Xerox Board of Directors, who apparently weren't yet used to female high achievers, congratulated Alan instead of me, but it turned into a peak experience with the help of the people who had assisted in getting me there.

And when I attended my first staff meeting as a vice president of Xerox, the first question somebody asked me was, "Bonny, what are you doing here?" It took time and a lot of hard work before I was fully accepted by my peers, but I always received support from my friends, and that helped keep me going.

In my career I met a lot of remarkable women, such as Sally Ride, the astronaut.

## Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling

As a world traveler I've accomplished three of my major goals: sitting on the steps of the Parthenon, kissing on the Great Wall of China, and sitting in an ancient ruin under a full moon.

Looking back, I wouldn't have missed these experiences for anything.