

Bear Hailey Atwood '77

Bear, for nearly 40 years you have defended our constitutional rights and advocated for social justice with a resolute strength of conviction. Through litigation, legislation, education and community organizing, you have given voice and agency to the most marginalized among us. As a friend says, “There are two kinds of activists: the kind that goes to conferences and gives speeches, and the kind that gets in the street to help people. Bear is both.”

Your ability to dig in at every level was fostered early on. You and your sisters spent long hours helping raise goats, steers, chickens and Old English sheepdogs on your family’s Massachusetts farm. You joke that your father used to say that there was men’s work and women’s work, and his daughters would do it all.

Beyond a strong work ethic, your parents instilled in you a social justice ethos. They welcomed students enrolled in A Better Chance to live in your home, and your father openly shared stories of discrimination he faced as a Jewish boy living in an Irish Catholic Boston neighborhood.

You organized your first protest before you were 10. Gathering your cousins, you marched on the front lawn to picket your parents (who apparently made you do too many chores). In sixth grade, you successfully convinced school officials to remove a fence that separated the boys and girls on the playground, disproving their theory that “girls were too fragile” by noting you could carry a bag of cement up a ladder.

You arrived at Exeter in 1976 as a new upper. You enjoyed the time away from home but felt girls were not always treated equally. It was the early years of Exeter’s transition to coeducation, and oftentimes you were the only girl in a class. “That was hard and inspiring,” you say. You sought a place where women’s voices were at the fore and found the National Organization for Women, or NOW, becoming a member at 17. You are currently the vice president of NOW and have served at every level of the organization. In 1998, the National Women’s Hall of Fame inducted you into its Book of Lives & Legacies.

Another defining moment came the summer before your senior year on a trip to Nicaragua. There, you came face-to-face with machine-gun-carrying local police, Sandinista revolutionaries and true poverty. You decided then to study political science and Spanish, earning a joint degree from Denison University. In 1984, you graduated from Columbus School of Law at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Law school not only taught you to analyze problems from all sides, it also offered a sure footing in the courtroom. You brought those skills to bear first as a public defender in Keene, New Hampshire, a post you held for eight years.

While you loved law, you didn’t particularly love practicing law, so you accepted positions with a policy-level focus. As New Jersey’s deputy attorney general in the division of civil rights, you helped draft policy to protect battered women, designed anti-bullying initiatives and led community outreach efforts to heighten overall awareness of civil rights. In the late ’90s, while president of NOW New Jersey, you advocated for same-sex marriage. Many called your efforts “crazy,” saying, “Not in our lifetime.” They were wrong. You were instrumental in adding gender identity to New Jersey’s law against discrimination.

You moved to Mississippi in 2007, and married your partner, Sheila, in the Academy’s chapel in 2010. Of course, you gave your wedding invitees the option of coming inside for the ceremony or picketing outside with signs reading “Marriage is a patriarchal institution.” They all came in.

You took up your advocacy work at the Southern Poverty Law Center as director of the Mississippi Youth Justice Project. Your tenacity helped reform the juvenile justice system in the state. One of your biggest accomplishments was forcing the closure of the Columbia Training School, a notorious youth detention facility.

Next, as legal director at the ACLU, you canvassed, ran phone banks, wrote, and spoke on radio shows and at forums in support of many causes, among them racial justice, women’s rights, criminal justice, voter rights, LGBTQ rights, pay equity and free speech.

Not only are you a zealous protector of your clients and constitutional rights, you are also a valued mentor. Colleagues say you lead by example — facing sometimes hostile courts and an often-hostile public with calm, courage and hope. You inspire confidence not only with your wealth of knowledge and experience but also with a sharp wit.

Your name, “Bear,” is short for “Boo Boo Bear,” a term of endearment coined by your elder sister and now your legal name. When people ask you, “Is your name bear like teddy?” you say, “No, bear like grizzly.” We are ever grateful that you live up to your namesake and never back down from a tough battle. Bear, the world is a freer, more equal and more just place because of you. It is our honor to present you with the 2021 John and Elizabeth Phillips Award.