

Of the eight tenets of the Athena Model – The Authentic Self, Relationships, Giving Back, Collaboration, Courageous Acts, Learning, Celebration and Joy... **Fierce Advocacy** was the one theme that stopped me short. I started mulling it over.... *Fierce Advocacy*.... not just "advocacy"... but *FIERCE* Advocacy.

Athena International defines Fierce Advocacy as: *Supporting and acting on your passion for people, causes, or ideas. Creating an unstoppable force for the greater good.*

I imagine many of you -- like me -- don't work in non-profits or see our lives in the context of advocating for something, the way this theme might conjure up visions of -- say, arguing in court... or taking to the streets in demonstration.

So you may ask yourself – as I have – how it fits into your life.

It seems a large mountain to climb, to create an unstoppable force for the greater good... I've been thinking about it for months.

Then one day, I realized where it fit in my life, and who taught me the meaning of it: My mother and her four sisters. I learned it by example. It's been a journey, and I'd like to share some of it with you.

My mother was a little thing, a bit over five-one and 100 pounds in her good days. But if you've ever seen a wren defending her nest, you know that size doesn't mean anything when it comes to making a statement.

She was a tiger for the people she loved! She was a full-time homemaker who possessed a brilliant mind, and once dreamed of being a brain surgeon. But her great love was her home and family, and that encompassed her friends and neighbors, which linked her into her greater community.

For example -- When I was still in school, growing up in a city neighborhood of Rochester – next to Highland Park and Highland Hospital – Mom became actively involved in the issue around creating the city's expressway, particularly the Inner Loop. It was originally designed to sweep through our neighborhood -- just two blocks or three from our street. It would affect Highland Park, too. (Houses were already demolished on Highland and S. Clinton Avenues)

Mom got into the thick of things – attending meetings, writing letters, passing petitions. The community effort was successful. The expressway was diverted. That was the first of many causes I saw her take up.

By the time the City wanted to close the historic #24 School in our neighborhood – which both my father AND grandfather once attended – *close it and turn it into*

condominiums! Unheard of in the 70's! -- I was a young mother living in the neighborhood, too. Mom brought me to the grass-roots meetings and strategy sessions at neighbors' houses... she wrote letters, I began to speak out... our neighborhood desperately wanted to keep the school.

We lost.

However, I learned that it feels much better to get involved in what you believe in than to sit by and complain. Even if you lose that round.

Over many years, Mom advocated on behalf of her wonderful neighbors -- the elderly ones, the young families... she took petitions around for various safety signs... wrote letters to the editor... and she wasn't afraid to enlist the help of the mayor -- or the late Sen. Moynihan, if she thought the issue called for it! She wasn't political -- she was involved.

Through those years, she wasn't the physically strongest person you'd ever meet -- or the healthiest... and suddenly in 2003 -- after four years of a terrible decline at home -- the day came when I had to become *her* fierce advocate.

We faced our worst nightmare --- having no other choice but to put her into long term care at a facility in Monroe County -- in their version of "hospice care".

It was the most devastating time of our lives as a family. She only wanted to go home, back to the center of her universe, and *stay involved*.

She never accepted the facility as her new "home" -- and why should she? It was a huge hospital, a 550 bed institution --- the least home-like atmosphere I'd ever seen.

I began a 14- month battle -- as my mother clung fiercely to life -- to keep her from being lost in the system, or ignored, or treated like a child. As a family, we were determined that she would not spend a day alone there. My dear dad came every single day, sitting for hours with the love of his life, watching over her.

I became the family executive, helping my dad through the Medicaid process (where he clearly needed an advocate in a dehumanizing, humiliating experience for a man who'd worked 40 years at Kodak to support his family)... I attended care plan meetings... or more often... I asked to *have* meetings to stay informed, pointing out when her pain wasn't being relieved.

I built relationships with nurses and doctors, and the Visiting nurses and hospice aide. I questioned the lack of privacy, the lack of respect, sensitivity, communication or humane response that we experienced... the lack of any sense of real commitment to hospice philosophy or set-up.

Just two weeks before she died -- still surrounded by an obstacle course of furniture and equipment I'd begged to be moved so we could be close to her -- I was finally able to see that she received the medications she should have had all along for her comfort.

Sometimes, I learned, advocating fiercely for someone or something means battling your way through a nightmare.

And if it was such a nightmare for someone who had family there all the time, like my mom -- what must it be like for those who have no one to speak on their behalf?

She died weighing just fifty pounds -- as if she burned herself up. At her memorial Mass, I paraphrased a quote from Shakespeare's Henry V to describe my mother in my eulogy -- "*Though she be but little, she is fierce.*"

My mother was the youngest of five sisters, born and raised in Washington, DC. Each of them chose a path involving advocacy --- One at the Department of the Interior; one as the head of a volunteer organization on Capitol Hill. Another chose the religious life and teaching. The fourth --my Aunt Kap -- spent her adult life in the service of her country, as the wife of an U.S. Intelligence officer, living in Pakistan, Lebanon, and Jordan.

It was being connected to this aunt's life in the Middle East that led me to a deeper understanding of fierce advocacy -- to a larger view of the world we share with all the good, ordinary, peace-loving people of every kind.

Through her letters and visits, we knew of the Arabs who shared her life and home as family -- Mona, the nursemaid and companion, from Lebanon... the Palestinian cook my little cousin adored... their Jordanian driver who protected the lives of my young cousins as he drove them through armed neighborhoods on their way to school....

For over 20 years, my aunt lived in countries where there was rarely any peace. But she *lived* as an advocate for peace -- she *demonstrated peace* as an American woman. I wanted to follow her example. *But how?*

On New Year's Eve 1999, as the clock ticked toward the new millennium, I stood in front of my TV with tears of awe, riveted by the celebration that was taking place all around the world-- people dancing at dawn in one country... music and singing in many nations ... fireworks erupting all over the face of the earth -- one perfect night of joy, celebration -- and *peace*.

One year and nine months later, our peace was shattered into a million pieces, disintegrated by 9/11.

My tears were different then... Tears of powerlessness, and sorrow... What could I do -- one person? – in the face of hatred and misunderstanding, for peace?

Well, the answer came in 2003. I received a request to become a mentor in the Athena Global Links Mentoring program, in conjunction with Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates, a federation of seven states on the Persian Gulf.

Zayed University is the only women's university in the UAE. It was founded in 1998 by the very progressive royal Highnesses Sheik Zayed and his wife, Fatima, who believe, if their country is to succeed and thrive in a rapidly-changing world, it must educate its women to be leaders.

Many of the mentors are ATHENA Award Recipients. One-on-one, this collaborative partnership of mentor and mentee enhances the learning of the students in an Honors program, while increasing awareness and understanding of people of different backgrounds and cultures.

I wanted very much to become an advocate for peace to my student, to demonstrate peace as an American woman. I wanted to be an advocate for the Athena program, as it extends into an international force for the benefit of all women.

Alyazia Kaleefah al Suwaidi and I bonded from the very first, and we continue our relationship to this day. She is a stunningly talented, award-winning photographer with her own gallery pages on an international photography website... an intelligent, funny, warm, curious young woman who astonished me with her ability to write emails in English, a language she was just learning. She also speaks German.

As a media studies major, she founded the Creativity Club at the university, and was an active member in all sorts of university clubs and student initiatives.... in other words – she's a leader.

She's a risk-taker. In many ways, she's very much a Gen-X 23 year old, very technologically fluent ... After her graduation from Zayed in 2005, she had several scholarship offers. She was twice offered a scholarship to do her Masters at Westminster University in London, but had to decline, because her mother is too afraid for her safety after the London bombings in 2005.

She has her résumé out to nine companies, and is starting an on-line Masters program with Staffordshire University, waiting for the day when she'll be able to go on for her Ph.D. somewhere in a safer world.

This coming March, Alyazia's work will be exhibited at the Goethe Institute in Germany.

Together, we discussed the Athena model tenets, month by month, in the formal program. I got even more out of our personal exchanges. I got an Arab daughter – who calls me her "American Mum." By email and cell phone, we share our lives... and our cultures. I have never seen her face.

We're only two women, a world apart -- so very different, and yet, with much in common, at heart -- reaching out to each other in the face of war and misunderstanding.

In my journey, I've learned I can't change an outdated belief system or institution alone... *but I've been given a gift to write and speak.* I can use it to help advocate for my clients in the long-term care industry in Ontario and Wayne Counties.

I can't stop war or the hatred between nations. *But I've been given the gift of an open heart, and role models to follow.* I can use my mind and heart to reach out to one person at a time, no matter where I am.

Each of us has the opportunity to be a **fierce advocate** for *something* – people, causes or ideas.

You may not think you have a gift to use. You do.

You may not see yourself having that role. *We all do. We all can.* Don't lose heart....

Even in small ways... daily... step by step... one act at a time... one person at a time -- we can do something for the greater good.

Fierce advocacy is like a pebble dropped in a pool of water – It causes ever-expanding, outward waves to reach the shore of Result. It expands into generations. Into nations. Into this world -- in which we are ALL connected by our humanity.

Ghandi once said: *Be the change you wish to see in the world.*

The 14th Dalai Lama says: *It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act.*

If each one of us contributes our advocacy for someone or something, **we become a chain that cannot be broken.** *We become an unstoppable force for the greater good.*

THAT is a fierce power! *Think what a world it would make!*

