

Unstoppable: The Nine Lives of Roxanne Barton Conlin, by William B. Friedrichs. Des Moines: Business Publications Corporation, Inc., 2020. xii, 335 pp. Photographs, note on sources, notes, index. \$20.00 paperback.

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William Friedrichs has addressed a significant gap in women's history and Iowa history with the publication of *Unstoppable: The Nine Lives of Roxanne Barton Conlin*—a long overdue biography of one of Iowa's most influential women. The title of the book presents its central argument: Roxanne, as Friedrichs refers to her throughout the book, is a force of nature. She has dedicated her life to fighting for others and has pursued this mission with passion, intelligence, and zeal. From former Iowa Attorney General Bonnie Campbell's forward to the book's conclusion, Friedrichs details the pathbreaking accomplishments of this "unstoppable" woman on the local, state, and national stage. The subtitle, however, is a little puzzling. While Friedrichs lists the "nine lives" Conlin has led on the final page of the book—wife, mother, grandmother, attorney, feminist, political activist, political candidate, ballroom dancer, and foster mom for kittens—they do not serve as organizational or analytical categories for the book, nor do they foreshadow the narrative structure that such a subtitle suggests.

In eleven chapters, arranged chronologically, plus an introduction and a conclusion, Friedrichs weaves Conlin's political, personal, and professional activities into a seamless narrative that highlights her indomitable spirit as well as her capacity to dream big, act big, and accomplish big. Conlin embraced feminism as a young woman in the mid-1960s. She read Betty Friedan, felt the stigma of being one of the only women in her law class, and experienced sex discrimination when she was dismissed from her job as a law clerk because she was pregnant. Women, she realized, needed to start speaking up for themselves, and she was the person to do it. Over the next fifteen years, Conlin co-founded and chaired the Iowa Women's Political Caucus, the largest state caucus in the nation at the time; pioneered the development of sex discrimination law in Iowa; and, in 1982, became the first woman to be nominated by a major political party for the office of governor in Iowa.

Friedrichs also provides a full account of Conlin's long career in plaintiff law, where, undaunted by powerful opponents or complex legal issues, she continued fighting for women and seeking justice for those who had suffered harm due to corporate or government malfeasance. Friedrichs documents many specific cases, including the sexual harassment case of Des Moines police officer Deborah Lynch, and offers

a comprehensive and lucid telling of Conlin's seven-year lawsuit against Microsoft, showcasing her strategic, dramatic, and legal skills that resulted in a victory no one would have predicted at the outset. Conlin's work was noticed by her peers, who elected her as the first woman to serve as president of the American Trial Lawyers Association (ATLA) in 1992. And while *Unstoppable* places Conlin's public life on center stage, it also shows how her drive and purposeful approach to life has helped her overcome challenges in her personal life, and enriched the lives of her family, friends, and beloved felines.

Unstoppable draws upon three main collections of primary source materials. First, and most significant, are the personal interviews and correspondence Friedrichs conducted with over seventy individuals including Conlin, members of her family, colleagues, friends, and associates. Secondly, *Unstoppable* makes extensive use of Iowa newspapers, mostly *The Des Moines Register*, but also those from places such as Sioux City, Waterloo, and the Quad Cities. Lastly, Friedrichs used archival collections including Conlin's public papers (located at the Iowa Women's Archives), her private papers, and several other private collections. The result is a lively narrative that is rich in telling anecdotes, heartfelt recollections, and contemporary perspectives on Conlin's work and career.

Friedrichs's detailed chronicle of Conlin's life provides a strong foundation for further scholarly inquiry into the historical questions that it raises. Several come to mind. How did the second-wave women's movement develop in Iowa? Local histories of the women's movement, especially in a rural midwestern state such as Iowa, are in short supply. Friedrichs recounts Conlin's involvement in the election of the first African American woman, Willie Glanton, to the Iowa legislature, and her support of Shirley Chisolm's campaign for president. How might we more fully understand the racial dynamics of the second-wave feminist movement by examining this story? Conlin's biography also begs for a gender analysis of her unsuccessful gubernatorial campaign. And what about that network of women lawyers, including Ruth Bader-Ginsburg, with whom Conlin worked? Who were these women, and how did this network influence the laws in their states and in the nation? And finally, how did Conlin's efforts to support women and non-white male lawyers during her presidency of ATLA contribute to the history of the profession?

Historians often focus their work on large population centers that are considered representative of the nation such as New York or California, resulting in a serious imbalance in research and scholarship on women in Iowa. We are all indebted to William Friedrichs for this ground-breaking biography that writes Roxanne Barton Conlin, a giant

in the American feminist movement, into the historical record. As Conlin herself said, she loves fighting for justice, especially “in areas where no person has gone before” (251). That she has done, leaving a trail in her wake that so many have followed.