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University of Dayton

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Bad Mothers?

Mothers who step out to become passionate activists must fight not only for their causes, but also against societal expectations, according to research by Danielle Poe, a University of Dayton philosophy professor.

Her book, *Maternal Activism: Mothers Confronting Injustice*, which tells the stories of four women who confronted what they saw as injustice even as some called them bad mothers, will be honored this month at the National Women's Studies Association annual meeting. It will be released in paperback in January.

Poe's research examines the the lives of Molly Rush, Michele Naar-Obed, Cindy Sheehan and Diane Wilson, and their fights against war, nuclear weapons and pollution.

“So often when we look at the news today — whether it's violence, racism, sexism, environmental destruction — we feel so overwhelmed. We feel, ‘What could one person possibly do?’ and that's why I love the examples of each of these women,” Poe said. “From very different background and very different contexts, each one makes a huge difference and then has ripple effects that inspire other people to act in whatever way is possible for them.”

Molly Rush, a mother of six, was convicted of a felony for vandalizing the nosecone of a nuclear warhead in 1980. Facing up to five years in prison, she wrote in her journal that she felt she had died to her children, Poe said. Ultimately, Rush served 78 days behind bars.

Michele Naar-Obed was a longtime activist and decided to join a community, Jonah House, in which members lived together and provided support to those who were jailed for felony nonviolent acts of civil disobedience. She met her husband there and they had a child. Naar-Obed trusted the community
to care for her daughter while she was in prison for symbolically disarming a nuclear submarine.

Cindy Sheehan, a mother of four, never considered activism until her son, Casey, was killed in the Iraq War. She began protesting after President George W. Bush refused to meet with her to answer her questions about why the United States was involved in the war. It is her adult daughter who helps her become politically mobilized, Poe said.

Diane Wilson, a mother of five, launched her efforts after learning the bay where she worked as a shrimper was the most polluted in the United States. She used hunger strikes, spent time in jail, disrupted Senate hearings and chained herself to a Dow Chemical oxide tower, Poe said. Wilson also developed Code Pink to help other women get involved in social justice issues.

Poe said the women faced public scrutiny from those who asked: Don’t you feel like a bad mother?

“That pressure to be a ‘good mom’ — meaning you should conform, you should just do what society expects you to do — that’s really the backlash these women faced,” she said. “Their willingness to take that on and say, no, what being a good mother means is working to make the world better not just for my child but for all kids, I find that really inspiring, even though as a mom, it’s really difficult to think about. I don’t think I could be brave enough to go that far.”

Poe said the book brings together her research and her own experience as a mother.

“I look at my kids and think: I want this world to be better for them. I want them when they see something unjust happening to say, ‘That’s not right and I’m going to stand up and do something,’” she said. “These particular women both inspire me and scare me. I look at what they do, and think I could never do that. I can’t image doing something that would possibly mean time in prison. But I can tell their story, and help use that as a way to talk about just being aware of injustice and being brave enough to stand up to injustice.”

The book is available in hardback now through SUNY Press.

For more information, contact Meagan Pant, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or mpant1@udayton.edu.