

THE NINA I KNEW:

Reflections on a Brilliant Woman

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Transitions occur in many forms throughout our lives: career changes, relocations, other major life events. People and ideas continually evolve, transforming our daily lives and our opinions. Sometimes a person can change our life forever; sometimes a person leaving can do the same.

Nina J. Gruen, a longtime CREW member, fierce advocate of women, and trailblazing professional sociologist, passed away on September 15, 2017, at the age of 83. Her loss was greatly felt in the community and by those who knew her, including many CREW SF members. She is survived by her loving husband of 57 years and business partner, Claude Gruen, as well as her five sons and their families.

Reflecting on Nina's life in the context of this issue of *the VIEW*, I observed that she experienced a great many transitions. To name a few:

- moving across the country
- having five (!) children
- pursuing higher education (while raising children!)
- entering an all-male profession (that intentionally excluded women)
- starting a business
- being the first woman to _____

I leave the last one blank because she was the first woman to do many things: she was the first woman trustee of the Urban Land Institute in 1982, the first woman to be elected president of the

academic Western Regional Science Association in 1984, and the first woman member of the World Trade Club (even filing a lawsuit forcing it to open its membership to women), among other firsts. In 1970, she cofounded Gruen Gruen + Associates with her husband Claude, and over the course of her career she published over 80 professional articles and mentored many women and men.

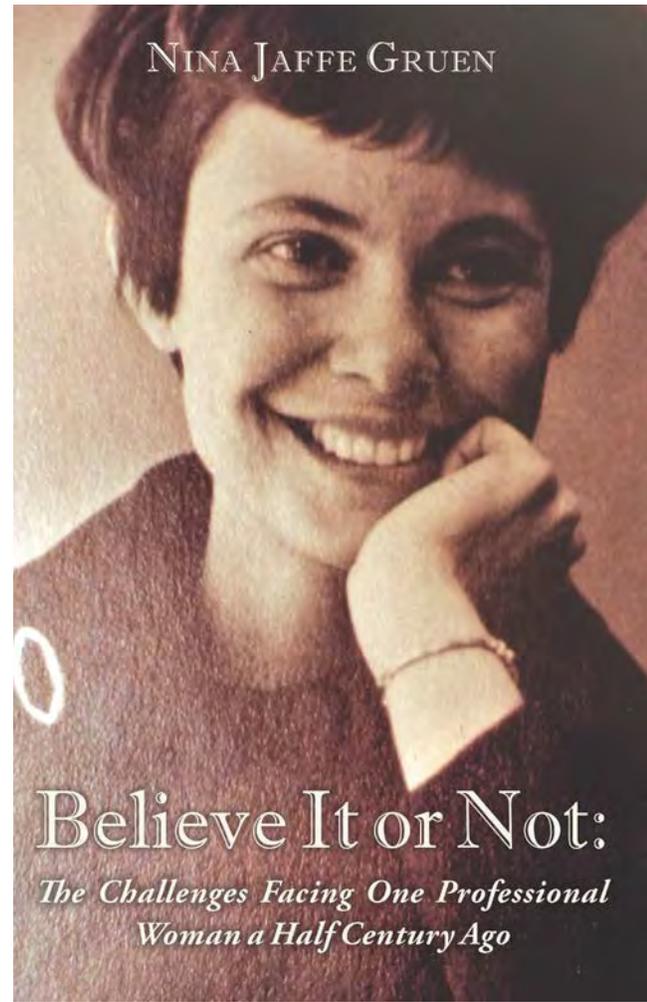
Her passing has ignited much reflection on my part. Not only do I now contemplate a world where Nina isn't tirelessly pursuing her passions; keeping up with trends, friends, art, and new ideas; being a catalyst for change and an advocate of reason; and finding humor in unlikely places, but I also reflect on what she accomplished, how she did it, and how she affected others, like me.

My reflections urge me to ask: What was it that I liked about Nina, and which of those traits can I cultivate in myself? What did I learn from her, and why was it important? What about her life is admirable and why? And how can the transitions and breakthroughs she experienced throughout her life inform my own?

The answers to these questions could fill this whole issue, but I will share a few key thoughts about what I learned from Nina in the short time I knew her:

Trailblazing needs support.

Nina never failed to credit her husband Claude with pushing her to succeed and supporting her in a time when professional women were not only unusual, they were generally not welcome. She taught me how true this is for anyone attempting to make



From left to right: Nina at dinner table with family, early 1970s; Nina with family, 1970s; cover of Nina's book, *Believe it or Not: The Challenges Facing One Professional Woman a Half Century Ago*; Gruen Gruen + Associates office warming, 1976; Claude and Nina on their balcony, 2013 [photos courtesy of Claude Gruen]

strides in a profession, industry, or world that has not yet opened its eyes to the benefits that a certain group can offer, be it women, an ethnic group, a class of people, or anything else.

She stated time and again—simply, truthfully, and openly—that breaking barriers is rarely done alone, and in her case, it was her husband who consistently championed her, encouraged her, and was her sounding board. He neither took credit for her accomplishments nor pushed her (too far) beyond her means; he helped her when she needed a boost and reinforced her confidence in her abilities. I assume that she reciprocated for him as well, and hence they were able to work successfully together for 57 years of marriage and 47 years as business partners (and even longer before that, but “that’s another story,” says Claude).

Success comes from passion, hard work, and persistence.

Nina was smart as a whip—there’s no denying it. But smarts alone don’t necessarily get you to the finish line. I don’t know all the secrets to Nina’s professional (and personal) successes, but I can see from her body of work over 50+ years that she worked steady-

ly and with a great passion for her profession. In a time often defined by “unicorn” tech startups and *American Idol*, it’s important to remember that the vast majority of us reach our goals by trying very hard for a very long time. Finding something for which we have enough passion to stick around for the long haul is extremely important.

Never stop learning and growing.

It’s often a challenge to keep our perspectives agile and our minds open to new information as we get older. A lot of people taper their growth over the years—and there’s not necessarily anything wrong with that. But I always felt like Nina was connected to modern trends, current events, and new ideas, and that this was important to her. (In fact, it’s one of the things that connected me to her; I don’t have many friends who are 50 years my senior.) I think this is in part because she didn’t close herself off from things just because they were different or unknown. She stayed connected, learning and growing for her entire life. And she had certain experiences and reached great heights in part because of it.



Women don't have to be sugar and spice and everything nice.

This is a hard one for me. Like Nina, I work in a male-dominated profession (though my experience has been nothing like hers was in the 1960s¹). I have found that women in such circumstances integrate themselves using a variety of methods. While I certainly don't know Nina's full experience on the matter, I felt that she walked this line in an uncommon way, but one that was true to her and was very successful.

Part of this seemed to just be her personality. Nina was very direct; she didn't sugarcoat anything. She stuck to her guns; she knew her value and was confident in her contributions. And she had a great sense of humor; this helped endear others to her, cut the tension in sticky situations, and show that she didn't take herself more seriously than a person should. Witnessing other successful women navigate their careers is one of the most powerful forms of mentorship that I experience, and I thank Nina for another great example.

¹ If you want to learn more about Nina's experience early in her career, read her short book, *Believe It or Not: The Challenges Facing One Professional Woman a Half Century Ago*, available at Amazon.com.

Nina was a very special person, and as I navigate the transitions in my own life, I'll always keep a piece of her with me. I last emailed her four days before she passed away. My final line was, "You're really one of a kind, Nina." And it's true, she really was. ■

About the Author



Angie Sommer is an associate at ZFA Structural Engineers, a 70-person engineering firm with five Bay Area offices and a broad range of experience in the commercial, educational, residential, retrofit, and hospitality sectors. In her spare time, she volunteers on a variety of industry committees, including CREW SF, the Structural Engineers Association of Northern California (SEAONC), and the National Council of Structural Engineers Associations (NCSEA), where she is the co-chair of the Structural Engineering Engagement and Equity (SE3) Committee. In her spare time, she co-owns a wedding writing business, Vow Muse, which helps people craft unique wedding vows, speeches, and ceremonies.