

Warrior Woman

By Martha Southgate

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Joan Evelyn Southgate, is a pioneer, a feminist, and a warrior for equal rights. She and my late father marched in the civil rights movement in the sixties in Cleveland, where she still lives in the house in which she raised four children. We were the first family I knew to own a copy of that womanist classic *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. And in the early seventies, shortly after abortion became legal, my mother was one of the first to set foot inside a local abortion clinic to work as a women's counselor. Not that she took unwanted pregnancy lightly. When I was 14 and my sister was 11, she brought home birth control supplies—condoms, a diaphragm, spermicides—and gave her utterly discomfited daughters a sex-ed lesson on exactly how to use them. I now believe that her thorough and unembarrassed explanation of the possible repercussions of sex, as well as its pleasures, was the reason I never felt any need to rush the experience. I didn't try it out until I was 20, and I made sure my partner and I used a condom.

Joan's children grew up, married and had children of their own, and her warrior spirit grew right along with us. Deeply moved by the bravery of those who had operated and used the Underground Railroad, she wondered, *What was it like and how can I praise them?* The thought stayed with her like a drumbeat. She was out for an exercise walk one day in 2002, when out of nowhere

came an improbable idea. She decided she would travel on foot the 519 miles from southern Ohio to St. Catharine's, Canada, following the path to freedom that her Ohio ancestors has taken more than a century before.

She called her project *In Their Path*, and spent months planning her steps. As word of her freedom walk spread, people opened their homes to her overnight, invited her to speak at their children's schools, feted her at church dinners, wrote stories about her in their local papers. Gratified but unfazed by the attention, for several weeks in the spring and summer of 2003 she walked in the rain and the sun and the snow, crossing hills and rivers and highways. On some legs of the journey, her four children and seven grandchildren walked with her. Other times, she trudged on alone. Along the way she became a hero to hundreds of new friends and admirers. As one ninth grader told her, "Damn, you got game." She was 73 years old.

This year, to celebrate her eightieth birthday, she has decided to recreate part of the walk as a fundraiser for Restore Cleveland Hope, an Underground Railroad education center she helped found. She's supposed to hit our hometown Cleveland on May 30. Of the many, many things I appreciate my mother for, I thank her most for teaching me this—to be a fighter, brave and bold and unconventional in a world that often makes being those things

difficult. That's why I'll be there on May 30 with my sister and brothers and our families, celebrating my mom, a warrior still. RestoreClevelandHope.org
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Martha, Joan, Letitia



Joan & Grandson Nate