



The Women of CourtWatch: Reforming a Corrupt Family Court System

Carole Bell Ford

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Houston was a terrible place to divorce or seek child custody in the 1980s and early 1990s. Family court judges routinely rendered verdicts that damaged the interests of women and children. In some especially shocking cases, they even granted custody to fathers who had been accused of molesting their own children. Yet despite persistent allegations of cronyism, incompetence, sexism, racism, bribery, and fraud, the judges wielded such political power and influence that removing them seemed all but impossible. The family court system was clearly broken, but there appeared to be no way to fix it.

This book recounts the inspiring and courageous story of women activists who came together to oppose Houston's family court judges and whose political action committee, CourtWatch, played a crucial role in defeating five of the judges in the 1994 judicial election. Carole Bell Ford draws on extensive interviews with Florence Kusnetz, the attorney who led the reform effort, and other CourtWatch veterans, as well as news accounts, to provide a full history of the formation, struggles, and successes of a women's grassroots organization that overcame powerful political interests to improve Houston's family courts. More than just a local story, however, this history of CourtWatch provides a model that can be used by activists in other communities in which legal and social institutions have gone astray. It also honors the heroism of Florence Kusnetz, whose commitment to the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* ("repairing and improving the world") brought her out of a comfortable retirement to fight for justice for women and children.

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