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Longtime New York Activist Heads Campaign to Stop Genocide

By Rosanne Skirble
Washington, DC
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Ruth Messinger describes herself as a fast-talking, fast-walking and fast-thinking New Yorker. "I grew up in New York City in a middle class family that was very interested in politics and what was happening in the city."



Ruth Messinger speaks for the victims of genocide in Darfur at April 2006 Capitol Hill rally in Washington



Ruth Messinger with her father in the 1940s

Around the time Ruth Messinger came into the world in 1940, her parents were living busy, committed lives as board members of service organizations. She says they set a powerful example: "My family very much emphasized doing for others, being of service, the idea of pursuing justice."

Early in her career, Messinger applied her college degree in social work to teaching, college administration and helping children and families overcome poverty.

Later, as a young mother and activist, she became a proponent for day care, education, housing, and transportation. In 1978 she was elected to the New York City Council, a job she held for 12 years. She spent another eight years as borough president of Manhattan, representing more than one million people in the city.



Ruth Messinger announces her candidacy for Manhattan borough president with her children on the steps of City Hall



Ruth Messinger runs for Manhattan borough president and stays eight years in the job

During her two decades of public service, Messinger says she honed her talents as an organizer and lawmaker. "I learned that a democracy is only as strong as the time and energy that people put into it." She also learned that change often starts from the ground up. "You don't win everything you want, for sure, but both community groups looking to

improve their neighborhoods, and local elected officials can win some battles."

Messinger helped redesign New York's waterfront. She pushed for improvements in child welfare, health care, housing and education and opposed tax breaks for the wealthy.

In 1997, faced with obligatory term limits as Manhattan borough president, Messinger ran for mayor. She lost against the incumbent, Rudolf Giuliani. But Messinger wasn't out of work for long. "I heard about [a] job running a not-for-profit [organization] that was about making the same kind of change that I believe in, but doing that work in the developing world."



Ruth Messinger makes a bid for mayor of New York

The job was with the American Jewish World Service, an international development agency that works with 350 grassroots groups in 36 countries. Its mission, says Messinger, AJWS President, is to alleviate poverty, hunger and disease. "We see groups that make change in people's lives all the time. If women farmers in Senegal learn drip irrigation and crop rotation, then they

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no longer have to leave their kids and work as prostitutes. They can stay at home and farm, and the family will be food sufficient."



Credit: AJWS Service

AJWS also promotes human rights, AIDS prevention, childcare and microfinance. Messinger also crisscrosses the globe to raise awareness about genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan.

"When you go to a camp for displaced persons in Darfur and you ask through a translator, 'Can you tell me what happened to you? How you got here?' People say to the translator, 'I'm going to tell her everything. Ask her to go back and tell the world so that this will stop.'"

**Ruth Messinger with
Darfuri newborn**

Which is exactly what Messinger does in her travels and public appearances in the United States and in other countries. She raises her voice against genocide in Darfur, against world hunger and poverty and the scourge of AIDS.

Messinger says the numbers can overwhelm: "Two billion people live on less than \$2 a day. 840 million people go to bed hungry every night, and there are 13 million AIDS orphans in Africa." But she says with confidence, "It is absolutely possible to make a difference person by person, community by community, individual by individual and village by village."

What's important, Messinger adds, is that somebody who can help is listening.

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