



# Lena Madesin Phillips

1881-1955

**A Founder of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs**

LENA MADESIN PHILLIPS once said, "I take it that neither God nor man foreordained or foresaw that the labor of the world was to be performed by one sex."

A born leader, she took a path of incremental steps that prevented her from becoming a "wife of" or "mother of." Instead, her life work resulted in the founding and developing of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women. People are just beginning to value the work ethic and lifestyle of single women or married women with no children whose lives and identities are fulfilled by their life work outside the home. Madesin Phillips was ahead of her time.

Anna Lena Phillips was born in 1881 in the small village of Nicholasville where her father was the county judge for 44 years. Through him she learned about politics and law. He encouraged her to find her true self and did not discourage her in learning unladylike skills such as shooting, carpentry, fishing and camping. When she asked for a bicycle, he bought her one. Her father was a close companion until his death at the age of 95. Her letters to him are copious, four to five per week every year of her life. Her mother did manage to instill in her daughter a love of music, so that Anna's claim to fame was her accomplishment as a musician, who occasionally composed.

When Anna was eleven she scored her first victory over parental determination. She detested her given name and changed her name to Madesin, after the French word *medecin*, in tribute to her brother who was studying medicine in Paris. Perseverance was one of her strongest traits, and it wasn't long before "Anna" was erased from everyone's memory. Lena Madesin Phillips became her name; to family and friends she was Madesin.

Phillips was a conspicuous leader at the Jessamine Female Institute, and in 1888, she formed a military company comprised entirely of females. She was chosen the captain of "The Main Avengers," whose members intended to offer their services after graduation to the United States in its fight against Spain. Phillips went on to Goucher College and then to study at the Peabody Conservatory of Music. Her ambitions to become a concert pianist ended prematurely when she injured her right arm, but this loss for the music world was a gain for the world of politics and social reform.

Eventually Madesin turned a life-long interest in the law into a degree. Some conservative students disapproved of her entrance in their classes, believing their work would be retarded, but when the semester grades were posted on the bulletin board, their attitude changed: she had made all A's. She graduated June, 1917 as the first woman honor graduate at the University's 50th commencement. At age 36 she hung her shingle up across the street from her father's office at the court house.

While practicing law in Lexington, Phillips became involved with the local Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and was quickly offered the position of executive secretary for the business and professional women's division of the national organization. In this job, she traveled thousands of miles surveying women as to the feasibility of a separate organization for business and professional women. She quickly sensed what power could be generated by a national movement to organize all women who had a business or profession. Together they could mould public opinion, set new working standards, improve economic and industrial conditions and lay enduring foundations for peace for the benefit of all mankind. To get such an organization on its feet became her consuming passion. Positive results led to her recommendation that the Business and Professional Women's organization (BPW) be founded and on July 14, 1919 at a convention in St. Louis, Missouri, Madesin's goal – a national organization of business and professional women who would bring solidarity to women throughout the nation became a reality. She served as Executive Secretary of the federation until 1923. While traveling widely to foster the establishment of local clubs, she helped found the federation's journal, *Independent Woman*, in 1920. In 1923, after receiving a master's degree in law from New York University, she entered private practice in New York City where she came face to face with the injustice, despair and social ills which had never touched her sheltered youth. She focused the organization on issues such as child labor, equal pay for women, peace efforts, and endorsement of the ERA. She believed in supporting organizational policies that were not regional-biased but were for the good of all women. Madesin Phillips served as BPW/USA President from 1926-1929.

In the late 1920's while President of the U.S. National Federation, she crossed and re-crossed the Atlantic leading "goodwill tours" finding like-minded European business women to form an international organization and inspiring them to give their all for the same cause. Her concern was to get women to look beyond their own borders, whether local, state or country, long before the term "global inclusivity" was coined.

On August 26, 1930, in Geneva, Madesin Phillips' dream was realized with the establishment of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women. She served as President from then until 1947. She was also President of the National Council of Women (1931-35), and in 1933 she was President of the International Conference of Women held in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair. Phillips abandoned her legal practice in 1935 and for four years thereafter was associate editor of and a columnist for the *Pictorial Review*. Her work as President of the International Federation required her to travel frequently to Europe, and during and after World War II she worked to sustain and rebuild clubs and national federations there. She was also active in war relief work and the United Nations serving as Consultant to Economic and Social Council and later was chairman of the First International Conference on Public Information.

In the Lena Madesin Phillips Collection, housed at the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College, researchers find a letter addressed to President Franklin D. Roosevelt imploring him to include suffragist Susan B. Anthony in the proposed Mount Rushmore Memorial: *"To us there seems needless irony in preparing for posterity an enduring memorial of America's liberators and at the same time omitting from it the liberator of one-half of our people."*

She died unexpectedly in 1955, while enroute to Beirut, Lebanon as part of a grant presented to the International Federation from the Ford Foundation to study the role of women in the Middle East. She died being herself, a dreamer *and* a doer.