

June Gabler is a trailblazer in AASA's history, having been the first woman to serve as the association's president in 1987-88. She started her career as a teacher in Detroit in 1952 and worked in all aspects of public and higher education during a 37-year career that included superintendent positions in Woodhaven, Mich., and Fort Dodge, Iowa.

Gabler was interviewed by freelance writer Glenn Cook as part of AASA's 150th anniversary coverage. Now retired and living in Stafford County, Va., she discussed what it was like to be an administrator in a male-dominated profession, as well as the changes she saw first-hand in education during a transitional period for women in the workplace.

Tell me about your early years in education. It was a much different environment then.

"I credit the automatic washer and dryer with allowing women to work and have a family at the same time. My mother spent her entire time washing and cleaning the house when I was growing up, and my father thought I should be educated, but that I should get married and have children and not work.

"It was really really difficult growing up in that type of environment, and I was stubborn and independent. I got married right out of high school, but made an agreement with my first husband that I marry him only if I could go to college. I carried my first child through my first college year, but that was difficult.

"I went to Wayne State in Detroit, and my doctor would not let me take physical education. It was a requirement, and I had to go all the way to the president to not take it. My professors did not want me there. My mother and father did not want me there. It was a hard time, but I made it."

You taught in Detroit for five years. What made you decide to go into administration?

"They had a policy at the time that if you were pregnant you had to leave after three months, and I had two children while I worked for Detroit. When I had my third child, I was on maternity leave, working on my doctorate, and taking care of all of the neighbors' kids. I thought this was like running a school. So I left Detroit, got a job teaching kindergarten in a suburb, and was there not quite six months when a principal's position opened up next door."

After working as an elementary school principal, you taught at Northern Michigan University and then became the only female professor at Oakland University. What brought you back to K-12 schools and eventually to AASA?

"I had my fourth child and took a semester off, then went to Mount Clements Community Schools where I was the curriculum director. I was there for three years and got a divorce, and then I decided to make the move to Woodhaven. That was when I met my current husband, Gary, and we blended our two families. We have nine children between us.

"My first contact with AASA was when I was working on my doctorate. One of the people that spoke to us was Jim Kilpatrick, who was then the deputy executive director of AASA. He introduced himself and talked about the organization and its publications and encouraged me to join. A couple of months later, he asked me to give a presentation to a New England group of superintendents and I gradually became more involved."

The first big push to move women in the superintendency coincided with the women's liberation movement. You and another superintendent, Joan Abrams, decided to start the National Women's Caucus in the mid 1970s. What was that like at the time?

"It was a fascinating time. Women were ready to move ahead in the workplace. The NEA was feeling its way and becoming a union. There were lots of things going on at that time and lots of changes. Women were finding their niche and what they could be good at at the time. And I felt I could do my best work by being an administrator.

"For years the women in AASA worked very hard to help the other women, but there was no way for us to really get to know each other. The Women's Caucus started out very, very small because there weren't that many women who belonged to AASA at the time. It was not because we wanted to do anything except to get all of the women together so we could talk to each other. And by all, I mean six or seven."

In 1977, the Ford Foundation awarded AASA a three-year grant to identify 75 female administrators and provide them with training to advance their careers as educational leaders. Meanwhile, the Women's Caucus was finding its voice, so they mounted a campaign to get you elected to the executive committee. How did that work?

"At the time, people on the executive board came through the ranks through their state organizations. I didn't have that opportunity. I hadn't been a superintendent for very long. Every place I went, it seemed, I was the only female. So I didn't really have a chance to get into leadership at the state level. I sort of skipped over that.

"I had the backing of the Women's Caucus though, so I was elected to a three-year term, then ran for vice president and lost, then the next year I ran again and won. After that, I was president elect and then president."

What was it like serving on the executive committee at that time?

“For a long time, it was lonely. The fellows would go out for dinner after meetings, and I wasn’t included in that, at least initially. Rich Miller changed that when he took over. He made sure that we were more inclusive. Rich and Jim were good people to work with, and there were a lot of men who were very helpful. But it wasn’t easy at times.”

Looking back, what does it feel like to be a trailblazer in your field?

“That was never my goal. My goal was just be part of what I considered to be part of my profession and to give something back to it. It just sort of happened. It happened because of the men that I met along the way who were really instrumental in not only helping me but helping me to focus and understand that I had some skills that could be helpful to other people, that there was some way I could help to grow the profession if you will.

“I would go to a meeting, whether it was an AASA meeting or a state meeting and if there were women there, I’d say come have a drink and let’s talk. I can’t actually give you a number of women who said that they only way they could have a career was to leave their husband and kids. But I couldn’t relate to that kind of conversation because I had nine children in a blended family. I felt the best way I could make a contribution was to sit down with those women and talk about how they could have the best of both worlds — a husband, a family and career. Now I realize that I was lucky; I had all of them. A lot of folks didn’t.”

You’ve had 25 years of distance from your education career. What would you say to women who are coming up in the profession today?

“If you look back at education, which reflects society, at the time I was coming along women were trying to change their role in the workforce, some of them in ways I couldn’t relate to. Every year, Gary and I would take two weeks of vacation during the summer, and I would get calls from women who said they wanted to be superintendents. They would ask me how to do it, and I told them they had to work for it. They still do.”