

## Marie Ragghianti: Moral Courage in Exposing Corruption

You don't set out to be a hero. It is more a matter of not being able to live with yourself if you do not do the right thing.

—Marie Ragghianti

On August 3, 1977, Tennessee Governor Ray Blanton fired Marie Ragghianti as the chair of the Board of Pardons and Paroles, one of the highest appointed positions held by a woman in the government of Tennessee. She had served only fourteen months. Blanton accused her of gross improprieties, such as bilking the taxpayers out of thousands of dollars in overtime pay, as well as demoralizing the corrections department and crippling its procedures. His action was particularly ironic in view of the fact that a federal grand jury had just spent ten months investigating the Blanton administration for payoffs that involved extraditions, paroles, and pardons. By the time the case was resolved, the power structure of Tennessee politics was in chaos; scandals were exposed and reputations ruined; indictments were returned and jail sentences pronounced; and four people had been murdered. All of this came about because one woman

refused to acquiesce to corruption and sought justice on behalf of the people of Tennessee, in spite of threats, intimidation, harassment, and ridicule (Maas, 1984).

### Ragghianti's Parents as Role Models

How was it possible for Marie Ragghianti not only to withstand the abuse suffered by whistle blowers, but also to retain a sturdy belief that justice would prevail in our political system? Stephen A. Bailey has suggested that public managers must develop the virtues of courage, optimism, and fairness, tempered with charity (1965, p. 313). These virtues are manifest in Ragghianti's character, and she points to the example of parents who gave her "the gift of being optimistic in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary" and the courage to live up to her convictions (Ragghianti, interview, 1989).

Marie's father, Roque Fajardo, was relentlessly positive about life and was politically active in working for the ideals of democracy and social justice. "He could always see the silver lining, no matter how bad things got. He found satisfaction in doing the right thing, no matter what others thought. In that way, he was a terrific role model" (Ragghianti, interview, 1989). Her mother, Virginia, was a gifted and talented woman—a superb athlete, photographer, dancer, seamstress, gardener, and entertainer. When Ragghianti was ten, her mother became paralyzed by a spinal tumor. Virginia Fajardo never exhibited self-pity; instead, she looked at her illness as a momentary setback and then considered what she might do. Virginia Fajardo returned to school, earned her master's degree in guidance and counseling, and began working with handicapped people.

### Emotional Life Crises

Although Ragghianti's parents provided outstanding role models, the development of her virtues as a moral exemplar and heroine came as result of her response to four crises that occurred during her life (Maas, 1984). As a child, Ragghianti was bright, beautiful, willful, and self-centered. As a high school student, she was extremely popular, winning beauty contests and having boys be very attentive.

Not knowing who to date, she would arrange two or three dates at the same time. When it happened that all the boys arrived, a brawl would ensue, and sometimes her father had to call the police. Her adolescent narcissism reached a point where her father was once provoked to say that "she was becoming a self-centered little snit, spoiled rotten, and that she'd regret it. He said she'd never be as truly popular as her mother because her main attraction was her looks, and looks weren't going to last forever. The choice, he said, was between being genuine and superficial, and she had better learn the difference" (Maas, 1984, p. 23).

Ragghianti's obliviousness to the needs and feelings of others abruptly changed in the last year of high school, when her father left her mother for another woman. This was her first trauma, and she was devastated. At the same time, Ragghianti's courageous nature emerged. Recognizing her mother's grief, she took personal responsibility to find a way to improve the situation and actually persuaded her father to return for a time.

Marriage was the second emotional crisis of Ragghianti's life. At Siena College, Marie met David Ragghianti and, despite her parents' objections to her quitting college, she decided to marry him. Soon she discovered David's volatile, unpredictable temper, which resulted in recriminations and beatings followed by remorse. By the time Marie had given birth to their two children, Dante and Therese, David Ragghianti could not tolerate the responsibility of the marriage any longer. When she became pregnant again, he forced her to leave.

Soon after the tragedy of her marriage, a third crisis occurred when Ragghianti's twenty-month-old son Ricky became gravely ill. Ragghianti insisted that her son had a pistachio shell lodged in his lungs, but the doctors could find nothing. The child had sixteen bronchoscopies and was constantly threatened with death before the shell was discovered and he returned to normal health. Deeply religious, Ragghianti thought of all her earlier vanities and how petty they were compared to her baby's life. She made a vow that she would never allow material considerations to prevent her from doing the right thing. She also realized that she could be right (about the source of her son's illness), and others in authority could be wrong. She began to integrate the virtues of courage and charity

derived from her own life experiences into a growing moral autonomy that would come to fruition when she faced a power struggle with the Blanton administration.

A divorced woman, Ragghianti now faced a fourth emotional hardship, working towards self-sufficiency for herself and the family. Due to her parents' economic situation, she and the children could not live with them or depend on them for financial support. Ragghianti had to make plans for financial independence. At the age of twenty-nine, with her children in school, she began attending Vanderbilt University. She was a top student who also worked at three or four part-time jobs. However, the strain of trying to be a nurturing mother and to establish her own identity and independence proved too much. Her health diminished; she was even diagnosed as having cancer, though, in fact, she had an infection. After several months of recuperation, Ragghianti felt a rebirth, as if she had passed to another chamber of her life, closing the door behind her (Ragghianti, interview, 1989). She graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology and English literature. She had also gained a substantial degree of self-reliance and self-confidence, tested her own convictions, and vowed to live up to her core values and principles.

### Unfolding of the Scandal

In 1974, through the influence of Eddie Sisk, Governor Blanton's general counsel, Ragghianti was offered a job as the extradition officer for the state of Tennessee. Though the pay was low, Ragghianti accepted the position. Her father had been a political journalist, and she was intrigued by the idea of work in government. Ragghianti learned her job quickly and became so efficient that her boss, Eddie Sisk, gave her the assignment of typing clemency petitions for felons and expediting paperwork.

During this time Ragghianti learned that, except through an executive clemency, felons could not be considered for parole until half of the sentence was served and that evidence had to be presented proving they were not likely to endanger citizens. She also found that the three-member Board of Pardons and Paroles, appointed by

the governor, reviewed the petitions and recommended pardons to him for his approval.

Unbeknownst to Ragghianti, Sisk was involved in arranging these clemencies in exchange for bribes; he would pressure the board to violate its guidelines in recommending early pardons for murderers and rapists even though they were imminently dangerous to the community. Ragghianti had no reason to suspect him of dishonesty until Sisk began pushing a case involving a felon convicted of a double homicide. Sisk kept insisting that he had information indicating the inmate was innocent. He put pressure on the board to recommend clemency, and although the case violated all the board guidelines, the board members voted approval. Ragghianti was disturbed by Sisk's actions in this case. A more experienced public servant might have entertained some suspicion, but she assumed that perhaps she did not know all the facts and felt it might be disloyal to voice any reservations to her colleagues. Thus, she dismissed the event.

During the next eighteen months, Ragghianti continued her excellent work as an extradition officer. This was in general a positive period for her. However, during this time, Ragghianti met Bill Thompson, whom she immediately disliked. He was often to be found in Sisk's office, his feet propped up on the desk, smoking a cigar, and joking with staff. At Christmas time he supplied the entire governor's staff with liquor and presents. Once Ragghianti asked a colleague who Thompson was and why was he acting as if he "owned the governor's office." She was told that Thompson played golf with Sisk and was a good friend of Blanton, supporting him in his reelection campaign. What she was not told was that Thompson was involved with Blanton, Sisk, and Charlie Benson, Sisk's newly appointed assistant, in selling clemencies. He was also suspected of involvement in armed robberies in the state of Georgia and was being protected by Sisk, who was stalling his extradition.

Ragghianti was startled by a suggestion from Sisk that she might be appointed to the Parole Board. Such an abrupt promotion was extraordinary given the fact that she had no background in corrections, but Ragghianti's naiveté led her to believe that her outstanding work performance and loyalty to the governor and his staff were the bases of Sisk's suggestion. She decided to try for the

position of board chair. She mustered up sterling recommendations, wrote the governor, and finally met with Blanton himself. Ragghianti was shocked when Bill Thompson personally called to inform her that she would be appointed chair of the Parole Board on June 30, 1976.

Just prior to her appointment, Ragghianti heard accusations that someone fitting Bill Thompson's description was involved in selling pardons, but Sisk and Benson assured her that there was no connection. They warned Ragghianti that loyalty and cooperation were essential aspects of her new job as board chair, particularly as she was appointed at the pleasure of the governor. Ragghianti began to think that Thompson was involved in selling clemencies, but she did not suspect Sisk, Benson, and Blanton. She tried to discuss her suspicions about Thompson with her colleagues, but they discouraged her from pursuing the matter. Ragghianti realized that if she kept voicing her concerns, she might not be appointed board chair. She decided to drop the matter with Sisk and Benson until after she took office. Her idealism led her to imagine that she could exercise independent judgment and make a contribution in this important public service role.

### Upholding the Oath of Office

As Ragghianti learned more about her job as board chair, she realized that information files on recent clemencies were missing. Someone on the staff who had access to her office had been tampering with them. Although not certain who the culprit was, she began to have nagging doubts about Benson and Sisk. Her denial about their involvement was shattered after her first power struggle with Sisk, who insisted that the board expedite a clemency that Ragghianti knew was inappropriate. Although Sisk and Benson exerted intense pressure on her, she would not approve.

Her anguish grew as she faced the conflict between her loyalty to Sisk and the Blanton administration and her commitment to uphold her oath of office and to protect the people of Tennessee. Ragghianti thought about resigning but worried about the opportunity lost to make a significant contribution to society. How many lives would be affected by her decision, and how could she live with

herself later if she did not face this challenge now? She would not bow to political pressures by compromising her responsibility and violating her oath. Her responsibility to the citizens of Tennessee overrode her obligations to the administration.

Realizing that some of the governor's inner group appeared to be selling pardons to hardened criminals, Ragghianti was still reluctant to consider Blanton culpable. She met with him to discuss the bribery accusations and Thompson's extradition to Georgia that Sisk was delaying. Blanton was cool and remained noncommittal.

Recognizing that she would receive no help from the governor, Ragghianti realized that she herself had the opportunity to do something in life that really mattered (Ragghianti, interview, 1989). In her memory, she reviewed the period when her grandmother was near death. She thought of her grandmother's integrity and her many kind acts on behalf of others. Looking to her own life, Ragghianti found herself asking the question, "What kind of life would I like to have led?" She decided that she could not turn her back on the situation. "I would rather try and fail," she thought, "than fail to try" (Ragghianti, interview, 1989).

When Ragghianti made the decision to expose the corruption, she realized she would need help. Through a district attorney acquaintance, she contacted the FBI. Henderson Hillin, an FBI investigator, interviewed Ragghianti and convinced her to testify secretly to a grand jury about the bribery incidents. Blanton and the others never really knew who instigated the grand jury investigations. They speculated that it might be Ragghianti, yet no one but Benson thought it was possible that she would endanger her powerful position to blow the whistle on them. They could not fathom what motive she could possibly have for such an outrageously disloyal action.

The conflict between Ragghianti and Sisk escalated. She found her card file missing but secretly retrieved it from Sisk's office. By this time, she knew she needed to retain legal counsel. After Ragghianti disapproved of the next ineligible pardon, Sisk confronted her about disclosing clemency information, an accusation that she denied. Ragghianti felt guilty in deceiving him and also frightened that Sisk may tie the grand jury probe to her.

To avoid any destruction of documents, the FBI raided the

governor's files on October 22, 1976. The probe on the pardon scandal reached the media, but the FBI had no hard evidence and had to resort to assembling the case painstakingly, piece by piece. The raids turned out to have been premature and gave the governor's office the opportunity to take the offensive. With great fanfare Blanton publicly claimed that the probe was nothing but a political smear. The grand jury convened on November 7, 1976, but after three hours of testimony from Ragghianti and two days of hearings involving parole board members, the governor's staff, and Sisk, no indictments were handed down.

### Harassment and Intimidation

Although her role in instigating the grand jury hearings and the FBI investigation was unknown, Ragghianti began to experience organizational retaliation for her failure to support the administration (Truelson, 1987). Staff began avoiding her, some giving solemn warnings of the suicidal path she was taking. In addition to warnings from Sisk, Blanton personally phoned Ragghianti and accused her of being disloyal, betraying confidentiality, and breaking the law. He also wanted to know about her "pretty cozy relationships with the DA's" (Maas, 1984, p. 251). He then threatened to fire her if she did not begin to cooperate with his administration within the next two months. Though feeling badgered and bullied, Ragghianti refused to comply and told the governor that she had done nothing wrong and would not resign.

Disillusioned, she realized that Blanton was as involved as Sisk, Thompson, and Benson. She became even more determined not to resign. Ragghianti knew that she was vulnerable because the Parole Board was under the governor's control. Furthermore, she knew that to correct the problem a structural change was necessary. The board needed to be financially independent and autonomous, accountable to the legislature as well as the governor. Realizing that Blanton would oppose these ideas because they would disrupt his control over the parole commission, she approached a prominent state legislator, Roger Murray, with her ideas. Her proposal called for an autonomous commission with its own budget and a procedure for the nomination and removal of board members by an in-

dependent committee with the governor selecting only one out of three positions on the commission. Changes in procedures also included direct supervision of parole and probation officers by the commission, not by the Department of Corrections. Murray embraced these concepts and requested that Ragghianti put her suggestions in more formal form.

The grand jury met in February 1977, and although more evidence was accumulated against Bill Thompson, no indictments were issued. Meanwhile, tensions increased as Ragghianti refused to recommend another contrived clemency. Sisk concocted a scheme to neutralize Ragghianti by submitting legislation to expand the board to five members, demoting Ragghianti from the position of chair and letting her serve out a lame-duck term. During this time, Ragghianti got a new assistant, Kevin McCormack, who appeared idealistic, exuberant, mischievous, and dedicated, and whom Ragghianti instantly liked. He helped her prepare a memo to Murray that opposed Sisk's proposal.

On March 28, 1977, the administration spoke out publicly, accusing Ragghianti of "not cooperating" and indicating their desire to remove her as chair but to allow her to finish her term. Ragghianti publicly countered, stating that she was only trying to uphold her oath of office. Simultaneously, Murray announced his proposed legislation, which was almost identical to the suggestions in Ragghianti's memo. When Sisk heard of Murray's proposal, he lambasted Ragghianti for her defiant actions in going against the administration's decisions pertaining to the parole commission and ordered her to support the governor's proposals or be fired. She should know, he said, that they were building a case against her.

Ragghianti became dispirited. The bill based on her proposal was defeated. Her new assistant, McCormack, having been intimidated by Benson and Sisk, was pressuring Ragghianti to acquiesce. One morning she couldn't get out of bed and, on a doctor's orders, was given tranquilizers and confined to bed for three days' rest.

FBI investigator Hillin was also having problems accumulating sufficient evidence to prove the allegations against the administration. Because Benson had actually been caught in a bribe, Blanton fired him, ordered a bogus investigation on the matter, and

later quietly reinstated him. Blanton was also pulling strings with the Carter administration. In April, Hillin was told that the public integrity section of the Justice Department was taking over the case from the FBI, supposedly because the investigation was dragging and the FBI had not proven its case. At this point, the outcome of the probe looked bleak.

On May 9, despite her lawyer's concern that she was putting herself in danger, Ragghianti testified to a state legislative subcommittee that Sisk had threatened to fire her. Sisk was also put on the stand, but he did such a poor job defending himself that the administration's proposals for the parole board were withdrawn. Several days later Ragghianti attended a West Tennessee Democratic caucus and was given high praise by her colleagues for her effective testimony, which she relished after the harassment she had been receiving.

However, her relief was short-lived. Immediately afterwards, she was accused of drunken driving, even though she passed the breath alcohol test. The charge was changed to reckless driving, based on the officer's contrived testimony. Headlines in the papers the next day added to her humiliation. Yet she wrote to one of her children, "You must pray for me. . . . Most of all, you must maintain your faith in God, in justice, and in the ultimate and inevitable triumph of good over evil. Sometimes I recall the words of Winston Churchill, that 'the malice of the wicked is reinforced by the weakness of the virtuous.' Please pray that the good people of this state do not shy away from their responsibilities to actively uphold the law, not just simply to fail to break laws. Too many people think that as long as they don't break the law and 'mind their own business,' that is enough. This is not enough, nor will it ever be" (Maas, 1984, p. 297).

Ragghianti felt isolated and helpless. She was risking her livelihood and well-being—a high price for her convictions. What were her motives? Some might consider her stubborn righteousness a vice. Was it selfish, as a single parent, to expose her three children to anxiety and ridicule? No one else was willing to speak out, even though others in the administration knew that corruption existed.

Regardless of personal hardship, Ragghianti remained determined to see the situation through; she deeply believed that justice

would prevail. Even then, she had a resolute sense of optimism. On her way to church on a rainy, overcast day, she remembers looking at the sun trying to penetrate the clouds and thought that eventually there would be sunshine. "I should try to see this analogy with my own experiences—that as painful as they seem right now, they are only temporary" (Ragghianti, interview, 1989).

As a way of escaping her ordeal, she began crisscrossing the state for hearings, meetings, and conferences with little rest in between. She noticed that sometimes she was being followed and became even more concerned about what Blanton and his colleagues might be planning. Feeling she needed a lawyer who would be less cautious and more of an advocate, Ragghianti hired Fred Thompson, who had been one of the Watergate prosecutors.

In July, actions against her increased. The parole board voted against every recommendation she offered. And on July 29, after attending a Democratic fundraiser, she was picked up again. This time she failed (barely) the breathalyzer test and was charged with driving under the influence. Of course, the reporters had a field day with this news, and the next day Ragghianti was told to resign. Ragghianti refused. On August 3, 1977, only fourteen months after she was appointed, Marie Ragghianti was fired as chair of the Pardons and Parole Board. Among other charges, the termination letter alleged that she had improperly billed \$7,584.94 to the state.

In spite of the devastating effects of these events, Ragghianti refused to give up. After conferring with Fred Thompson, she explained that she had upheld her oath of office and had been fired for no good cause. She decided to sue the Blanton administration to be reinstated to her position.

#### Resolution of the Scandal

As previously noted, Kevin McCormack had become intimidated by Sisk and Benson; he had even signed a letter stating that Ragghianti was remiss in her administrative duties. Remorsefully, he promised Ragghianti that he would testify on her behalf at the trial. Unfortunately, he allowed his intentions to be known. Before the trial he was found in a motel room, strangled to death. The murder, prob-

ably committed by a professional, was made to look as if there were sexual overtones. The case has never been solved.

For Ragghianti, the murder of Kevin McCormack was the most haunting experience of the whole ordeal. She felt that his death was linked to her refusal to resign. No other event tested Ragghianti's belief that the greater good lay in doing what was right than McCormack's murder.

Ragghianti's civil suit against Governor Blanton, which would reinstate her as chair of the Parole Board, was tried on June 28, 1978. Fred Thompson, Ragghianti's attorney, had decided that the best strategy for the suit was to disprove the governor's accusations by showing that Ragghianti was a decent human being and had executed her job expertly. Even though the governor had the right to hire and fire at his pleasure, Thompson pursued the idea that good cause was needed for dismissal. He gathered superb witnesses, of whom the most outstanding was Ragghianti herself. The state's assistant attorney tried to establish that power was her prime motivation, but the jury was obviously moved when Ragghianti responded that she was moved only by her responsibility to uphold her oath of office. Her case was further strengthened by Sisk's anxious and inconsistent testimony about a number of clemency cases. On July 10, the decision was announced in her favor. On all counts of the dismissal, the jury ruled that Marie Ragghianti had been fired capriciously by Governor Blanton. She was reinstated, and compensation was ordered for her lost pay. In her mind, the system was vindicated.

Ragghianti won in spite of the fact that Governor Blanton had not yet been indicted. In fact, just before the trial, the Justice Department had announced that it was closing its investigation due to lack of evidence. Yet Hillin continued the FBI's bribery probe of the Blanton administration. His persistent effort led to the uncovering of additional evidence linking Bill Thompson to the Georgia robberies, as well as to several clemency bribes involving both Thompson and Eddie Sisk. On December 15, Eddie Sisk, Bill Thompson, and Charlie Benson were arrested and indicted on bribery and extortion charges. Sisk and Benson resigned on December 19, and Thompson was suspended. The FBI investigation revealed that over six hundred pardons and clemencies had been issued dur-

ing the governor's reign. During his last few weeks in office, Blanton actually signed fifty-two new pardons, twenty-four of which were for murderers. To prevent Blanton from signing any more commutations while still in office, the new governor was sworn in three days early.

In July 1980, the presiding federal judge suffered a heart attack, and a mistrial was declared for Eddie Sisk. In February 1981, as a second trial was to begin, Bill Thompson pleaded guilty to having bribed Sisk to obtain a commutation and received two and a half years in prison. Sisk and Taylor eventually confessed to conspiring to sell clemencies to state inmates, and each received five years, which was the maximum allowed by their plea bargaining. Charlie Benson was acquitted on May 1, 1981, because the U.S. Attorney's Office failed to provide sufficient evidence for a conviction. Ray Blanton was indicted and convicted of conspiring to take kickbacks for liquor-store licenses. Although there were several reversed decisions, Blanton was finally convicted and sentenced to three years in prison.

### The Aftermath

When the publicity had died down, a state legislator told Ragghianti that she was politically doomed because she was considered "unpredictable and uncontrollable." Even though Ragghianti was outraged at "our chauvinistic society which attributes courage to a man who does what [she] did, but 'female unpredictability' to [her]," Ragghianti understood that any public service appointment, let alone reappointment to the parole board, was out of the question (Maas, 1984, p. 410).

Though Ragghianti was disappointed about her personal position, she was heartened by the passage of a bill that reformed the Board of Pardons and Paroles statutes in line with what Ragghianti had advocated. The board would be independent, with its own budget director; the staff would be enlarged; the executive director would report to the chair of the appointment committee; and membership on the board would be increased to five, four members of which would be appointed by the governor and one by the legislature.

During this period, when she was forced to earn her living

as a realtor, Ragghianti was gratified to discover that her example was inspiring to others. Peter Maas, who had authored *Serpico* and *The Valachi Papers*, approached Ragghianti about writing her biography. Though she found it hard to believe that someone would want to write a book about her experiences, it was a wonderful opportunity for her to talk about the issues that mattered most. During extensive interviewing, Maas came to realize that Ragghianti had acted out of moral principle regardless of whatever conflicting feelings she might have and that she would not go against her conscience, no matter what personal turmoil was involved. As we have seen, she had experienced traumatic events early in her life that she had learned to surmount through unrelenting willpower. Those experiences affirmed certain core beliefs that she had vowed never to abandon. Maas published the book, and later a movie was produced, both entitled *Marie*. Ragghianti appreciated being accorded genuine respect by journalists as she toured the country (Ragghianti, interview, 1989).

Although the public supported her, Ragghianti also found that the vindicated whistle blower (or "political activist," in her words) is rarely well liked in circles where the act is perpetrated. Staff within the Blanton administration resented her actions and considered her to be a pariah. Those she had helped send to prison would understandably be hostile, but why would those who were not engaged in the corruption resent her?

Ragghianti uncovered two possible explanations. Based on her own experience, she decided that organizational members are embarrassed by the whistle blower. They know corrupt acts are occurring, even though they are not directly participating in them; yet they rationalize that organizational loyalty and self-protection are more important than the wrongdoing. They thus resent the whistle blower, whose action implies that they have been irresponsible in their conduct.

Another explanation emerges from an unpublished paper by Ragghianti, "The Whistleblower as Deviant" (1988). In it she applied Kohlberg's stages of moral development (1981, 1983) to the whistle blowing dynamic. Kohlberg's theory suggests that individuals evolve in moral maturity through sequential phases. Ragghianti concluded that people who function at lower levels of moral

development are baffled by people who operate at higher ones. "The animosity which the whistleblower encounters is the product of confusion on the part of those around him, uncertainty as to what his motives are—pure and simple misunderstanding" (p. 14). Are whistle blowers acting because of higher levels of moral development or because of self-serving motives that would reveal them as cranks or axe-grinders? Ambiguous motivation raises suspicion in the minds of others.

Through her own investigation of the issue, Ragghianti came to believe that she would always be controversial in Nashville and, for that matter, in Tennessee. Some thought her a saint, others thought her a traitor, but with such polarized opinion, she could never be accepted or work in a state-level position again. Divorced and with sole responsibility for her three children, Ragghianti concluded that she had to leave the area completely; remaining would only wreak more havoc on her and her children. The analogy Ragghianti thought of is that of the person whose house is on fire. People shout that she must leave, but she says, "No, no, I don't have to leave because this is my house" (interview, 1989). Obviously she did not have to leave, but Ragghianti knew she would be a fool if she did not. Even though the problems of life would still confront her, she believed that the scene of the crime is the one place the political activist is doomed to be an outcast.

Thus, in 1983 Ragghianti moved to Daytona Beach, Florida, where she tried to create a normal life for herself and her children. Ragghianti taught criminal justice and psychology at Daytona Beach Community College, until she found that her children had gotten involved with drugs. Ragghianti immediately moved to Sarasota, Florida, where all three adolescents entered a drug rehabilitation program. This turn of events led to her interest in substance abuse. In her usual intense fashion, she became a foster mother to over fifty teenagers in an eighteen-month period. For Ragghianti, this experience was even more rewarding than her work on the parole board, and she began to find a new direction for her efforts. Ragghianti recognized a connection between drugs and delinquency. Almost all teens who got in trouble with the law were involved in drugs; if these teens could receive treatment to remedy substance abuse problems, their encounters with the law would also

cease. Ragghianti then began to focus her career interests on treatment and substance abuse programs for youth and adult offenders.

After three years in Florida, Ragghianti moved to New York in January 1986, where she worked as a freelance writer, publishing her articles in magazines and newspapers such as *Parade*, *Woman's Day*, and the *New York Times*. On March 22, 1987, Ragghianti published an article for *Parade* magazine entitled, "Serpico, Brubaker, and Me" (pp. 4-6). The author recounted her impressions of two other famous political activists—Tom Murton and Frank Serpico.

Tom Murton had been the superintendent of an Arkansas state penitentiary in the 1960s when he uncovered graft within the prison system. He was fired in a storm of controversy after he found the bodies of murdered inmates. In the early 1970s, Frank Serpico discovered graft running rampant in the New York Police Department. After unsuccessful attempts to correct the corruption from within, he went public, was ostracized, and was later shot and wounded, but was crucial in initiating the Knapp Commission.

Ragghianti wanted to meet these two whistle blowers because they had sustained the same ordeal. Here was an opportunity to end her isolation and meet with kindred souls. Yet Ragghianti was severely disappointed. On her second meeting with Murton, their observations and reactions clashed. Murton had become embittered by a corrupt system that had prevented him from making any more contributions. Ragghianti argued that they had won the struggle. From her perspective, though they had jeopardized their careers by upholding their principles, they had stopped the corruption.

Ragghianti found Serpico even more cynical. He told her that his motive had been to save his own sanity. He believed that all three of them were merely safety valves of a corrupt system and had allowed some of the mounting pressure to escape without changing anything. Ragghianti rejoined that they had been rewarded for their efforts by abatement of the corruption, but for Serpico the only benefit had been to retain his own dignity.

The opposing responses of these three famous whistle blowers raise some serious questions about the nature of corruption and the reactions of those who have attempted to combat it. Ragghianti holds the implicit view that corruption lies within the individual;



in her case, individuals had abused the public trust for private gain. Therefore, Ragghianti believed that her court victory and the subsequent prison sentences of Blanton and his cronies had ended their corrupt practices.

The cynicism and bitterness felt by Murton and Serpico stem from their view that corruption is systemic and, according to Caiden and Caiden, occurs, "where wrong-doing has become the norm, and the standard accepted behavior necessary to accomplish organizational goals according to notions of public responsibility and trust has become the exception not the rule . . . such systemic corruption is found . . . where society prizes organizational loyalty over the public interest, where past standards of public rectitude and personal integrity have eroded and where notions of public responsibility and trust have been thrust aside with exploitation of public office for private gain" (1990, p. 66).

Ragghianti's optimistic attitude has brought her popularity and appreciation, whereas Murton and Serpico, who question the fundamental integrity of our society, have been branded by many as alarmists or outcasts. In the end, Ragghianti vehemently disagreed with the negative outlook of Tom Murton and Frank Serpico, though she felt a special love for both. The three of them shared a bond: they had all made decisions to be true to deeply held personal convictions, regardless of the opinions of others and regardless of the consequences.

### New Directions

Ragghianti's journalistic endeavors inspired further acclaim. She wrote a piece for the editorial section of the *New York Times*, which led to an invitation to address the yearly conference of the U.S. Parole Commission. She was surprised not only to be asked to speak to those in her own field, but also to be received so cordially and to have her ideas on parole and treatment accorded such respect. It was an experience that would be repeated often. Corrections personnel would stand up in the audience and say how motivated they were by what she had done and what a role model she had been. Ragghianti began to feel an ethical obligation to use the platform she had gained for a renewed service commitment.

From July 1987 through 1988, Ragghianti was a consultant for a nonprofit agency, the National Office of Social Responsibility, in the areas of juvenile justice, delinquency, and parole. During this time her plans to further her education took shape. Ragghianti learned how research was planned and funded and realized that if she wanted to contribute in the area of substance abuse treatment programs for inmates she needed a doctorate. The recipient of a fellowship in criminal justice at the State University of New York, Albany, she is now enrolled in a doctoral program in which she researches person-based treatment programs for substance abuse felons. In 1988, she married an attorney and member of the faculty at the State University of New York, Albany. Her three children, now in their twenties, all live in Atlanta and are active in voluntary efforts to help teenagers with substance abuse problems.

### Conclusion

Marie Ragghianti deserves to be considered an exemplar of morality in public service for three reasons. First, in telling her story, we have seen the emergence of a person who is an inspiring role model for those seeking to improve the moral processes of public organizations. Ragghianti approached every aspect of her life from a deeply ingrained sense of morality, which carried over to her short-lived but powerful public service career. As extradition officer, she performed her duties in a diligent and competent manner, yet she also displayed qualities of loyalty and cooperativeness that led Sisk and Blanton to believe that they could control her as parole board chair. Although she felt torn between that loyalty and her oath of office, she came to realize that her commitment to the public good was her paramount obligation, and in every decision she sought to act on this principle by using her moral judgment to arrive at fair decisions. She had to balance the safety of the community, the compassion she felt for inmates, and respect for the law. When she realized that the position of parole board commissioners was being compromised by the sole appointment power of the governor, she embarked on the moral project of changing the legal statutes to correct the problem, and she succeeded—though at the expense of her own career.

Second, as a moral exemplar, Ragghianti engaged in moral heroism when confronted with the moral crisis of accommodating or combating the corruption she discovered within the Blanton administration. She refused to compromise her belief in the principles of justice and democracy in the face of organizational retaliation. Instead, she persevered with an optimism that eventually led to her vindication. Ragghianti's example serves as a role model for those public managers who may some day be involved in a moral crisis where their own integrity is tested.

Finally, Ragghianti is an inspiration to women who work in the public sector. Many who have experienced emotional hardships in their private lives will feel encouraged by her growth and her moral development as she coped with emotional traumas in her traditional roles as wife and mother. Ragghianti was fallible in her judgments and actions in the early part of her life, but through her courageous resolution of these personal difficulties she developed the qualities to become a moral exemplar in her public service career and throughout her life.

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