

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

MARIA PEPE INTERVIEW  
*MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA*  
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**Maria Pepe**  
**Baseball Player**  
**5/18/2011**  
**Interviewed by Nancy Armstrong**  
**Total Running Time: 31 minutes and 15 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America  
Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Maria Pepe  
Baseball Player

**Maria Pepe**  
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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

So Maria, let's start out talking a little bit about your family and your childhood. Can you tell me about your upbringing, where you grew up, what your family was like?

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MARIA PEPE:

My family is traditional Italian immigrants. My grandmother came over from Italy. My father is also Italian. His family came over from Italy as well, his mom and dad. My father was a longshoreman in Hoboken at the time of my Little League episode. He had worked on the piers for many years, knew most of the local politicians and the neighbors.

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Hoboken is one square mile, so his family growing up in town, he knew a lot of the local residents and co-workers. My mother was a traditional homemaker. She had four children. Sort of was just traditional Italian. Came from a very strict family. I recall stories about her grandfather, who was very strict and just had a certain image of what a woman should be doing with her life.

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My mother was not able to really have a lot of schooling, because in those years they had to go out to work very young to help support the family. And I think the fact that even though my family was very traditional in that respect, they were very supportive of my athletic skills and willingness to let me endeavor into letting me playing baseball, which was obviously sort of an extreme from their growing up in those traditional Italian families.

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

So did you have gender roles in your household? Did your parents have views on-

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MARIA PEPE:

My family didn't have me feel significantly that I need to play a specific role model within the household. I think- Whenever it was Christmas time or a birthday, they'd ask me what I wanted. And if I said a basketball or a baseball, they would hesitate for a moment but they figured, well, if this is what the kid wants, we'll make her happy. I think their goal in life was to have me be happy with whatever it was I was doing, and if they didn't see that I was going to be harmed in any activity, then they were very supportive.

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

And what were you like as a little girl? How would you describe yourself back then?

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MARIA PEPE:

I look back at pictures of my father holding my hand and having a dress on, and my sisters on the other side of my father... I think it was where I didn't really have a strong emphasis on... I was masculine in any way. If you look I

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was very tiny, small. Although when you look at me at age twelve in the Little League pictures, I do look a little bit bigger than some of the boys that were on my team.

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

What was the perfect day for you growing up?

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MARIA PEPE:

The perfect day growing up. Before Little League or after?

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

Or just around that time. 9 years old, 10 years old.

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MARIA PEPE:

I think it was probably when I wound up getting the invitation to do the tryouts for the Hoboken Young Democrats. I was very excited because I had never played in Little League before, nor had I been given the opportunity by a coach to actually attend the tryouts. And I knew- I was so confident in my ability having played ball with the local fellows in my neighborhood, I knew I was going to make the team.

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And I think watching the Yankees on TV, from probably when I was five years old- My father liked baseball even though he didn't really play much baseball. He was a bowler, he liked bowling. But I think the day I was given the permission to have the tryouts for the Hoboken Young Democrats, that was probably the most exciting moment because I knew I was going to make the team, and I was just so looking forward to having a uniform.

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I think baseball is a big part of youths' activities, and all my friends, every spring, would go up and play ball. And so for me, to have that same opportunity was so important to me as a child.

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

What was your memory of those three games? What was that like being out there?

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MARIA PEPE:

Oh boy. I was so excited. I think just having a uniform- There's something about having a baseball uniform. My parents bought me a new set of cleats, because you need cleats to play on the field. I think I just loved the way I felt in the uniform, like I belonged in that uniform. I had earned it. And I still look

back at some of the pictures. I wished I was able to keep the uniform. But I have to say it was not easy.

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The first game wasn't too bad, meaning I was starting pitcher. But not everyone realized I was a girl because I looked like a boy. I had a baseball uniform, my hair was short. You just saw a couple small curls hanging out of my baseball cap. And it wasn't until really some of the coaches- 'Cause opening day, they have all the teams there, and the Young Democrats happened to have their game on opening day.

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So my peers on my team, my teammates, knew I was a girl, but it took a little while into that first game before some of the other coaches were saying, "Hey wait a minute. Jimmy's got a girl on his team. Is that okay? The rulebook says that girls aren't allowed to play." So by the second game, you can feel a little more intensity that I felt, "Okay, people are starting to question whether I should be playing or not," and even though the rulebook states girls are not allowed, my coach Jimmy was really a good supporter.

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He tried to argue with the coaches and say, "Look, Maria is just as good as the boys. If you want to play under protest, you can do that." So I do remember like, the second and third game, that the teams that we were playing were playing under protest 'cause they felt that Jimmy was putting me on the field which was not in the rule book, if you will. I did feel a little more pressure

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that I needed to perform above and beyond at that point. Like it was a weak spot, in the sense that I felt that not everyone was approving of my playing.

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Even though my parents said it was okay, there were other people now that had an opinion of me. However, I think what it did was it just sort of propelled me. I have a good ability of being very focused, and I think that's what baseball teaches you—or any sport in life—is that when you're playing the game, you're not thinking about anything else. You're in the game, you know who is on first, you know who is on second, you know who is coming up.

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And it's a great lesson in life to learn how to play a sport because it keeps you focused, and I was able to keep my focus even though you could sense that there were some conflict that the coaches were having about my participation.

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

Anyone else? Was there parents?

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MARIA PEPE:

There were parents that- By the third game, there were then politicians that were hearing about the week and my team having a player, and so some of

the politicians in town started to voice opinions to Jimmy. My Coach Jimmy Farina. And then what happened is Williamsport- Now mind you, as a youngster, I didn't even know Williamsport existed. Little League was just like an official play to go and wear a uniform and have the benefit of umpires who call the game shots.

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But Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and the headquarters, I really had no knowledge that they even existed. It was so it was something I had never studied about. No one ever mentioned Williamsport, but apparently there was this corporate headquarters that oversaw all of the Leagues in the towns throughout the United States. And apparently, they must have called some of the politicians and expressed that, "You need to address this. We're not happy that Maria's on the team. And you need to somehow remove her from the League."

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And I think that's when the news started to get wind of the fact that Hoboken had a girl playing. So my coach was feeling the pressure now that Little League sort of- there was this story where Little League issued a letter to the town. I've actually never saw the letter, but what I've learned as an adult is that the letter stated, "If you don't remove Maria, we're going to take that charter away from Hoboken." Which means that they would be playing- the children would be playing without insurance.

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The charter sort of covers the children in case they get injured. And so it was almost sort of like a threat to the town, that you need to take care of this because we're not happy about it and it's not in the rulebook. And so I realized this negativity was occurring around me, and I knew all these children in town. 200 children approximately played on the twelve or thirteen teams of Little League, each team had like twelve or fifteen children.

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And I thought, "Well, If I'm going to threaten the whole League because I happen to enjoy baseball and be a participant, then I need to talk to Jimmy and say, 'Jimmy look, I don't really don't want to get dropped off the team. I don't want to feel all this pressure. And I don't want my friends to not have a League this year.'" And so I decided that it was the best thing if I somehow removed myself.

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And my coach—I remember this was very difficult for me—my coach said to me, "Maria, you can come to the games and keep score." Well, I have to be honest, I did that for one game and I could not just sit there and take score because I wanted to be out there. So after the fourth game, when I was walking home, I realized that there were more news people around, always asking me, "Well, why do you want to play baseball?"

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And I think it was really distracting for me to try to answer that question because the only answer I could give them was that I loved playing ball, but they were sort of questioning whether a girl really should be doing this. And

so, it was a question that I couldn't comprehend because I just felt it inside that I loved playing baseball and I couldn't give them the answer they wanted almost.

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So I decided that after the fourth game, I couldn't go back up to the Little League field, which was a really a big park that had a beautiful field on the waterfront in town. And I just decided it was better for me to not go up there. What happened is my coach, Jimmy Farina, came to see my parents. He knew that I was a little bit upset and he unfortunately had the task of asking to give back my uniform. So my folks knew that this was gonna be the ultimate ending if you will, because remember the story of the cleats, and I was so happy.

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I had the yellow stirrups. Uniforms were gray and yellow. And I did give the uniform back but my coach let me keep my cap. And the cap was so important to me. It was the only memory piece I had of those three games that I decided to wrap it up, and I put it in like, a keepsake box, never to really know that someday, Cooperstown would ask to have my cap on display in their museum. And so it has a wonderful ending for me, because the cap meant so much,

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-and I just kept it in this box, never knowing that someday it would find a resting place not in the box, but in the display for others to understand the story and to learn from the story. And so I'm very honored about that ending

part of the cap. I couldn't have asked for a better gift later in life, than to have that as the resting place.

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

Why do you think that what you were doing, in just trying to play baseball, was so threatening to the press, the community, the coaches, the League? What were they so afraid of?

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MARIA PEPE:

Why the others were so afraid of having a girl participate is always something I will reflect back on as an adult, and I think it was a major cultural, social type of change. That even though women had come a long way in American society, there was always some fight or effort that had accompanied that growth. Whether it be the right to vote, just the right to get certain types of jobs, whether it be in the police department or the fire department-

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There's always been a struggle, and I'm not sure if it's that there's such an old rootedness in American society of women and what their roles should be, versus just accepting everyone as a person and not categorizing someone as, "Well, you're a girl therefore you should do this." That was one of my biggest struggles. I didn't want to be in a category. I didn't want to be locked down,

that these were inherited limitations. I need to feel free that I could do whatever I felt was good for me as a person.

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

So that's when the women's organization found out about you?

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MARIA PEPE:

Right after that fourth game episode, what happened is the news had sort of escalated about Maria being removed from the game, and it caught the headlines of some of the local newspapers in the different counties that I live around. What happened is a women's organization called The National Organization for Women, the Essex County chapter—wasn't the Hudson County chapter—they were very active in Essex County at the time.

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There was a woman by the name of Judith Wise who reached out to my family and called my parents one day, and had read about the story and was fuming at the fact that they let me off the team. And when I say "let me off the team," it was obvious I didn't really have a lot of choice. And she questioned my parents whether they were comfortable with what had happened, and if they felt they would support her wish, which was to file a complaint with the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights.

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Now obviously this was way above my head, because first of all, I honestly, at eleven years old, had never been taught about the NOW, or who they were or what they do. But I could remember when my father hung the phone up that evening, he came over to me and he tried to explain this conversation. He said, "Honey I just want you to understand, that was a women's organization. They feel bad about what happened to you playing ball and they would like to file a complaint with the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights. And I feel that they should go ahead and do that."

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And I was sort of excited because I thought, "Wow. Is there really somebody out there?" Because I had gotten so much negativity, is it possible somebody would actually come to bat for me? I mean, does it mean like I could get back in my uniform? Because remember, the season was still going on. The season had not ended. The season runs for twelve or fifteen games. And so that's when they- within the day or two or week, they filed a formal complaint with the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights.

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New Jersey happens to be one of the first states to have a division on civil rights which represents minorities, women, discriminatory housing, any type of discrimination—which I didn't even know I was being discriminated against. Meaning the word discriminated, because it wasn't something you were taught in school. But I felt it, but I didn't really know how to label it. And in any event, they filed a suit against the Little League claiming I was being discriminated against 'cause I was a girl.

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I didn't realize that this case was gonna go on for awhile, that things could be so complicated, because what happened was once they filed the complaint, then there had to be all these court hearings. And Little League representatives had to be present and present their case, and what happened is the Division on Civil Rights has their own group of attorneys that were representing my request to play baseball on their teams. As a child, I honestly didn't understand all the articles.

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They continued for a two-year period roughly. They had psychologists testifying whether girls are mentally equipped to play ball with boys. They had physical doctors testifying about the strength of girls' bones between the ages 12 compared to boys And I mean, I can remember coming home at times and my mom trying to explain some of the articles in the paper; but at times, they were upsetting because I thought everyone was missing the whole point.

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The point being that I had an ability, I was an individual, I didn't want to be in this classification, "Well, you're a girl so you're not supposed to." And all the sudden, my bones and everything else is involved. This was like, way beyond a child, eleven or twelve. Well, another blessing happened for me, and that is that the case was being heard by a judge by the name of Sylvia Pressler.

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And the main issue of the case that I did understand is that Little League uses public land and public grounds, and under the law, you cannot discriminate

against an individual because it's- you're using public land and public grounds. So as much as Little League fought other issues as to why I shouldn't be allowed to play, the lawyers from the Division on Civil Rights felt very strongly that this is absolutely, unequivocally discrimination, and you need to let the girl play.

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Well, Little League- When the ruling came out, Little League actually appealed the ruling. So I thought like, for the moment, that it had ended. But it didn't end. 'Cause now they had appealed the ruling to New Jersey Appellate Superior Court. Well, thank god after like two years of this activity or court hearings, the appellate court upheld the ruling of the division. And it was... when they actually said, "No. The ruling's upheld. You need to allow girls."

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Now since New Jersey only has jurisdiction in New Jersey, Little League was ordered to allow girls to participate with the boys in baseball. Remember softball didn't exist in Little League when this ruling came out. And so they had to open their doors to the girls. And there was actually, some towns- there's some articles that I have where some coaches in some towns said, "We're not gonna have a League. We don't want the girls. This is not the right decision. You don't understand." And so there was even a little bit of that.

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So as much as you tried to feel encouraged and hopeful that this was a good thing, you still had this cloud of like, opinions and negativity around the

decision. I do remember the day that the decision was made. My father came over to me and said, "Maria, they ruled in your favor." And I think I was relieved that it was over, but I also knew I was too old to play.

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And so it was like, bittersweet, because I really wanted to play. Sorry. I'm good. But I remember my father looking down at me and saying, "Maria, you have to think of this—that you opened the doors for all the girls that will come after you. And you can now go on and play in high school, do whatever you want, but you have to feel good inside that the decision was made in your favor." And I was.

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I couldn't tell you how elated internally. I was the type of kid that internalized a lot. That's why now you see, it's hard for me to talk about it. But I was absolutely elated, and so, so thankful for the people that helped me get to that point.

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

So, this event happened to you at a very impressionable age. Why do you think that even telling it now still elicits such strong emotions for you and everyone who hears it?

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MARIA PEPE:

I think I was strong enough as a child to hold everything in, and it was a lot of pressure just getting the attention or being on the news or reading about your story in the newspaper. Knowing that the question was bigger than, "Should Maria Pepe play baseball?" It was, "Should girls be athletic? Should girls play sports?" So the question was so much bigger than I, that I remained very quiet, although I was very extrovert in terms of playing ball.

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Physically, I was strong. I held a lot of it in. And I have to be honest, when I was probably in college- Because once the ruling came out, I was on to high school, I was playing girls basketball. I was in to college, I was playing women's softball. I sort of went on with my life, so that I could enjoy the things I wanted to enjoy. And the story was always a part of my youth, but I had held in a lot of how I felt about what had happened at different points in time.

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And I realized as I got older, I took out these old scrapbooks that- thank God my mother kept all these articles, 'cause whenever she asked me did I want to read them, I said, "No ma. Just tell me when they make a decision, 'cause I really just want to play. I don't quite understand all this commotion." And so as an adult, in college, I took this scrapbook out one day, started reading these old articles, and realizing that this whole- I couldn't believe that such a commotion occurred, and at times, I was a little angry about it.

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I think it helped to open me up a little bit and show the hurt that I was feeling, 'cause I knew if I showed the hurt as a youngster, maybe it may have pulled the plug on the whole thing. Maybe if my father saw I was so getting emotional about it, that he would've said to them, "Now my daughter's too upset. This is affecting her schoolwork. This is affecting this. I don't want you to file a complaint on our behalf."

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And I think I held a lot of it in, and so, when definitely certain questions are asked, I can easily go back and have- It shows the sensitivity to others, to treat children with respect. To not judge a child, whether they're a girl or a boy, but to encourage whatever it is that's coming forth from them. Because that's really what life's about. It's not about whether you're a girl or a boy, it's what you can contribute to society, being a good citizen... It's all those other things.

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It's not... Life puts too much emphasis on whether you're a girl or a boy. And I think today, it's much better than when I was a child. I feel like the doors have opened, even in career terms. When I was a young girl people would say, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I used to answer, "I want to be a Yankee." But I knew that that dream was beyond my reach. Even though I had won Little League, I knew that being a Yankee was gonna be like a whole 'nother hurdle, maybe a whole 'nother set of court hearings, and I thought,-

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- "I just don't want to go through life having such a battle. It has to be easier. It has to be easier to get in and move around and do the things you like to do." Thank god today, there are so many career options for young girls and young women, 'cause they- When I was young, it was either being a teacher or nurse, something that was quote "feminine," a feminine profession. Today, you can be a police officer, you can be a fireman, and I'm so happy for these women in my local town.

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Just the other day, there were two women firefighters that were promoted to captain and I thought, "How cool is that? If they're happy, it's their life. They're serving the public. Yes, they may get hurt. But that's what they want to do and they have the right to do what they want to do in life. It's their life. They've been given the gift of life and life is short. They should be able to enjoy whatever it is they choose as a career."

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Sometimes I think of careers as- If you could picture a room- When people say, "Oh, what do you want to be when you grow up?" If you could just picture a room that you could go in and see all these different uniforms—I have this thing with uniforms—and you could look at different uniforms and say, "Well, could you picture yourself doing this job?" Like a nurse's uniform or a police officer's uniform. And I think you kind of get a sense, "Well, no, I don't think I fit into that uniform. That's really not me. But that one kind of interests me, the way that uniform is outfitted or looks."

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And I think you gotta find your own uniform in life. Something that you fit into, that you feel is where you should be. It's like your gut. You have to kind of go with your gut. I think that's the best advice I can give to a young person that's trying to figure out, "What do I want to do with my life?" And don't feel locked in forever. Remember to pick yourself up when you fall down, and pick something that you feel good in, that brings out the best in you.

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And whatever that is, that uniform that you pick off the shelf, go with it. Maybe at some point you'll choose to change it, but at least you felt comfortable in it and it brought out the best in you. But you need to have that ability to choose from those different uniforms.

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

So what is it like for you now, when you drive by a field of little girls playing baseball, knowing you had a major hand in that?

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MARIA PEPE:

Well, it's a wonderful feeling. You couldn't express it in words. I couldn't nail it down to a sentence. You feel humble. You know that like, I go walking and there's a softball field where I walk, and the girls don't know me because it's a different town. And I'll stop and I'll watch them play and I'll listen to them having a good time, and I'm so thankful that I was able to help pave the way

or take some of the heat for that outcome that they're actually there, enjoying it.

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I know they're going to be better people in the end for playing ball of some sort. It's hard to put it into an exact sentence. It's a very warming feeling inside.

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NANCY ARMSTRONG:

How does it make you feel when you're identified as the first woman to open the door for girls to play Little League baseball?

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MARIA PEPE:

When I'm identified as like, the first girl to open the doors for baseball for young girls, and how that feels, it's sort of- I'm very humble. I've been able to acknowledge that I've been given like a gift in life because this was something that didn't exist. I didn't know I was going to get it at the end. And so I treasure it like I treasured my cap.

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I reach out to people if they ask to learn about the story. And I try to use it as a teaching model for everyone to learn from the experience that I had, so that we sort of prevent these occurrences that took so much energy and time,

when at the end it turned out to be a wonderful decision, but yet there was so much negativity about it.

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And I don't think anybody would look back today and say that Judge Sylvia Pressler made the wrong decision, but yet at the time, it still wasn't what people thought was the right decision. I'm very humble about the story, and proud. I wish my father was alive at some of these adult-type occasions. Being inducted into the New Jersey Sports Hall of Fame, being invited to Little League, I think he would've had the ultimate, because he supported me at a time when other dads may not have supported their child the same way, and I think he would've been very proud of me.

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One of the things I remember growing up about my dad's family is that my sister was born prior to me, so in the traditional Italian families, you need a boy to carry the name on. And I always felt like I was maybe a slight disappointment, not to my father and my mother, but to some of the family, the traditional family members, that were so rooted in Italian. 'Cause I can remember sometimes hearing, "Oh, Chief, you were supposed to have a boy." They used to call my father Chief.

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My mother will tell me stories too. So I was the second girl. And what's really cool about my story is that those roots thought I could never carry on a name on, and yet what I did really does leave a name and it leaves an impression and so I'm very, very proud of that. That I was able to attach my name to

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some event that helped other people in life enjoy life better and just make the world a nicer place.

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