Professor Nadine Strossen identifies her family’s struggles with discrimination and injustice as the fuel behind her passion for justice and civil liberties. Her father was a Holocaust survivor who was imprisoned in the Buchenwald forced labor camp for his part-Jewish background and anti-Hitler activities. Her maternal grandfather was a conscientious objector during World War I who was sentenced to stand against a Hudson County, New Jersey courthouse to allow passers-by to spit on him. “Once I realized that in law school I could acquire the professional skills to advocate for values that I had always believed in, it just seemed the right thing to do,” Strossen has said. “A legal career has fulfilled my highest hopes as an excellent avenue for promoting the values I have always cared about deeply.” Her pursuit of justice ultimately led to her election as the national president of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), where she was the youngest person and the first woman to head the nation’s oldest and largest civil liberties organization.

Strossen received her undergraduate degree from Harvard College in 1972 and graduated magna cum laude from Harvard Law School in 1975, where she was an editor of the Harvard Law Review. While she undertook a judicial clerkship with the Minnesota Supreme Court and then pursued an eight-year career in private practice—first in Minnesota and later in New York City—before becoming a law professor, Strossen’s work with the ACLU has remained a constant. All of her ACLU work, even as national president, was as a volunteer; the ACLU has a strong lay leadership structure, in addition to its paid staff. Therefore, Strossen always has had two parallel legal careers: one as practitioner/professor and one as an ACLU volunteer lawyer and leader. Immediately after graduating from law school, Strossen began handling ACLU cases, and she soon after joined the board of directors of the ACLU’s Minnesota affiliate.

In 1984 Strossen began her academic career at the New York University School of Law, where she was supervising attorney of the Civil Rights Clinic. At the ACLU, she was elected successively to its national board of directors, executive committee, and as a general counsel. She was also very active with Human Rights Watch, serving on its board of directors and executive committee and undertaking many international missions on its behalf.

In 1988, she became a professor of law at New York Law School, where she has taught constitutional law and international human rights. She especially enjoys working closely with students, having mentored many student research assistants who over the years have become outstanding public interest lawyers and also good friends. Although she teaches, speaks, and writes on a wide range of constitutional law and civil liberties issues, Strossen is best known for her First Amendment work, including her opposition to censoring such controversial expression as hate speech, pornography, media violence, commercial speech, and campaign expenditures.

A prolific writer, Strossen’s 1995 book, Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women’s Rights, was named by the New York Times as a “notable book” of the year. Contrary to other feminist scholars who call for censoring pornography as a violation of women’s rights, Strossen maintains that such censorship undermines women’s rights and safety, in addition to violating freedom of speech.

The ACLU elected Strossen as its president in 1991, a post she held until 2008. During this time, the ACLU nearly doubled its membership. She led the organization through numerous landmark Supreme Court victories on issues including reproductive freedom (Planned Parenthood v. Casey), women’s rights (United States v. Virginia), internet censorship (Reno v. ACLU), and LGBT rights (Lawrence v. Texas). She was a prominent spokesperson for the ACLU and civil liberties, speaking regularly on the campus lecture circuit—including frequently debating prominent conservatives, such as Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia—and doing regular media interviews, appearing on every major national TV news program. When Strossen stepped down as ACLU President, three ideologically diverse Supreme Court Justices participated in her farewell tribute luncheon, consistent with the ACLU’s neutral defense of civil liberties: Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Antonin Scalia, and David Souter.

Strossen has served on advisory boards of many human rights organizations, including the Electronic Privacy Information Center, Feminists for Free Expression, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), and the National Coalition Against Censorship.

A staunch champion of human rights, Strossen’s consistent commitment to women’s rights and opposition to censorship, regardless of the target, exemplifies the unyielding determination of a Margaret Brent Awardee.