

# Cityside/Mary-Lou Weisman

## 'EMPRESS OF WEST 67th STREET'

### Tough Town, Tough Lady

AT 7 A.M., WHILE MANY OF HER CONTEMPORARIES are crawling into their panty hose or lacing up their Nikes, Arlene Simon is on her way to the flower market to buy exotic blooms for the lobby of her West 67th Street co-op.

At 8:15, when a few of us are still hitting the snooze buttons on our alarm clocks, the 47-year-old Simon is on the phone to the Parks Department, asking if the trees for the sidewalk on 67th Street have arrived.

By nine, when female executives all over New York are unsnapping their attaché cases, Simon is trotting to a rendezvous in a nearby vacant lot where builder-developer Benny Caiola is putting up a building.

Until you get up close enough to see the tiny lines around her eyes and the occasional gray strand in her close-cropped brown hair, Arlene Simon (who used to be a successful designer of children's clothes) looks like a lanky teenager, loping down 67th Street in a blouse, sweater, Levi's, and sneakers, on her way to Walden or the Ethical Culture School. "Hello. Good morning. Hello. Good morning." Arlene Simon smiles, nods, greeting each doorman as she passes beneath the green awnings of Central Park West.

Once she reaches the construction site, Simon and Benny Caiola begin sorting through brick samples for the building's rear wall. She does not leave until she has convinced Caiola to use a lighter-colored brick than the one he wanted. Benny Caiola doesn't have to listen to Arlene Simon. She's nobody, really. So why has he just let her cost him eight grand?

Because Arlene Simon is one of a relatively new breed of self-appointed, self-starting, self-made—and increasingly powerful—West Side women who are usually identified in the papers as neighborhood activists. They have become forces to be reckoned with by just about anyone who wants to get something done in their part of town. Each of them has her own sphere of influence. Simon's is 67th and 68th Streets between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue.

Arlene Simon, wife of labor lawyer Bruce Simon, mother of three, has some of the play-dumb humor of Gracie Allen, but the stamina of Alberto Salazar. She has a strong sense of territorial imperative, and a bite that's worse than her



Force to reckon with: Simon patrolling West 67th Street.

bark. If she can't convince a developer that what he plans to build (and may, in fact, be entitled to build under the law) is not in keeping with the needs or character of the neighborhood, Simon has learned a lot of ways to make that developer's life miserable. She can conjure up a few busloads of protesters, or launch a letter-writing campaign. If the developer's intransigence persists, Simon really gets tough.

As Benny Caiola well knows. In 1982, when Simon learned that the Jewish Association for Services for the Aged was planning to sell a lot zoned for a nineteen-story building she felt would overpower the brownstones of West 68th Street, she succeeded in threatening the organization with the prospect of a city environmental-quality review and down-zoning. JASA agreed to negotiate. As a direct result of Simon's efforts, Benny Caiola's new building will rise not nineteen, but eleven stories.

Privately, the people Arlene Simon deals with will call her anything from the "empress of West 67th Street" to an "unguided missile" to a "den mother" to worse. On the record, they're more diplomatic. "She's very tough in asserting her position," says City Councilwoman Ruth Messinger. "Sometimes, on the West Side, that means rubbing people the wrong way. But in Arlene's case, all her moves have been thoughtful and effective."

Ethel Sheffer, the former head of Community Board 7, which includes Si-

mon's neighborhood, agrees. "Arlene Simon has been called abrasive by some," she says, "but that's less important than the fact that she's a dedicated, capable woman. She is a highly intelligent and well-informed spokeswoman for her community's interests."

Simon says simply, "I'm assertive until I'm turned down. Then I get aggressive. I can't stand it when people say you can't fight City Hall. Of course you can."

Even for the Upper West Side, Simon's turf is unusual. Some of the Tudor-style, turn-of-the-century buildings on 67th Street were among the city's first cooperative studio apartments—not today's efficiencies, but genuine studios with splendidly high ceilings and huge windows. They were originally built to house artists, who ate in the communal dining room of what is now the Café des Artistes. When Arlene Simon tours her neighborhood, she walks in the footsteps of such former residents as Rudolph Valentino, Noël Coward, Fannie Hurst, Al Jolson, and Norman Rockwell. They would still recognize much of it. But they would be taken aback by the new buildings on 67th Street owned by the American Broadcasting Company.

Arlene Simon cut her first activist teeth gnawing on ABC. In 1971, just two years after she and her family moved to 27 West 67th Street, Simon was seized by an obsession to plant trees on the sidewalks. Posing as the chairman of