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Pioneer woman marathoner Kathrine Switzer stands in her New York office May 22, 1980. In 1967, Switzer became the first woman to run with an official bib number in the Boston Marathon. A new film that captures much of the Boston Marathon's colorful history premieres Saturday in conjunction with the 121st running of the race on Monday.

Gibb, Switzer battled Marathon prejudice

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BOSTON — One is a neuroscientist-turned-sculptor, the other an activist and organizer. Taking different paths to the same goal, Bobbi Gibb and Kathrine Switzer outran Boston Marathon tradition and trampled the notion that women were too frail for a 26.2-mile race.

"When you're trying to overcome a prejudice and do something you're not allowed to do, how do you do it?" Gibb said this week as she prepared to serve as grand marshal for the 121st edition of the race, which Switzer will run again on the 50th anniversary of her landmark entry.

"I was hacking through the jungle. There was no path at all," said Gibb, who actually hid in the bushes before becoming the first woman to run Boston, a year before Switzer strutted up to the starting line as the first official female entrant. "But I think we need all kinds of people. She's an extrovert, I'm an introvert. Everybody has a gift to give."

The Boston Marathon traces its origin to an ancient Greek battle and has a rich history of its own, filled with war heroes and Medford milkmen who persevered through oppressive heat, blinding rain and the occasional fox terrier that strayed onto the course.

But the story of the race's distaff division didn't begin until 1966, when it was still a fringe footrace of amateurs running only for an olive wreath and a bowl of beef stew.

Told she was too pretty for medical school — "the boys in the lab," and all that — Gibb trained for the race in solitude while on a cross-country road trip in her Volkswagen Microbus, then persuaded her mother to drive her to the starting line by saying: "This is going to help set women free." Jumping out of the forsythia bushes after the gun, she joined a field of 415 men and began what has only recently been recognized as the "unofficial era of women's participation."

A year later, Switzer told her coach at Syracuse, Arnie Briggs, about Gibb and said she also wanted to run Boston.

His response: "No dame ever ran no marathon."

But Briggs struck a deal with her: If Switzer could complete the distance on a training run, he would bring her himself. They ran 26.2 miles together three weeks before the race, and Switzer suggested they go five more — just to be sure.

He passed out.

"And when he came to, he was so impressed," she said. "He was

like an evangelist and helped me sign up."

The two pored through the race's entry rules — Briggs insisted that Switzer, "a card-carrying member of the (Amateur Athletic Union)," could not be a bandit and would have to register — and found nothing about gender. Switzer, an aspiring journalist who thought her first name didn't sound writerly enough, signed up using her first initial, K.

"I generally am pretty law-abiding. I don't speed in my car," Switzer said. "But am I bold? I'm also bold. And am I the type of person who asks for permission or begs for forgiveness? I ask for forgiveness."

Although Gibb was also in the race for the second year in a row, it was Switzer in official Bib No. 261 that so offended race director Jock Semple that he ran after her, in his blazer and slacks, and tried to pull her off the course.

"We thought we were following the rules," Switzer said. "And Jock thought we were trying to pull a fast one."

Semple couldn't knock Switzer off the course, but he did change her path: After the pictures of the scuffle were splashed across newspaper front pages, she found herself an unintended — but eager — spokeswoman for her gender.

THE CITIZEN AUBURN, NY APRIL 16, 2017