

Making a Difference in the U.S.A.

WOMEN IN POLITICS



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Cover: Deepa Iyer (center) during a SAALT demonstration in favor of immigration reform (Courtesy South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)) See her story on page 13.



Introduction

The average woman in the United States – just like those in other countries – wakes each morning to a myriad of responsibilities and concerns. These concerns range from the quality of her children’s education to the stability of the family’s source of income to her ability to safely walk the streets near her home.

What most women do not focus on, however, is how political and governmental actions affect “their” issues. Many do not realize that they can do something to improve the quality of their lives – and that of their families and communities – by reaching for political leadership or becoming involved in political and civic activities. If democracies are to function and to better their citizens’ lives, women’s voices need to be heard at the political level and the barriers to their participation have to come down.

This publication offers the stories of women who believed that they could make a difference by par-

ticipating in politics and government, and forged ahead to do so. They are not famous, like U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, and they are not serving at the top, like Presidents Michelle Bachelet of Chile or Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia. But, just like Bachelet, Clinton, and Johnson-Sirleaf, they have overcome obstacles to get where they are. They have acquired experience in running for election, being an effective policy-maker, and in persuading elected officials to support their cause.

We hope that these stories inspire women who read them to become involved in their communities and even at the national level. As Carol Hunstein, presiding justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia and one whose story is featured here, says, “It’s really important for women to serve. ... We have something to offer.”

Women in the United States not only vote in huge numbers, but volunteer to help run elections. Above, precinct chair Judy Wittkop explains the rules during a caucus in Le Mars, Iowa, January 3, 2008. (© AP Images)

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP: A “SEISMIC CHANGE”

By Jane Morse

There’s been a “seismic change” in cultural assumptions about women and leadership, says a top scholar on politics in the United States.

In 1995, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, then dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, published a book called *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*. In it she described the “damned if you do; damned if you don’t” choices that many women faced when they ventured beyond their traditional sphere of home and family.

Jamieson documented cases in which women political figures had difficulty gaining a hearing or respect for their ideas, were tied to “female issues” and were perceived as not capable of winning elections. “The history of Western culture is riddled with evidence of traps for women that have forcefully curtailed their options,” she wrote.

Recent history, however, is a lot different.

“Since I wrote the book, women have increasingly held positions as heads of state” around the world, Jamieson says. More American women are serving as governors, in the Congress, in presidential cabinets, as heads of major philanthropies, and as university professors; and all have demonstrated their competencies as leaders to the public.

“All of those (women) constitute oppor-



tunities for the public to see female leadership,” Jamieson said. “Since I wrote *Beyond the Double Bind*, there have been a great number of changes in the culture – most of them increase the likelihood that a woman will be taken seriously as a presidential candidate.”

She credits the women’s movement of the second half of the 20th century for raising public awareness that there were women with expertise the nation could use who were being barred access to visible positions of authority. Jamieson, now the director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, says the women’s movement had a personal impact on her life as well.

When Jamieson published *Packaging the Presidency*, the first of some 20 books she has written on U.S. politics, she was “invited to be in more media places than I wanted to be; I was taken aback by the attention. ...



“I attribute that to the fact that the mass media were recognizing that women were in the audience and they (the networks) needed to make sure that they had women on television.”

Jamieson acknowledges that “women’s leadership doesn’t necessarily solve all of the problems. And women’s leadership doesn’t necessarily insure that

you address the problems that are unique to women. ... The difference that we attribute to a difference in gender may well be the difference that gender brings in the form of life experiences. ...



countries are struggling to gain freedoms that we take for granted in the United States, the message that I tried to convey in the book *Beyond the Double Bind* is, I think, still a good message: that if

“There are times in which the difference that a woman makes is a difference that occurs because that woman is more likely, perhaps, to have been a mother; perhaps to have cared for elderly parents; perhaps to have experienced discrimination; perhaps to have a combination of experiences in the economic world. ... And those kinds of things do make a difference,” she says.

Jamieson notes that other countries have led in putting women in leadership positions higher than those held by women in the United States. “In some ways, the women of the United States should look to those countries that have been led competently by women as a way of assuring themselves that the United States’ time will come as well,” she says.

But, she adds: “To the extent that women in other

you look across the history of the United States, the progress that women have made has been relatively steady. The model that says women make progress and are then pushed back, doesn’t seem to fit the historical data. ...

“My take on history is that progress (for women) is slower than it should be, but progress tends to be steady and sustained. And one would only hope that in many of the countries where the oppression is backbreaking and mind-boggling that that progress will be faster and more strongly sustained than it has been the past.”

Previous page: professor and author Kathleen Hall Jamieson. (Courtesy University of Pennsylvania.) Above, the 16 women senators of the 110th U.S. Congress: (front row) Claire McCaskill, Dianne Feinstein, Maria Cantwell, Lisa Murkowski, and Olympia Snowe; (back row) Blanche Lincoln, Kay Bailey Hutchison, Barbara Boxer, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Mary Landrieu, Debbie Stabenow, Susan Collins, Barbara Mikulski, Elizabeth Dole, Amy Klobuchar, and Patty Murray. (Courtesy U.S. Senate)

Politician by Choice: Three Who Faced the Voters

By Jane Morse

Editor's Note: It takes courage and hard work to break into U.S. politics and seek elected office. This section looks at three very different women who risked the odds and won. They are serving their first terms in the General Assembly of the state of Maryland.

You Try to Be Part of Change

It was a rocky road to the Maryland State House, but Joseline Peña-Melnyk loves challenges.

She was just eight years old in 1974 when she left the Dominican Republic and came to the United States. Joseline, her younger sister, and her mother couldn't speak much English, and her father had abandoned them. Her mother struggled to support the little family. Joseline's sister succumbed to the lure of the streets, becoming a teenage mother, and the father of the first two of her four children was killed in drug-related violence.

But the tribulations only served to inspire Joseline to work harder. She became the first member of her family to earn a college degree, and went on to finish law school. She later moved to the Washington, D.C., area, where she married Markian Melnyk, her law school sweetheart.

Peña-Melnyk had a full life as a wife, mother of three young



children, and as community activist. But she wanted greater opportunities to make a real difference in society. In 2003, she jumped into politics and was elected to the city council of College Park, where she lives.

Into her second term on the city council, she had established relations with politicians at the state level and realized she was already doing a lot of the work they do. So when the incumbent state delegate for Peña-Melnyk's district retired, Peña-Melnyk decided to run for that seat in the Maryland General Assembly. The assembly meets each year for 90 days to act on more than 2,300 bills, including the state's annual budget. The Maryland General Assembly has 47 senators and 141 delegates elected from 47 districts.

Peña-Melnyk was hoping that the senator and the two other incumbent delegates for her district would put her on their slate. Her qualifications were sterling: In addition to being an attorney and an experienced city council member, she spoke Spanish in a district that has a growing number of Hispanic immigrants. She had close ties with the community, having served on the board of directors for Casa de Maryland, a nonprofit social services organization.

"Instead they put on (the slate) some young kid who worked at one time for the president of



the Maryland Senate, and he was a well-connected Caucasian,” Peña-Melnyk recalls. “So I had to run on my own.”

That, she quickly discovered, was an expensive endeavor. “I had to put in close to \$30,000 of my own money, and I’m not wealthy,” she says. “I spent over \$7,000 just on signs.” Friends, family, and other supporters rallied to come up with another \$40,000.

“It was a challenge because no one would write a check for me from the (Democratic) party or other elected officials because they didn’t think I was going to win,” Peña-Melnyk says. “It is very tough when you are not part of the establishment, not part of the ‘good old boy’ network.”

But “grassroots” efforts can accomplish great things. Peña-Melnyk knocked on the doors of more than 10,000 homes in her district. Senior citizen volunteers made phone calls; a printer helped out by mailing solicitations; a group of six core supporters gathered at her home every Sunday to plan her campaign.

“My three kids – my twins who are girls, seven years old, and my boy, who is eight – at 6 A.M. we were at street corners, sign waving,” Peña-Melnyk recalls. “This was a family affair; they believed in me. ... My husband believed in me.”



And, finally, some important local papers recognized her efforts and endorsed her.

Peña-Melnyk won the election and began serving her four-year term in January 2007. She has been working to get an anti-cervical cancer vaccine into the schools, make health insurance accessible to the approximately 800,000 people in Maryland who currently don’t have any, and find funding for boys and girls clubs in her district, which encompasses some 110,000 people. “I think in my first session I did well for someone who is a freshman,” she says.

What advice does Peña-Melnyk have for women around the world who may not enjoy some of the freedoms of their American sisters? “I say give them hell.

Go try to make a difference. ... It’s worth it,” she adds. Women in politics set important examples to both girls and boys, she says.

“I think a lot of people don’t take their civic duties seriously,” says Peña-Melnyk, who became a U.S. citizen in 1983. “It is so important to stay informed, to vote to be a part of the process, to have a voice. You don’t just complain; you try to be part of change.”

Previous page: above, Joseline Peña-Melnyk. (Courtesy Joseline Peña-Melnyk.) Below, flags of Dominican Republic and Maryland. This page: Joseline Peña-Melnyk with her family by their home in College Park, Maryland. (Courtesy Joseline Peña-Melnyk)

Winning With Hard Work, Supportive Friends

Hard work and some very supportive friends helped Gerron Levi realize her life-long dream of holding public office.

In January 2007, Levi beat two incumbents and another non-incumbent for a seat as a delegate in the Maryland General Assembly, representing her district in Prince George's County.

"I had always had the desire to run for public office," Levi says. "I didn't know exactly how I would enter into that. I didn't have a great number of contacts in the (Democratic) party establishment in Prince George's County – in fact, I had none."

But her friends urged her to reach for her dream, and in December 2005, she held her first community meeting to establish herself as a contender for the delegate seat.

"The primary obstacle," Levi says, "was simply 'name recognition.' For any candidate entering into office, the primary obstacle is getting known and getting your message out to enough people."

To do that, of course, takes money.

"Money is central to being able to mail things to people, to host events, to get to know people," Levi stresses. Initially, she raised money from family, friends, and professional colleagues – Levi is an



attorney and serves as assistant director of the Legislative Department at the AFL-CIO, a federation of over 50 national and international labor organizations.



By January 2006, Levi had \$38,000 and eventually was able to raise a little over \$70,000 for her entire race.

At the end of March 2006, Levi had mailed literature about herself and her political goals to over 30,000 voters. In the course of her campaign, most voters got at least five pieces of mail from Levi. She walked through neighborhoods, knocked on doors, and personally introduced herself to over 8,000 voters at their homes. She went to countless community events and held her own fundraisers. "That's how I was able to gain enough name recognition and then go on and win the race," Levi says. "I basically outworked the incumbents."

Levi credits her success as a political newcomer to two special aunts who gave her emotional support and a lot of great friends.

"When I got ready to run for office, I was surprised by some of the things my friends did," Levi says. "I had so many friends who gave me enormous money, opened their homes, and just 'went over and above (the call of duty)' for me. And so I feel that I owe them a great debt – that is part of the reason

I really try to be as best a public official that I can be and to remain true to my convictions."

And those convictions include improving the troubled school system in Prince George's County – closing the "achievement gap" between students of color and their Caucasian counterparts – and reducing crime. Levi is proud of the work she did on passing a bill to prevent truancy, which she considers to be a "feeder crime" – a "small crime" that potentially leads to more serious crimes. And she has been tireless in her work to get parents and communities to become more involved in working to improve the performance of neighborhood schools.

A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and Howard University's School of Law, Levi got her first taste of politics while serving as legislative assistant for U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (Democrat of California) on judiciary issues. Levi helped Feinstein draft campaign finance legislation and pass a ban on assault weapons.

"I really have a high regard for her (Feinstein), so as a professional politician, I would say I probably emulate her," Levi says.

"I think it is very important for women to be involved in politics," Levi says. "And it's important for them to join together in organizations with like-minded women who can support them in that effort.

"It can be very difficult, when you are one of a very few, so you really need a support base." Levi could have a long political career ahead of her. Young, Levi will only admit to being "under 40."

"I don't feel that I've accomplished enough at this point. I'm always sensitive about my age because of that," she explains. But she said that after completing her first year in the House of Delegates, she might consider running again after completing her four-year term.

"This is a lot of work!" she acknowledges.

Success Is the Best Revenge

Barbara Robinson has had more than her share of bad fortune: An abusive stepfather, an alcoholic mother, grinding poverty, sexual molestation and rape, homelessness, and hateful racial discrimination.



In her youth, she recalls, people told her she would never amount to anything. But she defied the odds and succeeded in government, business, and – most recently – in politics.

"I had so much to prove – that I was as good as the next person," Robinson said. "Success is the best revenge you can get on anybody."

Previous page: top, Gerron Levi. (Courtesy Gerron Levi) Below, Gerron Levi, with Joseline Peña-Melnyk on her left, cheers passage of a bill to help homeowners. (Courtesy of the Baltimore Sun Company, Inc., All Rights Reserved.) This page, Barbara A. Robinson. (Courtesy Barbara A. Robinson)

That success, however, did not come easily. Despite a hellish childhood in segregated Georgia, she managed to complete high school with honors. A grant allowed her to escape her dysfunctional home and go to college in Baltimore, Maryland. But she dropped out after the first semester, pregnant with the first of five children she would have with the man who would be her husband for 46 years. Nonetheless, she was determined to get an education.

It took her 18 years to get her Bachelor's degree. She would work for tuition money, attend school until the money ran out, and return to work to earn more tuition money. Her husband, who had never completed high school, felt threatened by her ambitions.

"Once he kicked down the door to the bedroom so he could tear up my schoolbooks," Robinson recalls. Finally she told him: "I'm going to graduate with or without you. ... So whatever you do to make me drop out of college, it's not going to work." He relented and eventually became proud of her accomplishments.

But living in low-income public housing did not provide much in the way of a social support system. The "street people" who were her immediate associates scorned her for her efforts to improve herself. And she found she had little in common with her fellow students, who had come from better circumstances.

"I was by myself," Robinson says. "I had to create a place for myself. And I did."

Robinson went on to get her Master's degree in criminal justice administration. She became the

first woman and the first African American in the history of the Maryland court system to hold positions as chief administrator of the Traffic Division and deputy administrator of the District Court and the Supreme Bench, which later became known as the Circuit Court.

In 1985, she founded her own company – Strategies, Tactics, and Results Associates, Incorporated. Known as STAR, the company is now widely recognized for its work in human resources development and training. Five years later she founded SelfPride, Incorporated, a nonprofit organization that provides community-based residential facilities and 24-hour care to people with developmental disabilities, as well as employment opportunities for people who were social welfare recipients.

Despite all her accomplishments, Robinson remained dissatisfied with what she saw as systemic racism that hindered minority entrepreneurs. So she decided to change things "from the inside" by running for a seat in the House of Delegates in the Maryland General Assembly.

Robinson competed against 19 people running for the three open seats representing her district. "They were younger than me and had much more experience in politics," she says of the other candidates. In one of her first public appearances with the challengers, she notes: "I started getting scared, my voice shaking." But she told herself: "The old Barbara Robinson the fighter is going up there. ... I'm in it to win it."

At an age when most women settle down to play with their grandchildren, Robinson enlisted her five grandchildren





and their parents to work in her campaign. "I got my friends to help me," she says. "I had 30 volunteers that worked like 300." She funded her campaign with her own money. She knocked on doors in rough neighborhoods other candidates declined to visit.

And she won.

"Nobody endorsed me," Robinson, a Democrat representing District 40, Baltimore City, says. "I don't owe any allegiance to any special interest groups. ... I represent the voters. And that's a great, great feeling." Completing her first year of a four-year term, Robinson says: "My primary goals are to see that small businesses get their fair share

of the market. To see that women-owned businesses get their fair share of the market. To see that those (minorities) who are in business not only get their fair share of the market, but have the same advantages that non-minorities have to expand."

A member of what she describes as the "over-60 wisdom group," Robinson acknowledges with pride: "I am 69-years-old, and I ain't finished yet."

Previous page: logo for Self Pride, inc, an NGO founded by Barbara Robinson. This page, some of the 61 women legislators in the Maryland state assembly pose for the camera at the 2007 women's caucus. (Mark Odell)

Learning About Leadership on the Job

By Michelle Austein

As mayor of a small city, Candace Watkins has faced some big challenges.

During her time as mayor of Covington, a southeast Louisiana city of about 9,600 people 40 miles from New Orleans, the city weathered hurricane Katrina in August 2005 and saw its city hall set on fire in September 2006.

These events, while difficult, provided new opportunities for both Watkins and her city.

Covington was hit by Katrina's winds, which spread half a million cubic yards of debris through the city. Many houses were severely damaged, including the mayor's. Watkins and her family spent 13 months living in a dormitory while their home was repaired.

Rebuilding and cleaning up from the storm damage was "an opportunity to step up and show people what [the city] could do," Watkins says. "It was a group effort; I was just fortunate enough to be in the position of the top person in that group."

Katrina helped Watkins realize how well she can handle a crisis, she said. "People will say they really saw a change in me at that point. ... I became a much stronger leader in that environment."



"If you're in leadership ... these are not the things you want to happen," Watkins says. "But what an opportunity to show people what you can do. It really gave me the opportunity to rise to the occasion and show what leadership skills I had."

The city hall fire, which made several government and police department offices unusable, became an opportunity for Covington as well. It provided motivation to find a new home for the offices, which had been in a building in need of renovation. Now the city is considering Watkins' proposal to buy a beverage distributor property and turn that into the city government's center.

Watkins has faced challenges from the beginning of her political career. Elected in 2003, she became the city's first female and first Republican leader.

During a recession in the 1980s, both Watkins and her husband – with three children to support – lost their jobs.

Having to start over, she tried many different jobs over the years and ended up taking a position as the city's downtown development director. It was Watkins' first exposure to government operations.

"I love public service," Watkins says. "Every business I was ever involved in had some level of customer service and that's what I really enjoy."

After serving as downtown development director for four years, "I really wanted to go forward, and the only full-time job that would afford me the ability to graduate to the next level was running for mayor. And so I did."

But she almost did not.

In order to run for office, Watkins had to leave her job with the city. She accepted an offer with a local bank, on the condition that she would be able to campaign while working there. But after she started the job, Watkins was told that she could not accept campaign contributions.

Without campaign contributions, Watkins could not afford to run.

"Feeling totally deflated," Watkins says she told her husband she would not be running. He instead encouraged Watkins to quit her job, despite her doubts about whether the family could afford her being out of work.

Watkins' husband told her, "We are in this as a group." Watkins says her family was very supportive while she was unemployed for a year during the campaign.



Watkins' campaign material featured a pamphlet with a picture of her walking with an umbrella that said "Walking for mayor: Rain or shine." It was not just a slogan – Watkins walked door

to door talking to residents. Watkins estimates that she knocked on about 2,500 of Covington's 3,500 doors. "And it rained a lot that year," she remembers.

"We made the campaign about the people," she says. "Not so much about me. ... we made it about the people and what they wanted."

Watkins won by one of the largest margins in about 60 years. She defeated four men for the job, including the son of a former mayor who had served for 24 years.

Watkins was re-elected in 2007. But because of term limits, she cannot run again for mayor and does not intend to run for another office. "There aren't a lot of other jobs that I want," Watkins says. "I love this job because I'm a caretaker. And I'm a caretaker of a place that I really love."

Watkins wants to continue to be active in her community. She notes that community involvement and volunteering is "like a drug ... you get this great rush out of it."

Previous page: top, Candace Watkins. (Sophisticated Woman Magazine) Bottom, damage caused by Hurricane Katrina to Watkins' home. (Courtesy Candace Watkins) This page: in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, some Covington citizens camp outside to wait for essential social services. (Paul J. Richards/AFP/Getty Images)

Women Judges: Pioneers at the Bench

By Michelle Austein

Women today commonly serve on the benches of the highest courts in the United States. Many of these women judges have overcome great obstacles – from discrimination to scant financial resources for their studies – before they broke new ground by achieving their positions.

Leah Ward Sears, chief justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia, has been a “first” many times throughout her career as a lawyer and a judge: the first woman and youngest person appointed to the Supreme Court of the state of Georgia in 1992 and the first female to win a statewide contested election. After her election in 2004, she was sworn in as the first African-American woman to serve as the state’s chief justice.

“Being the first was always a little difficult,” she says. The American judicial system nowadays is “very different than when I joined the court and they were all white men,” Sears says. “I had to fight to be accepted. I didn’t do it by having a chip on my shoulder, I just worked hard.”

Born in Germany when her father was an army officer, Sears was inspired to attend law school after she moved to the United States in 1955 and saw the courts issuing in sweeping civil rights changes in response to the African-American struggle for equal rights.

“I never thought [being a judge] was a possibility for me,” says Carol Hunstein, presiding justice of the Supreme



Court of Georgia.

“Each step along the way has been a happy surprise.” She had problems to overcome all along, however.

Hunstein contracted polio at age two and then spent much of her childhood battling bone cancer. The cancer returned when she was 22 and a single mother. Doctors amputated her leg and told her she had about a year to live.

Despite these hardships and a constant struggle to make ends meet, Hunstein earned a scholarship to attend college and paid for law school with Social Security benefits she received after her former husband’s death.

As a female lawyer, Hunstein felt some judges did not treat her fairly. One in particular commonly addressed her as “little lady” in court, which she viewed as unfair to both her and her clients. Thinking “I can be a better judge than he can be,” she ran her first judicial election in 1984.



Patricia Timmons-Goodson, associate justice of the Supreme Court of North Carolina, was also often a “first,” whether as the first person in her family to attend law school or the first African-American woman to serve on North Carolina’s highest court.

Timmons-Goodson chose a career in law because “when individuals had problems ... they found their way to a lawyer seeking advice. That excited

me then and it excites me even today.”

In the United States, citizens elect their judges in at least 35 states. Each state has its own set of guidelines for these elections. In some states judges belong to a political party, in others they do not. Hunstein, Sears, and Timmons-Goodson learned from the challenges of mounting their campaigns for election.

“Campaigning is a very humbling experience, in which each citizen has a vote,” Timmons-Goodson says. Running a state-wide campaign takes a tremendous amount of effort, time, and travel, she points out.

Judges are expected to be fair and impartial, which can make running a judicial-election campaign uniquely difficult. “Our masters are the law. When we run, we don’t run as politicians,” Sears says. “I’m very careful when I run for office that I not say ‘Vote for me and I will do this.’”

The women described their experiences on the bench as both difficult and rewarding, and as an important community service.

“Judges make very difficult decisions that have an incredible impact on people’s finances, their property, on their future, on their families, on their



children,” Hunstein says. “These are important decisions to the people who are in front of you.”

Serving as one in a group of judges on a supreme court means that one needs good interpersonal skills, Timmons-Goodson says. All the justices on her court are involved in every decision.

“You need to be able to get along with others, you need to know how to listen, you need to know how to communicate. You need to know how to compromise and when to compromise.”

When a group makes a decision, it is critical to have a diversity of ideas represented, Timmons-Goodson points out. “Women often offer a per-

spective that is different than men.”

“It’s really important for women to serve ... so that we’ll be viewed as equals,” Hunstein says.

“We have

something to offer. That’s what I’ve done and that’s what a lot of other women in the state of Georgia and across the United States have done.”



Previous page: top, Leah Ward Sears. (Courtesy Georgia Trend) Bottom, Carol Hunstein. (Courtesy Stetson University College of Law) This page: top, Patricia Timmons-Goodson. (Courtesy Patricia Timmons-Goodson) Below, the three justices and their families, left to right: Leah Ward Sears, Patricia Timmons-Goodson, Carol Hunstein. (Courtesy Ward Sears, Timmons-Goodson, Hunstein.)

An Activist's Vocation: Social Justice, Equality

By Lea M. Terhune



When Deepa Iyer moved from India to Kentucky she was 12 years old, an awkward age for a young girl to make such a drastic adjustment. Blazing a path from there to being the executive director of the increasingly influential South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT) took a combination of hard work, timely opportunity, and key influences that shaped her perceptions of democracy. Iyer has dedicated her life to making a difference, and being a woman and a member of an ethnic minority has not held her back. She helped push important civil rights legislation through to adoption, testified before the U.S. Congress on immigration issues, and works to educate immigrants on their rights.

"Part of the reason I am active with an organization like SAALT and really believe in the mission of civic and political engagement is due to the adjustment period that I had and some of the experiences that my family and I faced," she says. These were not unusual or traumatic experiences, but she recalls times "when my family felt marginalized and isolated in the community."

This lawyer-activist says people made assumptions about as her family's origins and their ability to speak English based on inaccurate stereotypes. Seeing other immigrants and minorities have similar experiences "shaped my desire to become part

of a movement in the United States that was based on social justice and equality," she says.

That, she says, is "the promise of America, in that there is this amazing diversity in race, national origin, in so many ways, and the promise is that we can all have the same rights and share the same benefits and privileges that come with the Constitution." The opportunity for social justice is great, she says, "but it's also a struggle and it's something that sometimes gets harder with time."

Iyer recalls that it was an immigration clinic at Notre Dame University in Indiana, where she got her law degree, that piqued her interest and provided information about immigrant rights issues and the legal challenges they face. She soon knew she wanted to pursue civil rights work, leaving an Indianapolis law firm to take a job with the Asian American Justice Center, where she learned the importance of governmental, legislative, and grassroots advocacy. For several years she was a trial attorney in the civil rights division at the Department of Justice, which gave her valuable experience in litigation. She left within a year after September 11, 2001, "primarily because it was difficult for me to be in the Department of Justice as a civil rights lawyer when the government was also responsible for implementing initiatives that were so detrimental" to some minority communities, she says.





Subsequently, while legal director for the Washington, D.C., area Asian Pacific American Legal Resource Center, she worked with a coalition that successfully advocated for the passage of a language-access law in the city, one of the few in the country. It mandates multilingual materials and, sometimes, that staff be provided by city agencies.

Since 2004 when she joined SAALT as director, she has spearheaded programs that effectively educate immigrants about their rights and issues important to them. SAALT hosts town meetings and other awareness-raising events, which have intensified ahead of the 2008 presidential elections in which immigration has been a top issue.

In her testimony in Congress in May 2007 before the House subcommittee on immigration reform, Iyer appealed for legal means for immigrant work-

ers to contribute to the U.S. economy and become permanent residents.

Emphasizing that immigrants range from naturalized citizens, to those on special visas, to the undocumented, Iyer says, "I don't think civic engagement and civic participation is just about voting and being a citizen," adding, "You don't have to be a citizen in order to feel connected to this country and in order to feel connected to your community."

Defending civil rights is Deepa Iyer's passion. Early on, she says, "I found what I am passionate about and I feel really lucky about that. I was able to recognize what I was interested in ... and chart a path based on that interest in what moves me and drives me."

Previous page: top, Deepa Iyer. (Courtesy Deepa Iyer) Bottom, SAALT logo. This page: SAALT members pose at a regional conference. (Courtesy SAALT)

Helping Hands Train Women in Politics

By Jane Morse

League of Women Voters: Politics at the Grassroots Level

The mission of the League of Women Voters isn't specifically to train women to be politicians, but it often whets their appetite for politics and its power to improve lives, says Mary Wilson, currently the president of the League of Women Voters of the United States.

"We basically serve as a training ground for women who are interested in things political," Wilson says. Members get involved in a variety of projects – from distributing information on voting to running leadership training workshops for activists from other countries. They get to know their elected officials through these activities, Wilson says, and learn how the public's business is performed.

"They (league members) gain a lot of insight, and they really sharpen their interest in the subject," she says. "Many of them, as a result, say, 'I could do

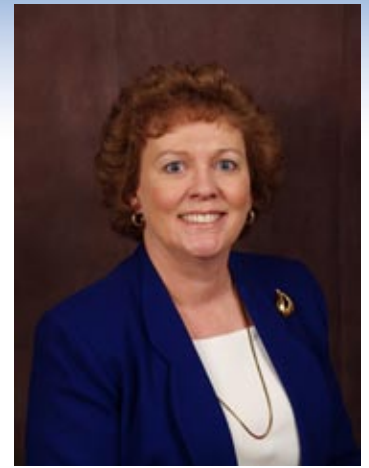


that, too. I could make an impact as an elected official."

The league doesn't keep statistics on how many of its members go on to run for public office, but Wilson notes that Senator Dianne Feinstein of California has acknowledged publicly that she first got interested in politics through the league.

The league was founded in 1920, a direct descendant of the suffragist groups that – after a 70-year battle – won American women the right to vote that same year. Its organizers saw in the league a way to educate women about their newly acquired political rights. As an organization dedicated to encouraging women's political engagement, the league remains a strictly nonpartisan organization. Its basic purpose is "to make democracy work for all citizens" via voter education and to influence policy through advocacy.

The strength of the league, Wilson says, has always been its "grassroots," decentralized structure. There



are some 900 league chapters located across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and even Hong Kong. The League of Women Voters of the United States, led by Wilson, and the League of Women Voters Education Fund (a related group that provides research, publications, and forums on public policy issues) operate at the national level with support from local leagues.

To keep its civic education relevant into the 21st century, the league is making better use of the Internet, Wilson says. For example, its local and state voter guides are being made available on the Internet.

"A year ago," Wilson notes, "right before the November 2006 election, we launched *Vote411.org*, which is a kind of full-service Web site where people from all across the country can find out basic things about where they can go to vote in their home locations.

"We're hoping to get some additional foundation funding to bring it to even more people for the November 2008 presidential election," she says.

At the national level, *Vote411.org* will pose questions to the presidential candidates both during the primary season as well as during the general election, Wilson says. Their answers will be posted for the entire country to see.

Although the league has some paid staff, it relies mostly on volunteers – a resource that is becoming scarcer now that more women have entered the work force and have more opportunities to volunteer in a variety of organizations than ever before.

"But I'm happy to say," Wilson says, "that the League of Women Voters in the last year or so has been holding its own in terms of membership, and we have been undertaking a very special membership recruitment initiative ... and that is the league's role as an important training ground for people who want to participate in the civic lives of their communities and state and the nation."

Recruiting from a broader age, racial, and ethnic demographic, the league is soliciting members among energetic retirees, students, and – yes – even men, a tradition that goes back to its suffragist roots.

Previous page: top, Mary Wilson (Courtesy League of Women Voters); bottom, League of Women Voters representatives writing and printing news releases – on the sidewalk – during the 1920 campaign. (Hutton Archive/Getty Images) This page: League of Women Voters members are ready to assist voters outside a polling station in Pensacola, Florida, 2004. (© AP Images)



"We are striving through our membership recruitment initiative to indeed attract a broader base of members and thereby continue to be as relevant as we have been for the last 87 years," Wilson says.

Getting Women "Ready to Run"

If ever there was a "gender gap," it is in the area of confidence – especially confidence to run for political office.

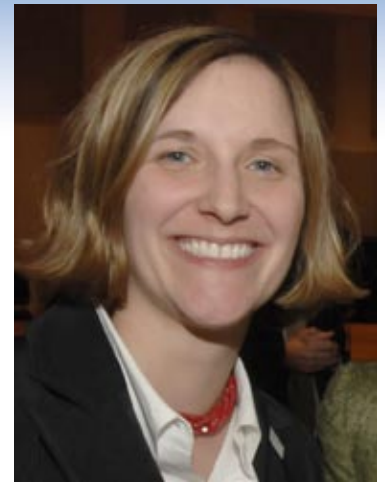
"Women tend to think they need to be prepared," says Jean Sinzdak, project manager for Rutgers University's Program for Women Public Officials. "Men will wake up and say: 'You know, I could run for Congress today.' But a woman will say: 'I want to learn how to run for Congress.'"

To help encourage more women to take the first steps towards a career in politics, the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), which is a national organization based at Rutgers State University of New Jersey, developed a training program called "Ready to Run." Offered once a year, the non-partisan, one-day Saturday program is a crash course on how to position oneself for a political career, how to launch a campaign, how to do interviews, and how to raise campaign funds.

"Ready to Run" was born 10 years ago, when CAWP, which keeps track of how many women hold political office in all the states of the United States, found that New Jersey was consistently ranking in the bottom 10 states. Nowadays, "Ready to Run" seems to have helped: New Jersey is now ranked 15th, according to Sinzdak.

"This year, we had an election

in which every single (New Jersey) state legislative seat was up for election and a record number of women won seats," Sinzdak says. "Over a quarter of the women who actually won seats – there are 35 of them now – were 'Ready to Run' alumni."



She adds that, although most of the approximately 850 women who have completed "Ready to Run" have been from New Jersey, women attend from all around the United States and from every age group. More recently, "Ready to Run" has been targeting the needs of minority women, specifically, Latinas, African Americans, and Asian Americans. Steering committees for the three groups have found that the issues are the same: Women need to be asked to run for office; they're afraid to take the first step on their own. What differs, she believes, is the level of political sophistication.

According to Sinzdak, African-American women already have a strong presence in the political arena. CAWP statistics show that as of October 2007, of the 87 women serving in the 110th U.S. Congress, 12 are African American. Of the 1,734 women state legislators serving nationwide, 231 are African American. African-American women hoping for a political career can take advantage of CAWP's "Run Sister Run," a program newly launched in 2007.

CAWP

Election Watch

Latinas are slowly but surely entering American politics. CAWP reports that of the 87 women serving in the 110th U.S. Con-



gress, seven are Latina. Of the 1,734 women state legislators serving nationwide, 71 are Latina. “For Latinas,” Sinzduk says, “one of the issues is finding common ground across different backgrounds – there’s a big difference between Latinas from South America and Cuba, for example. They’re working on finding a common voice.” “Election Latina,” now completing its fourth year, addresses those needs.

South Asian immigrants, on the other hand, are pouring into New Jersey and have made strides in business and professions, but few have entered politics. Nationwide, there are only two Asian-American women of the 87 women serving in the 110th U.S. Congress. Only 30 of the 1,734 women state legislators serving nationwide are Asian American.

In response to these numbers, CAWP launched last year “Rising Stars: Educating Asian-American Women for Politics,” a program aimed specifically at this group. About 40 Asian-American women came to the program, which featured Asian-American women speakers who had been elected or ap-

pointed to political positions or who had worked on political campaigns.

“The women who were in the audience came up to us afterwards and said, ‘This is so great! I never see Asian women in politics,’” Sinzduk recalls. This reaction points to one of the most important benefits of the minority-specific programs, in Sinzduk’s view: “the opportunity for people to see people who look like them and to find mentors and role models.”

Other Programs

Other institutions also provide training programs for would-be women politicians. The “Go Run” training program, for example, was established in 2005 by the White House Project, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing women in leadership roles.

Previous page: top, Jean Sinzduk, bottom, CAWP logo. This page: Ready to Run participants talk to expert panelists during a recent session. (All, courtesy “Ready to Run,” Center For Women in Politics (CAWP))

Women in Politics: Additional Resources

IIP materials

International Perspectives on Women's Political Participation

http://usinfo.state.gov/dd/eng_democracy_dialogues/womens_rights/women_perspectives_essay.html

Women of Influence: "A Woman's Right to Vote"

<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/womeninfiln/vote.htm>

Women in the United States

http://usinfo.state.gov/scv/history_geography_and_population/population_and_diversity/women_in_the_us.html

Working for Women, Worldwide: Championing Women's Political Empowerment

<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/women/champion.htm>

Working for Women, Worldwide: Training Women Leaders to Make a Difference

<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/women/training.htm>

Recruitment and Training Programs for Women in Politics

Center for American Women and Politics

<http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/TrainingSeries.html>

League of Women Voters

www.lwv.org

South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT)

<http://www.saalt.org/>

The White House Project: Go Run

<http://thewhitehouseproject.org/voterunlead/gorun/index.php>

Online Resources

Online Women in Politics: Statistics

<http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/Statistics.htm>

Women and Social Movements today

<http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/links/today.htm>

International Women's Democracy Center

<http://www.iwdc.org>

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance: Democracy and Gender

<http://www.idea.int/gender/>

Center for American Women in Politics: Web sites of Interest

<http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/Connected.html>

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