

2009 SUMMIT OF
Southern Women Leaders

STENNIS
CENTER

for Public Service Leadership



Southern Women IN PUBLIC SERVICE LEADERSHIP

They came. They saw. They dialogued. On May 4-6, 2008, approximately 140 women political leaders with vastly different experiences and points of view came together for two days of discussions at St. Simons Island, Georgia. This first ever *Summit of Southern Women Leaders* generated incredible creative energy and produced amazing results. From rap songs to elaborate skits, women from across the South expressed their ideas for ways to improve confidence in public service and to encourage more young women to become leaders in government.

A sampling of the conclusions reached through dialogue at the Summit includes:

- ◆ *Encourage more mentoring opportunities with women leaders and younger women*
- ◆ *Create a public/private task force on trust in government*
- ◆ *Create a speakers' bureau for women in public service*
- ◆ *Start a web site as a resource for women and girls who are interested in public service careers*



Participants present a creative skit at the powerful conclusion of the Summit.



Leaders meet in a small group discussion.



Perhaps the creative spirit sparked by the Summit is best exemplified in the newscast below from the fictitious Women's Broadcasting Network. It was part of one group's final presentation at the Summit.

The Stennis Center announced today, May 6, 2019, their intention to take their Parity and Progress Campaign to the next level. Their goal is to achieve the same percentage of women in the U.S. Congress that exists in the population. The Parity and Progress campaign has already achieved parity at the local level, from school boards to state houses...In judicial news the Senate confirmed the sixth woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. America's first female president countered criticisms for nominating only women to the high court by stating that she does not consider gender when she makes appointments. She said that if she could find a qualified man, she would nominate one.

The *Summit of Southern Women Leaders* is an outgrowth of the *Southern Women in Public Service* conference the Stennis Center conducted from 1991 to 2007. It continues in a new way our longtime effort to bring more women into public service leadership and to encourage and enable women leaders to advance at all levels of government.

SUMMIT OF *Southern Women Leaders*

Responding to the request of women to work more closely together, the *Southern Women in Public Service* conference morphed into the *Summit of Southern Women Leaders* in 2008. The Summit differs from the past conference in that women leaders work in small groups to explore key challenges facing women in public service. It replaced the annual conference's skill-building workshops with a more interactive dialogue-based program.

A key part of this groundbreaking collaboration of women leaders is the fact that they are active participants working together to find common ground rather than attendees listening to speeches. The Summit uses dialogue as a tool for participants to learn from each other. The skill of dialogue is based on the work of Daniel Yankelovich in his book, *The Magic of Dialogue*.

Yankelovich writes that dialogue is a highly specialized form of discussion that imposes rigorous discipline on the participants. Dialogue has great potential to help those in the political world. Its benefits include: long-standing stereotypes dissolved, mistrust overcome, mutual understanding achieved, visions shaped and grounded in shared purpose, people previously at odds with one another aligned on objectives and strategies, new common ground discovered, new perspective and insights gained, new levels of creativity stimulated, and bonds of community strengthened.

According to Yankelovich:

“Dialogue rather than advocacy is the superior method for resolving gridlock. We need a large dose of dialogue to highlight our common ground rather than our differences, to help us reserve judgment until we have considered a variety of ways to approach controversial issues, and to motivate us to concede the merits of the other side even when it pains us to do so. We need a special kind of dialogue to bring hidden assumptions to the surface where they can be examined and questioned in the light of a changing world. Dialogue forces participants to reconcile their views with their most basic values, it obliges them to confront their own wishful thinking, and it exposes them to a variety of ways of seeing and framing issues – an indispensable way to escape polarization and gridlock.”



The first *Summit of Southern Women Leaders* took place on May 4-6, 2008, at St. Simons Island, Georgia. Like its predecessor, the Summit included a diverse, bipartisan group of women political leaders from 14 Southern states representing all three branches of government – executive, legislative and judicial – and all three levels of government – local, state and federal.



Former Governor Madeleine Kunin of Vermont signs a book for Juanita Bryant of North Carolina.

Former Vermont Governor Madeleine Kunin set the tone for the Summit with an introductory address based on her book, *Pearls, Politics & Power: How Women Can Win and Lead*. She said, “It is time for new political leadership to emerge from the women of America. We need their voices as grandmothers and mothers, wives and widows, daughters and sisters to be heard in the political debate about the future of our country. Each woman’s experience changes the nature and content of the conversation.”

She continued, “It is time for women to change both the content and style of leadership. Children, families, education, health care, the environment and diplomacy must be brought to the top of the agenda, not relegated to an asterisk. Women do not vote in unison any more than men do, but there are differences, and these differences will change the outcome on many issues that now divide us.”

Using Governor Kunin’s charge that women’s leadership makes a difference, these key women leaders used the process of dialogue in small groups, each led by a trained facilitator. These groups examined two core questions.

- 1. *How can women leaders help restore trust and confidence in public service?***
- 2. *How can more young women be brought into public service leadership?***



*Georgia State Representative
Stacey Abrams facilitates a group.*



*Facilitator Deb Sofield and
Anita Dean of the Stennis Center*



*Participants relax outdoors
after a hard day's work.*

The participants explored these questions through an interactive dialogue-based program designed to produce ideas that can be shared with others and to build relationships among participants. They are usually so busy with their everyday jobs in public service that they do not have time to reflect on these questions, much less explore them with colleagues. In addition, women college students were included in each small group.

Working in small groups and practicing the art of dialogue, these women generated a number of ideas to bolster trust in public service and lift up the next generation of women leaders. The following recommendations are representative of the creative output at the Summit:

- ◆ *Encourage more mentoring opportunities with women leaders and younger women*
- ◆ *Create a public/private task force on trust in government*
- ◆ *Create a social networking web site, such as Facebook, MySpace or YouTube, to link women leaders with students*
- ◆ *Establish a center to promote women for elected appointed office using alumni of the conference*
- ◆ *Create a speakers' bureau for women in public service*
- ◆ *Start a web site as a resource for women and girls who are interested in public service careers*
- ◆ *Create a database of women's organizations that help women in public service*
- ◆ *Establish a scholarship program for women interested in politics and public service*

The participants benefited greatly from exploring these issues that are important to the future quality and character of public service leadership. As the participants learned from each other, they also strengthened their dialogue skills and gained insights into the use of dialogue as a leadership tool. As one of the students noted, “I think the dialogue among the older and younger women was most important. It allowed both groups to grow, learn and listen to each other.”

In addition to brainstorming about ideas and solutions, the Summit provided an avenue for women to build relationships with other women who care about women’s leadership and public service.

Jaimie Hardin, one of the facilitators, said afterwards, “The most important outcome, as always, was the opportunity to interact with an amazing group of women. This year, more than any other year, everyone commented that they had more of an opportunity to meet and learn more about the other participants at the conference. Everyone has inspiring stories and life journeys. I always leave energized with many ideas to bring home.”



Southern Women IN PUBLIC SERVICE CONFERENCE HISTORY

The Stennis Center’s interest in promoting women as political leaders has roots in an observation made by Senator John C. Stennis. During his final year in office in 1988, Senator Stennis often was asked by the media, “After 41 years in the United States Senate, what is the single greatest change you have witnessed in American government?” Without hesitation, he would reply, “The increased involvement of women in political leadership.” He always added, “It’s a good change; it’s good for the country.”

Following his lead, the Stennis Center seized on the idea that one of the best ways to improve the quality and character of government is to increase the number of women in political leadership. Over the years, the Stennis Center has developed a reputation for supporting

the advancement of women in public service leadership. Since establishing the *Southern Women in Public Service* conference in 1991, the Stennis Center has been working in a bipartisan way to bring together women political leaders from across the South.

From 1991 to 2007, the conference aimed to build a stronger America through tapping more extensively into the reservoir of talent, energy, intellect and courage that women bring to council tables where important decisions are made. The conference grew to include women leaders from 14 Southern states. Twelve different states hosted the conference. The focus was on the South because the region as a whole lags behind the rest of the nation with respect to women’s representation in public office.

Former Louisiana Congresswoman Lindy Boggs, a member of Stennis Center’s original Board of Trustees, provided the inspiration for the conference. She said at the outset, “It is not a matter of equality so much as it is a matter of quality. We simply cannot achieve the greatness we seek in our communities, states and nation without tapping more deeply into the tremendous resource of leadership available among women.”

The idea behind the conference was to bring together women from different backgrounds – Democrats and Republicans, rural and urban, young and old – to unite behind the belief that our country will be better off with more women in leadership roles in public service.

It was a unique event because it brought together women from the local, state and federal levels and women from the executive, legislative and judicial branches. Participants routinely included elected and appointed officials, such as statewide elected officials, mayors, judges, state legislators, commissioners, cabinet members, school board members and others. With such an eclectic group, a special synergy was created by rallying around the idea that women’s leadership makes a difference in the public sector.

“ THE TRUTH IS WE NEED MORE *Women in Politics...* WE HAVE A
Sense of Compassion, AND YET WE CAN BE TOUGH AS NAILS. ”

— Sandra Mortham, *Former Florida Secretary of State*



Participants celebrate achievements at Summit's conclusion.

This bipartisan gathering offered unparalleled networking opportunities and cutting edge skill-building workshops. It also developed a reputation for nationally recognized speakers such as Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Dole, Kay Bailey Hutchison, Mary Landrieu, and Janet Reno to name only a few. Nearly every Congresswoman from the South attended, including Marsha Blackburn (R-TN), Kay Granger (R-TX), Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), Sue Myrick (R-NC), and Debbie Wasserman Shultz (D-FL). Big city mayors also participated, such as Shirley Franklin of Atlanta and Pam Iorio of Tampa.

Former Secretary of State Sandra Mortham from Florida summarized the purpose of the conference when she said, “The truth is we need more women in politics. We think differently; we act differently; we work differently. We have a sense of compassion, and yet we can be tough as nails.”

Regarding the difference women make, former Texas Governor Ann Richards said, “The most sympathetic of our men friends, no matter how hard he tries, cannot hear with a woman’s ear or process information through a woman’s experience. The point is that the experience is different, the perspective is different, the knowing is different.”

Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, praised the efforts of the Stennis Center to promote women leaders. She said, “More women are needed in public service leadership not just for fair representation, but also because research shows that women make a difference in both the public policy agenda and the process by which the policy is made.”

Looking Ahead



Summit participants discuss increasing women in political leadership.

The number of women office holders in state legislatures and the U.S. Congress is at an all-time high in the nation and in the South. There can be no doubt that the last two decades will go down in history as a time when women made significant advances in elective office. These gains are reason to celebrate and represent achievements unimaginable a generation ago. In the words of Governor Ann Richards, “A matriarchy has never been our goal. It never was what we were after. We learned that when the scales are weighted in favor of one gender or one race or one privileged background, no one in a democracy is well served.”

Still, the potential for women’s leadership has barely been tapped. No Southern state currently has a female governor. The South also trails the nation in the number of women elected to state legislatures. Eight of the bottom 10 states are from the South. Many leading observers agree that women’s leadership gains have reached a plateau after significant improvement in the 1990s. As Elizabeth Dole stated when she spoke at the conference, “While some progress has been made, there is still much work to do before all the barriers for women are down so that the glass ceiling meets the same fate as the Berlin Wall.”

To borrow a phrase from the USS JOHN C. STENNIS aircraft carrier, we need all hands on deck. To meet the myriad complexities and challenges facing our country – from the financial crisis at home to fighting terrorism abroad – America must draw on the resources, strength and talent of all her leaders. “That is why the Stennis Center will continue to celebrate the achievements of women and will seek to attract more women leaders to public service. Our work has been meaningful and productive, but the job is not finished,” said Rex Buffington, executive director of the Stennis Center for Public Service. When asked when the job would be finished, he replied, “When men tell us that they are underrepresented in the halls of government.”

THE PERCENTAGES OF *Women in State Legislatures* IN THE SOUTH

Source: Center for the American Woman and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University

SOUTHERN STATES	% WOMEN 1990	% WOMEN 2009	NATIONAL RANK 1990	NATIONAL RANK 2009
ALABAMA	5.7	12.9	49	48
ARKANSAS	7.4	23.7	45	27
FLORIDA*	16.3	23.8	25	24
GEORGIA	10.2	19.1	41	37
KENTUCKY	5.8	15.2	47	45
LOUISIANA	2.1	15.3	50	44
MISSISSIPPI	5.8	14.4	48	47
NORTH CAROLINA	14.1	25.9	32	20
OKLAHOMA	8.7	11.4	44	49
SOUTH CAROLINA	8.8	10.0	43	50
TENNESSEE	9.9	18.2	42	39
TEXAS*	10.5	23.8	40	24
VIRGINIA*	10.7	16.4	39	41
WEST VIRGINIA*	19.4	16.4	18	41
U.S. AVERAGE	17.1	24.2		

*States share the same rank if their proportions of women legislators are exactly equal or round off to be equal (FL, TX; VA, WV)



STENNIS CENTER

for Public Service Leadership

STENNIS CENTER FOR
PUBLIC SERVICE LEADERSHIP

Box 9629, Mississippi State, MS 39762-9629

Ph: (662) 325-8409 • Fax: (662) 325-8623

WWW.STENNIS.GOV