

National Women's History Alliance

Select Page



2010 Gazette

The Making of Women's History Month

THE SUMMER OF '79 AND THE CONTINUING "GIFT" OF WOMEN'S HISTORY

By Pam Elam

The quest to know our history as women and the desire to use that knowledge in our organizing efforts for women's equality converged almost 31 years ago at Sarah Lawrence College in a 1979 Summer Institute in Women's History for Leaders of Women's Organizations. As a graduate student in the SLC Women's History Program, I was proud to be a Teaching Assistant at that Institute. In 2004, I was also proud to organize a 25th Anniversary Reunion of the Institute's participants honoring Dr. Gerda Lerner, the Director of the Summer Institute and the Founder of the Sarah Lawrence College Master's Program in Women's History, the nation's first.

From July 14-31, 1979, leaders of major women's organizations from across the nation met at the SLC Summer Institute, which was co-sponsored by the Women's Action Alliance led by Ruth Abram. These leaders became students in an intensive crash course in Women's History challenged with the goal of integrating that history into the work of their organizations and the consciousness of their communities. Out of that Institute came a resolution, offered by Molly MacGregor, the representative from the Sonoma County Commission on Women, calling for the creation of National Women's History Week to honor and celebrate contributions made by women to the history of the United States.

The National Women's History Week resolution that Molly MacGregor brought to all of us at the Summer Institute was a gift. As a Feminist organizer, I recognized the value of that gift as both an organizing tool and a life-changing learning experience. As soon as the Summer Institute was over, I stated working with Molly and the other Summer Institute Participants to bring the National Women's History Week Resolution to life. Since I was still in graduate school, I created a practicum approved by Gerda Lerner that allowed a framework for me to use graduate program time to organize. Joined in the practicum by another graduate student, Peggy Pascoe, Peggy and I lobbied for the introduction of a Congressional Resolution creating National Women's History Week (introduced by Representative Barbara Mikulski on Feb. 27, 1980) and urged President Jimmy Carter to issue a proclamation (Presidential Message of Support sent on Feb. 28, 1980). We contacted state governors and city mayors throughout the country requesting proclamations designating Women's History Week (Governors in 14 States issued proclamations for the week containing March 8, 1980, including my home state of Kentucky and Peggy's home state of Montana). We also organized Women's History Week meetings, programs and press conferences in the New York City area. But this is just one example of the many activities taking place around the country as a result of the National Women's History Week resolution adopted by the participants of the 1979 Summer Institute. In 1980, the newly created National Women's History Alliance began to lead the charge for the Resolution and has continued to do so for nearly thirty years. In many ways, the years since the Summer of '79 and the 1980 birth of the National Women's History Alliance offer a lesson in the power of history.

Anyone who works for social change is very familiar with the concept of "reinventing the wheel." It simply means doing what others have already done because you didn't know they'd done it. Had you known, you might have learned from it and acted differently. That's what learning from history is all about. And for women it has a special meaning, because so much of our history has been hidden from us and has only been brought to light in the last few decades through the valiant work of Feminist historians, scholars and activists.

In a brilliant 1938 essay on the differences between women and men, *THREE GUINEAS*, Virginia Woolf described the history of the continuing fight for women's equality this way: "Almost the same daughters ask almost the same brothers for almost the same privileges. Almost the same gentlemen intone almost the same refusals for almost the same reasons. It seems as if there were no progress in the human race, but only repetition." Repetition, reinventing the wheel and generations of women around the world who live and die as second class citizens – how can we change that? Much as history haunts and taunts us at times like these, it can also provide a light shining the way out of the darkness of injustice and inequality. Learning from a "history" which fully and fairly includes the vast and varied contributions of women and people of color offers a departure point in our search for social change. We re-think the past to re-shape the future.

Through the "gift" of Women's History, we discover an historical treasure chest, overflowing with the stories of women who serve to inspire and energize us. We learn of their strategies and tactics in the battle for equality. We build on their work. We honor their memories. We vow to complete their journeys. We begin to understand the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression. We start to build coalitions across boundaries based upon race, ethnicity and nationality, class, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion or any other kind of "difference" that threatens to divide us. We begin to understand power: who has it, who doesn't and how to change that situation. In the words of the women from the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas, we begin "to move history forward."

For 30 years, National Women's History Week, later Month, has not only inspired us, it has challenged us to keep moving history forward. The knowledge of Women's History is a priceless gift that nourishes our spirits and enriches our lives. Few participants of the 1979 Summer Institute could have predicted the lasting power of National Women's History Week, but many certainly experienced the power Women's History to expand their vision of the world and their place in it. In 2004, at the 25th Anniversary Reunion, almost half of the Institute participants returned to the Sarah Lawrence campus to share how that knowledge of Women's History had changed their lives. As Gerda Lerner put it: "I'm quite overwhelmed by the gift you gave me by your

presence, your testimony, your generous words and, above all, by the activities you have engendered, by the organizational outreach you have created. I have had many honors in the past decades, but nothing has moved me and affected me as this reunion has. The power of Women's History as a force for organizing has never been more real to me than now."

Pam Elam made her first public speech in support of Women's Rights in 1964 at the Kentucky State Speech Festival when she was 13 years old and has been organizing ever since. Her proudest feminist moments include: helping to organize the 1972 campaign to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed in the Kentucky General Assembly; being elected a delegate to the 1977 National Women's Conference; earning her Master's Degree in Women's History from Sarah Lawrence College in 1980; organizing the non-violent civil disobedience demonstrations of the Congressional Union at the White House in support of the Equal Rights Amendment and in 1981 getting arrested for burning an effigy of then President Ronald Reagan; organizing over a hundred hearings on Women's Issues in the New York City Council's Committee on Women from 1980-1989; organizing the first ever Presidential Candidates debate on women's Issues in NYC in 1988; getting the NYC Council to approve legislation in 2004 naming "Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton Corner" near the site where Anthony and Stanton wrote their newspaper THE REVOLUTION; co-organizing the "Freedom on Our Terms Conference" in NYC in 2007 to honor the 30th Anniversary of the National Women's Conference; and creating "Women's Rights, Historic Sites: A Manhattan Map of Milestones" in 2008.

ADDING HERSTORY TO TELL OUR STORY

Maryland Women's History Project and Maryland Women's Heritage Center – A Brief History

I need to know their names
those women I would have walked with...
all those women who could have known me.

Where in the world are their names?

Lucile Clifton, Former Poet Laureate of Maryland

To make visible the rich history of the contributions of women whose names were often missing in traditional textbooks and classrooms in Maryland and nationally, the Maryland Women's History Project was established in 1980 as a collaboration between the Maryland Commission for Women and the Maryland State Department of Education. In March of 1980, with the leadership of the Sonoma County Commission for Women and Molly Murphy MacGregor, founder of the National Women's History Project, National Women's History Week was established through an act of Congress (sponsored by then Maryland Congresswoman Barbara A. Mikulski). At the same time, Maryland Women's History Week was declared by the Maryland Legislature and Governor, under the leadership of the Maryland Women's History Project founder, educator and activist Jill Moss Greenberg, and her colleagues. Prior to 1980 there were no official observances of women's history in Maryland, and most people were unaware of the many contributions made by girls and women throughout the history of the state and in every corner of it. In 1987 Women's History Week became Women's History Month, both in Maryland and nationwide.

The goal of the Maryland Women's History Project was to re-frame history, to shape a history which was genuinely inclusive of the great diversity among Maryland's women – culture, race, disability, language, age, religion, etc. The women and women's organizations that were profiled were also geographically diverse, representing all areas of Maryland, from the water women of its Eastern Shore to the craftswomen of Western Maryland. It was important to tell the stories of everyone, the history of everywoman and everyman, instead of a history only about a few "stars," largely political, military or in fields such as entertainment. The materials produced in 1981 and for every succeeding year until 2005 were multicultural and reflected the contributions not just of "famous" Maryland women, but also of the "unsung heroines" who built and sustained families and institutions, who often led struggles for social justice, and who were instrumental in transmitting cultural traditions.

Beginning in 1981, resource materials profiling historical and contemporary Maryland women were developed annually by the Maryland Women's History Project and distributed to every public school and library in the state, as well as to local commissions for women and other women's organizations. The development of these kits was coordinated by Linda Shevitz at the Maryland

State Department of Education. In addition to biographical information, the resource kits included a statewide speakers list, coordinated by the Maryland Commission for Women, on a range of women's history topics.

The Annual Maryland Women's History kits were expanded over the years to include lesson plans and suggested community activities, as well as compilations of organizational, written, and media resources. Schools and community groups shared information about the local initiatives and programs that grew out of the Maryland Women's History Project and its resource materials. Each year the kits reflected a particular theme, such as Maryland Women in Science and Mathematics, Maryland Women in the Arts, Maryland Women in Law and Government, etc. In the 1990's, at the request of educators, bulletin board display kits were featured, with photographs, biographical profiles, interviews, and photographs of contemporary Maryland women. In 2005, A Maryland Women's Heritage Trail Kit was developed with a fold-out map and a booklet, which highlighted more than 150 historic sites in every area of the state that related to women's history.

With a rich collection of materials and programs from more that two decades that raised awareness and substantively filled the gap of existing material, the idea of establishing a permanent site to honor Maryland women was born. In 2005 the Maryland Women's Heritage Center was established, a non-profit, non-partisan public/private partnership organization with a mission to "preserve the past, understand the present, and shape the future by recognizing, respecting, and transmitting the experiences and contributions of Maryland women of diverse backgrounds and from all regions of the state." The Heritage Center is being created to be a place to honor women's contributions but also as a leadership center and a living, interactive site to meet to discuss and act on issues of particular importance to women, girls, and families. Many organizations statewide and locally became active supporters of the Heritage Center and will use the Center for some of their meetings or events.

In 2009 the Maryland Women's Heritage Center established a small temporary start-up site in Baltimore. In the future, the Center will be located in a permanent site which will house the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame (established in 1985 by the Women Legislators of Maryland and the Maryland Commission for Women), the Maryland Women's History Project, exhibits on

unsung heroines and on “famous” Maryland women such as Harriet Tubman, Rachel Carson, and Clara Barton. Also featured will be a research and learning center, a resource center with media materials and books and articles by and about Maryland women, a gift shop featuring arts and crafts by Maryland women, and meeting spaces for use by community groups. The Maryland Women’s Heritage Center will be an active, alive place. It will serve as a statewide focal point to convene, discuss and take action about issues critical to girls, women and their families. Since its inception the Heritage Center has sponsored many educational programs across the state, and maintains a website (www.mdwomensheritagecenter.org) and a quarterly electronic newsletter.

The Maryland Women’s Heritage Center Board of Directors reflects a wide range of statewide representation of individuals from many different areas of interest, and includes the current and past two First Ladies of Maryland. Former First Lady Frances Hughes Glendening currently serves as President, and Jill Moss Greenberg, founder of the Maryland Women’s History Project, is the Executive Director of the Center. Serving on the Honorary Board are such Maryland women leaders as U.S. Senator Barbara A. Mikulski, author and commentator Cokie Roberts, Olympic gymnast Dominique Dawes, former Congresswoman Helen Delich Bentley, poet Lucille Clifton, and the author Nora Roberts.

For more information, visit the Heritage Center website or contact Jill Moss Greenberg, Executive Director, at mwhcjill@comcast.net or Program Coordinator, Linda Shevitz at 410-767-0428.

OUR FOREMOTHERS WITH OUR FOREFATHERS IN THE U.S. CAPITOL ROTUNDA

A Summary of the Return of the “Portrait” (Suffrage) Monument to the US Capitol Rotunda from the US Capitol Crypt

By Joan Meacham

On a beautiful crisp 1992 fall day, five women sat contemplating a seemingly overwhelming task. We had just committed to moving a marble statue that weighed seven tons from the lower level of the U.S. Capitol to the Rotunda, as

part of their celebration planning for the suffrage 75th anniversary 1995 celebration. The statue, labeled the Portrait Monument by Congress, was commissioned in 1920 to honor the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the right to vote.

In 1921, the statue was reluctantly accepted by an all male Congress as a gift from the National Woman's Party (NWP) on behalf of American women and in honor of the 72 year battle for voting rights. An unveiling ceremony with state representation from every state of the Union was held on February 10, 1921. A short time thereafter, Congress moved the statue to a broom closet in the capitol crypt. Alice Paul, suffragist leader and NWP founder, and colleagues visited the statue, cleaned it, and held rallies on each Woman's Equality Day. The statue was later moved out of the closet and into the Crypt, without identification.

Sculpted by Adelaide Johnson and commissioned by the National Woman's Party, the monument depicts the three suffrage movement founders, Lucretia Mott, a Quaker minister, abolitionist, and peace advocate, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, architect and author of the suffrage movement's most important strategies and documents, and Susan B. Anthony, abolitionist, temperance advocate, and spokesperson.

An unfinished portion behind these visionaries represents all women supporting suffrage and equality for women. The founders are rising out of a large marble structure which exemplifies rights not enjoyed by women, which included legal ownership of property, guardianship rights of their children, and voting rights.

As I reminisce about that autumn day, I am amazed at our enthusiasm and innocence as we confidently prepared our list of major tasks ahead in light of the forthcoming 1995 75th woman suffrage anniversary. Our ultimate success is due, I'm certain, to the talent and dedication in that room that fateful day. Looking around the room I commented "It is time to have our Foremothers with our Forefathers." That phrase became our rallying cry. Little did we know that resistance to allowing these remarkable women to reside in the Rotunda along with some of our nation's male leaders would prove to be as strong in the 1990's as it had originally been in the 1920's.

Grassroots lobbying efforts for the suffrage statue campaign began in earnest in late 1992. Following many meetings on Capitol Hill, Senator Ted Stevens, whose grandmother had been a suffragist and taught him the suffragist songs, spearheaded a Senate unanimous resolution to return the statue to the Rotunda. He was reputed to have said "It is time for the Ladies to Come Upstairs." We were half-way there!

Lobbying continued in the House with arguments such as the "the women are ugly, too old," or the statue "too heavy" along with "radical women do not belong in the capitol rotunda." There was mistrust and others demonstrated a complete lack of interest. House leadership, due to misunderstandings or lack of understanding fought the move aggressively.

During the successful 75th Anniversary events a press conference and rally, with Senator John Warner speaking, was held in front of the monument in the capitol crypt along with the launching of our fund raising efforts in order to pay for the moving costs. These costs were first estimated at 75,000, but were later raised to 120,000.

Since I was now working on the Women's History Museum development (NWHM) the statue campaign was transferred to NWHM as their first project. Monies trickled in, always accelerated when the media published articles about the statue or discussions on the Hill, pro and con, regarding the move. Another year passed with our lobbying efforts still only half-way there! The CEO of Abbott Laboratories read a N.Y. Times article about the plight of the statue and contacted us. After a few conversations, we were awarded the final 25,000! This statue was and still is, I believe, the only statue in the U.S Capitol paid totally by private funds.

Following consistent lobbying, meetings with Congressional members and key staff, and continuing letters pouring in to Congress, the House unanimous resolution was approved by House leadership and passed! The statue was moved on Mother's Day weekend May 11, 1997.

The rededication ceremony was held on June 26, 1997 to a capacity crowd with participation from U.S. Senate and House distinguished members, Lynn Sherr, ABC journalist, statue campaign co-chairs, and actors depicting Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass. It was a historic and memorable occasion. Our

foremothers are now with our forefathers in this hallowed space in our nation's capitol!

For more information, contact Joan Meacham, Arizona Women's Heritage Trail Executive Director, former President, National 75th Woman Suffrage Anniversary Task Force and Co-Chair Suffrage Statue Campaign at womensheritagetr@aol.com or call @ 480-471-7792

Washington Women in Trades Honor Rosies

Founded in 1978, Washington Women in Trades and was originally created to provide support for women working at non-traditional careers in trades such as carpentry, welding or painting. This was a time when the presence of women on construction sites was rare. Like their foremothers, the Rosie the Riveters, they were doing groundbreaking work, and there were few support systems in place to ease their way. When a group of tradeswomen recognized this need, they created WWIT.

The group well understood that the public, as well as educators, needed to be informed about the high wage career opportunities available in the trades; it was necessary to enlighten our communities about the training available to ensure better jobs for women, complete with better earnings, and a better living in their daily lives. So, as things evolved, this loose volunteer association eventually went on to produce an annual spring-time job fair where women of all ages and ethnicities could learn about, and be inspired by the high paying, life sustaining careers available in non-traditional skilled trades.

Today, the Annual Women in Trades Job Fair takes place at Seattle Center in the spring. It hosts more than 80 exhibitors (limited only by the size of the exhibition hall) representing union/non-union apprenticeship programs, vocational schools and governmental agencies. Each of our exhibitors attends because of a strong commitment to placing women in the workplace. The purpose of the Job Fair is two-fold: First, it's education. Scores of high school and middle school students attend, along with their school counselors and some parents, too. They learn about career opportunities and enjoy the many hands on and interactive projects offered by exhibitors. Workshops are

sometimes offered to assist attendees with education and/or assist with job search, or offer information about site safety and first aid. Second, we connect work ready women with jobs. Often, exhibitors/recruiters bring with them job applications and conduct tests and interviews. Many attendees have been hired “on-the-spot”.

A large part of the WWIT mission is to celebrate and honor the working woman. To achieve that goal, we host an annual awards ceremony. Categories include Tradeswoman of the Year, Apprentice of the Year, and Instructor of the Year. This is integral to the philosophy of WWIT, to recognize accomplishments among our peers and associates. The WWIT Awards are part of an annual fall banquet.

In addition to our annual job fair, WWIT also is involved year-round in outreach throughout the Puget Sound. Most of these are educational forums at area high schools. In the recent past, WWIT has also participated in events such as the Northwest Women’s Show and other promotional events.

Finally, WWIT is also active, in a very special way, with local WWII Rosie the Riveters. Most of these women are octogenarians who carry with them an incredible wisdom. Whether it be stories of working in non-traditional jobs during the war or simply their life stories, their input is of tantamount value. In 2002, WWIT launched a “Calling ALL Rosie” campaign and celebration. The collaboration brought together more than 100 Rosies and was featured on ABC national news with Peter Jennings, as well as Nick Clooney’s syndicated news show. This event highlighted the importance of their contribution to the war effort, but more importantly, their contribution toward paving the way for today’s and tomorrow’s tradeswoman. We are committed to preserving this legacy and do that in part by presenting a “Rosie Table” at every Spring Job Fair where present and future trades women can chat, connect and learn from our tradeswoman past.

While paving the way for putting women to work in high skilled, high wage non-traditional construction trades, we are helping to create a diverse workplace and salary equity. The level of self-esteem that results from a successfully completed apprenticeship or a stairway perfectly welded empowers, not only the woman directly involved, but also her peers, family and community.

www.wawomeninrades.com/aboutus.html



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