

# The best education I ever had

In the wake of my winning the chairmanship of the Knox County Democrats, a bitter letter to the Zephyr editor was written and signed by only an e-mail address, the letters of which form no name any of us Democrats have ever known to be involved in the party. The letter was also full of untruths — so much so that I wonder if the writer has ever looked up the words "libel" and "slander." Probably not.

One of the smear tactics was to imply that the Galesburg League of Women Voters collapsed while I was president from May, 1998 to May, 1999. So to make something positive out of such stupidity, I would like to talk about the League of Women Voters. The organization had been struggling for several years when I was told that the League would probably fold in June of 1998 unless I wished to accept the challenge of trying to keep it going another year. I had not served on the League board since about 1976 and had not been active for many years, but have a long history and love for the League, so said I would try.

The League has a well-earned respect in this community, but after the annual meeting in June of 1998, I saw few of those in attendance again and felt like I was a façade for an organization that didn't exist. A few of us worked so hard but there was simply no participation. In May of 1999 a small group took the reigns, still hanging on to hope of the League's continuance. By the end of 1999, the papers were filed to dissolve the League. It was a sad day.

I joined the Galesburg League of Women Voters in 1957 when I turned 21 and was a student at Knox College. It was a vibrant and intelligent group of women which, in the League's best tradition, studied and discussed and acted on local, state and national issues. At the time, they were up to their ears in garbage. They were working for recycling, regular garbage pick-up and a

sanitary landfill. While I became active and eventually president of the 300-member League in Oak Park-River Forest and 200-member Rockford League in the '60s, the Galesburg League was fighting for the city manager form of government, a county health department, reclamation standards for strip-mined land, establishment of the Mary Davis Youth Home and relocation of the Galesburg airport.

The Galesburg League always worked for adequate financing of schools and was active in every school referendum. All Illinois Leagues worked for a State Constitutional Convention and took positions on the Revenue Article, merit selection of judges and single-member district representation. The local League studied and reached consensus on issues of criminal justice, election laws, welfare reform, state redistricting, children's services, mental health facilities, land use and agricultural policy. The national League of Women Voters was talking about environmental issues and possible water shortages in the mid-1960s before anyone else gave it a thought. Well, almost no one. The Leagues from the Western states pushed those issues onto the national agenda — where they belonged.

In its last years, the local League studied the recommendations of the county Blue Ribbon Committee, the economic and environmental impact of mega-hog operations in Knox County and last, but not least, culminated years of study and action to achieve a total ban of yard waste and trash burning in the city of Galesburg.

It was and is a wonderful organization and provided me with the best education in governmental issues and citizen action a person can get, bar none. A non-partisan organization, the League attained the enviable reputation of being trusted to provide voter information, run fair and efficient candidate meetings and give the

straight facts on issues.

I served on a League of Women Voters board for about 17 years in Oak Park, Rockford and Galesburg, doing every job there was. For women in those days, who were home with children and not expected to think or do anything very intelligent, the League was like a pool of water in the desert. In Oak Park and Rockford I started baby-sitting service during day meetings so young women could get involved. I remember with amusement attending board meetings in Rockford while three of us were pregnant and all had our babies at the same time. We took turns excusing

ourselves to nurse our little ones. It was a wonderful combination of women's unique purpose of bearing and nurturing children and using our minds to the fullest.

So when somebody who hardly knows me or anything about the League accuses me of bringing down the Galesburg League of Women Voters, I take offense. But the League also taught me how to be gracious under fire in public. Lord knows I'm trying.

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May 4, 2000