

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

County board gets a woman's touch

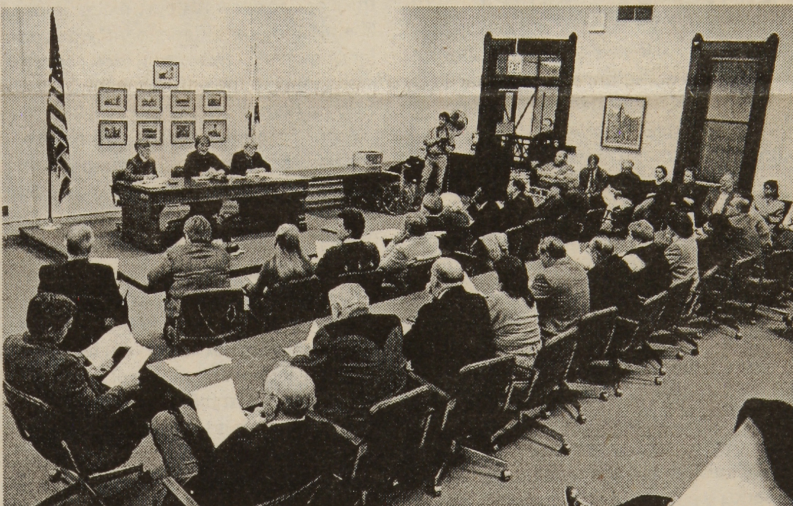
I really never thought I'd live long enough to see a woman chair the Knox County Board. It's good to see a competent woman attain leadership, especially in politics and government. Sally Keener is the first woman to be elected chair and regardless of political party affiliation, as a woman I'm proud of what she has accomplished.

One reason she is in a position of leadership is because, while being firm in her positions, she shows kindness and respect for everyone. During the years I spent on the county board with her, she was quiet and in a learning mode, and that's intelligent. No matter what disagreements there were, and those are temporary, she rose above the fray and was always genuinely friendly. She apparently has the confidence of board members of both parties to provide good and fair leadership. Congratulations to her!

I imagine I'm about 20 years older than she and I'd like to think that those of us who broke the barriers back in the 60s and 70s helped her get there. I was one of the first two women to run for the county board in 1972, a Republican and Democrat. Ann Ward, wife of a Knox College professor, was a candidate in the Republican primary and didn't survive the primary race. 1972 was a redistricting year, as is the year 2002, and on the general election ballot in my district were five male incumbent Republicans and me. Five were to be elected - I came in 6th.

The next year, a Republican member of the board, attorney Bruce Stratton, told me he was moving to Springfield and there would be a vacancy in my county board district. I started my campaign all over again, calling all the board members and arranging to meet with them AND their wives. It was important to include the wives in those days. I was asked questions like, "What does your husband think about this?"

There were four Democrats on the board then, so I had to convince Republicans to appoint me. There were four of us interested in the vacancy — the usual line up of three Republican men and me. County board chair Dick Burgland and most of the other board members knew I was qualified to be on the board and I was the only one who



was a candidate in 1972. In that election, even though I came in last, I got good bipartisan support.

Burgland decided to have a secret ballot. At the last minute, Wilbur Danner came running down the aisle waving papers and said that State's Attorney Don Woolsey had issued an opinion against a secret ballot. Burgland said he had gotten an opposite opinion from the States Attorney, slammed down his gavel and said "Sit down Wilbur." The vote was held, it was split, and I won by one vote. I was the first woman on the Knox County Board.

The headlines told it all. "Knox County Board Members Pick Woman Democrat to Fill Vacancy." That day was probably one of the most exciting of my life. Years later legislators went back to the drawing board and decided that such a vote had to be by roll call and a vacancy must be filled by someone from the same political party.

One of my idols is Shirley Chisholm, the first black United States congresswoman. In the 1970s I read her book, *Unbought and Unbossed*, in which she tells stories of fighting and clawing her way up through the ranks of her own Democrat party organization and into Congress, and then the terrible treatment she received from men in her own party when she got there. She said that being a woman was much

more of a liability than being black. Black and white men shared one prejudice, she said, and that was their distaste of women sharing power in the political hierarchy.

Chisholm, from the 12th Congressional District of Brooklyn, was assigned to the Agriculture Committee. She thought she could live with that until she found out her subcommittees were rural development and forestry. (Only one tree grows in Brooklyn!) Mrs. Chisholm refused to "play the game" and complained about committee assignments. She was constantly told she was committing political suicide.

My favorite quote in the book is "Another lesson I learned was that if you decide to operate on the basis of your conscience, rather than your political advantage, you must be ready for the consequences and not complain when you suffer them. There is little place in the political scheme of things for an independent, creative personality, for a fighter." The leadership of outgoing chair Lomac Payton and incoming leader Sally Keener proves the atmosphere, at least in Knox County, is improving dramatically.

Sally Keener has been a quiet leader on the county board for years. Her election to the board and election as chair after serving as mayor of Altona, bodes well for women in politics. I will vicariously enjoy her experience and wish her well.

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