
Opinion

AAUW Rockford: In 1980s, education, empowerment and expanded advocacy for women

By Dr. Marilén Loyola

Posted Jul 6, 2019 at 9:45 AM

In the 1980s, the American Association of University Women Rockford Branch saw a renewed emphasis on women's rights, both personal and professional. Owing in part to the 1973 passing of Roe v. Wade and an increasingly widespread feminist movement, branch members in the 1980s advocated for women's reproductive rights, rewarded feminist activism, expanded educational reform efforts, and increased programming to secure voting rights for all.

In February 1983, the branch formed a task force dedicated to "Empowering Women: Achieving Change through Advocacy Networks." Its key areas of interest included child care, education, elective and appointive office, employment, the Equal Rights Amendment, homemakers and family law, international issues, violence, and health-related issues, both general and those pertaining to freedom of choice.

Women in the workplace continued to be a major concern and, in the spring 1984, the branch hosted a "Women and Stress" workshop, open to members and non-members. Equality in the workplace hinged on women's civic participation, though, so the Rockford branch continued its voter registration campaigns in the 1980s using the following slogan: "It's a Man's World ... unless women vote."

The 1970s had seen the branch engage educational initiatives and collaborate with key organizations in the Rockford area. These efforts continued in the 1980s and, on April 27, 1985, the branch cosponsored a forum with Rockford's Project L.E.A.D. (Legislation, Education, and Direction), the Regional Office of Education, and Rock Valley College. Titled "Educational Reform: Everyone's

Business," it aimed to inform citizens about recent education reform studies and featured speakers such as Sen. Joyce Holmberg, who talked about the Illinois Commission on the Improvement of Elementary and Secondary Education.

In 1982, the branch began to sponsor a "Women In My History" annual competition for area fifth- through seventh-grade students. Students did interviews, wrote essays and made posters about special women in their lives. Joan Tunnel coordinated the project, which included a public display each March for the next 25 years.

In January 1986, the branch cosponsored with RPS an educational workshop to celebrate Women's History Week. Focusing on integrating women's history in the classroom, it featured classroom dramatizations, discussions of "how to" strategies, and hands on materials to share with teachers, counselors, administrators, and "anyone interested in incorporating pertinent women's history activities into classroom or other school-related activities."

The theme of the 1986 state convention was "Personalize, Strengthen, Unify AAUW." Pat Smith-Pierce, Illinois program vice president, explained, "When we all work together, we unify our group; we strengthen it and we learn for ourselves — thus personalizing." Kappie Spencer, then AAUW's director for women's issues, gave the convention's keynote address, "Is There a Future for Women's Issues?" The convention also screened the 1985 film "Women of Summer," which "documents an experiment when feminists, educators and unionists came together to work for a common ideal."

In 1988, the Rockford Chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) sought nominations for a Feminist of the Year Award. Dorothy Romberg of Caledonia nominated Nancy Flanagan, also from Caledonia and former president of the Rockford Branch (1985-1987). Romberg described Flanagan as a positive role model who had worked actively with the Personal and Professional Power Coalition Committee since 1983, the Bright Future Committee of the Leader Luncheon Council, and career days, which focused on helping women make the best choices in planning for their careers.

Dr. Marilén Loyola is an assistant professor of Spanish, Rockford University. AAUW-Rockford Branch is celebrating its 90th anniversary in 2019. It is a nonpartisan organization and open to both women and men with at least a two-year college degree.

For more information, visit <https://rockfordarea-il.aauw.net>.