
Opinion

AAUW looking back and looking forward

By Judy Schultz and Barbara Simon

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On Sept. 21, the American Association of University Women Rockford Area Branch celebrated its 90th birthday with a luncheon and program titled “AAUW Rockford Branch through the Decades.”

Each of its nine decades was represented by a woman who exemplified that decade. Each woman portrayed also represented a mission of AAUW. At the end, we could all see the tremendous arc of leadership that AAUW has encouraged and the focus on empowering women it has espoused from 1881 to the present day.

The 1930s were represented by Dr. Mildred Berry, an early president of the branch and Rockford College (now University) faculty member, representing educating women through high school and beyond, and responsibility to the community.

The 1940s were represented by Eleanor Roosevelt, who promoted equal pay for women in the workforce and in the military, peace and human rights.

The 1950s were represented by 1952 Rockford Peaches bat girl Clara Helleman, standing for equal opportunities in sports.

The 1960s were represented by Betty Freidan, bring attention to a woman’s place in society and access to better careers.

The 1970’s were represented by Gloria Steinem, a leader in the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment.

The 1980s were represented by U.S Rep. Patsy Mink, and focused on the establishment of Title IX Amendment of the Higher Education Act, voting rights, electing women and reproductive rights.

The 1990s were represented by astronaut Mae Jemison, encouraging women in the sciences, and equity for girls.

The 2000s were represented by Lilly Ledbetter, typifying equal pay for women, and STEM careers.

The 2010s were represented by Cecile Richards, drawing attention to women's reproductive health, and electing women.

Where are we now?

In the areas of education and equal opportunities in sports and careers, we have improved greatly although there are many instances of inequality in advancement and pay. Title IX is currently under attack and AAUW's Legal Aid Fund is still needed to support pay inequities in the academic world. There has been an increase in female representation in STEM fields although sometimes women are marginalized in the workplace.

AAUW continues to support education for women nationally with \$4.3 million given in fellowships and grants. The AAUW Rockford Area Branch currently awards four \$1,000 scholarships to area high school female students studying in STEM fields and networks to support other girls locally.

The gender pay gap is still painfully obvious with women earning 77 cents for every dollar earned by males. The statistic for African American women is 61 cents, for Hispanic women 53 cents, and Native American women 58 cents.

Where do we go from here?

Judge Rosemary Collins gave a talk at our 90th celebration entitled "Women Rock! Women's Leadership in Today's World." She encouraged women to look locally to even the playing field, to support other women who are qualified and to look at corporations and banks to make sure that they have women on their boards. We should look into every area of government, corporate and non-profit entities to be sure that women are compensated fairly.

In the future, AAUW will continue to emphasize gender equity for women and girls through research, education and advocacy. The Rockford Area Branch will continue to collaborate to make our community a better place and to advocate for lifelong educational opportunities and equity for women. Future articles will share more specifics of our vision and plans for our community engagement.

Judy Schultz and Barbara Simon, co-president, AAUW Rockford Area Branch. AAUW-Rockford Branch is celebrating its 90th anniversary in 2019. It is a nonpartisan organization open to both women and men with at least a two-year college degree. For more information, visit <https://rockfordarea-il.aauw.net>.