

Celebrating Women In Public Life - Will They Help Save The Day In This Country? (by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

This issue of StreetVibes overlaps with Women's History Month. This fact prompts the question: How are women progressing in terms of achieving equity in U.S. society? Further, how are the current crop of women in public life helping to lead us through a very precarious period in American life?

Several recent events show significant progress for women in public life. In November 2020, Kamala Harris was elected as this country's first woman Vice President. Then, several weeks ago, President Biden appointed Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first African-American woman to be named to the U.S. Supreme Court. Harris and Jackson join Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi as a trio holding key positions in Washington, D.C.. Flanked by a number of influential Senators and members of Congress, women now are holding their own in the nation's Capital. Meanwhile, a number of cities such as Chicago and Atlanta are administered by women Mayors.



This growth in the numbers of women holding influential positions in public life is historically important. Will this trend also help during this critical time when our democratic institutions are badly in need of reform? Critics may justifiably say that I am inclined to put too much faith in women as positive forces in U.S. politics and government. After all, many women attend Trump rallies, and women were involved in the January 6th insurrection. These critics contrast Liz Cheney with Marjorie Taylor Greene.

Even accepting this warning not to overly romanticize the positive role of women in public life, a case can be made that white men makeup the base of the population that supports violence and events such as the assault on the Capitol. Most women lack the extreme macho egotism that often drives the male species to negative behavior and violence. On the contrary, most of the women I have worked with over the years are motivated by value systems that prod them to assist people in need or to support initiatives that will benefit the community or public life.

It seems appropriate in this essay to briefly celebrate some of these community and civic leaders. One person who has inspired many of us to promote citizen involvement over the years is Louise Spiegel. A longtime leader of the Woman's City Club, Louise was always calling for new grassroots initiatives on a variety of issues. She supported my establishment of Applied Information Resources as a non-profit organization that could both provide information to citizens while organizing citizens around issues such as children in poverty. Louise also served as AIR's board chair for over a decade.



In AIR's first decade of existence, we were hired to research and write the first homeless study in Cincinnati. That brought us into contact with a group of dedicated women who were operating the new shelters and working on other homeless related issues. They provided us with critical guidance and insights in conducting this study, and we have continued to work with community and neighborhood leaders such as Alice Skirtz and Mary Burke Rivers long after that 1987

report was completed.



A current neighborhood organization led by able young women dedicated to improving the lives of Over-the-Rhine residents is the Peaslee Neighborhood Center. Not only is Peaslee providing valuable programs for residents, but it has taken a leadership role in promoting a process that the City should employ to insure that new neighborhood developments improve rather than harm community life. Jennifer Summers, Peaslee's Executive Director, and Jenn Arens, and Joelle Newman deserve praise for this work.



Political reform is another issue that brought me together with a group of incredibly able and dedicated women. When AIR joined a number of local organizations determined to do something about the influence of "big money" on City Council and Mayoral campaigns, this coalition included many leaders from the League of Women Voters and the Women's City Club. One of these women deserves singling out. When the Fair Elections Coalition reached the point in November 2000 of needing to collect signatures to place a campaign reform Charter Amendment on the ballot, Alice Schneider, as a volunteer, took on the job of organizing and administering this task. After a sufficient number of collected signatures secured this initiative's place on the November 2001 ballot, Schneider, a leader of both the League and the Women's City Club, threw herself into organizing other administrative aspects of what turned out to be a successful grassroots campaign. Later, when AIR determined to keep working on political reform issues, Schneider became this non-profit's Director of Communications (a position she still holds today).



When in 2003, I became involved with Common Cause both in Ohio and nationally, I worked with two women that need to be celebrated for their dedication and abilities. As a consultant and then a board member of Common Cause Ohio, I experienced the organizing abilities of Karen Hobert Flynn. Flynn, who is now the Executive Director of Common Cause in Washington, D.C. Flynn was then a regional organizer helping state chapters stay afloat financially while remaining active in reform activities. Her organizing talents now keep Common Cause as a critical citizen force in preserving and renewing our democratic institutions.



Finally, Catherine Turcer, Executive Director of Common Cause Ohio, must be singled out for both her longterm and current work on a variety of political and governmental reforms in this state. A leader in helping to successfully organize two campaigns to put in place Ohio



Constitutional Amendments to end partisan gerrymandering, she is part of the grassroots effort now going on to insure that the Republican majority in the Ohio General Assembly does not get away with ignoring these Amendments by implementing new gerrymandered Congressional and state district maps. Turcer, a good friend, should be celebrated for both her organizing talents and her keen sense of humor.

Although this list of women civic and community leaders is impressive, it only scratches the surface of a vast number of women who deserve to be cited for their contributions to public life. Even admitting the fact that these exceptional leaders represent a minority of women, they, nevertheless, give me hope for the future. Just maybe this growing group of progressive women in public life will save the day for this country.