

## The LWVSBA in the 1970s

Actually, the League of the 1970s got started in late 1969. The state League reached out to some women in the area and asked if they were interested in giving the South Bend League a re-start.

The first formal meeting was held on Dec. 15, 1969, with Greta Betchov as acting president of a (Member) Unit At Large, which was a way to get started and then transition to status as a “provisional League.” Greta, by the way, was a naturalized citizen, having emigrated from Berne, Switzerland, where women did not win the right to vote in federal elections until 1971.

Right off the bat, the new group showed an interest in air pollution, housing, county reorganization, library services and, last but not least, a quality education for all students in public education. The League’s interest in education is not surprising because the national League, serving as a backdrop, had directed its energies to equality of opportunity in education and housing as a response to the growing civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Credited with “bringing the League back” were Jane Robinson, Linda Kroger, Carol Winslow, Eileen Bender, Janet Scalpone and Jeanne Gibbs. Jane Robinson became the president of the resulting “Provisional League,” and then president of the League once it gained full status in 1971.

As in previous years, those early accounts, however, often listed their names as their married names, such as “Mrs. Lloyd Gibbs” or “Mrs. James Robinson.” But in the early 70s, it seems as if the feminist movement took hold overnight, and – wham! -- we suddenly learn their real first names.

Annual dues per member were \$7.50. And by June of 1970, they had 71 paid members.

Here are a few other things that jump out in the historical record: In the early 1970s, the League had “observers” who went to county council meetings, city council meetings, county commissioner meetings and South Bend school board meetings. They were intensely interested in local issues, and published “Know Your Town” and “Know Your Schools” bulletins.

They also had “unit meetings” in the mornings, afternoons and evenings. These were small discussion groups designed to reach an intelligent consensus on issues. It goes without saying that most of the members in that era were likely full-time homemakers, and could attend these Unit meetings. But they were homemakers with wings. You can just picture them getting their kids off to school, changing clothes, and then flying off to a meeting.

And yes, they were superwomen, fighting voter apathy and voter suppression. In the winter of 1971, there was a dust-up with the county voter registration board over the League’s request to register voters at convenient locations away from the county-city building in South Bend. The voter registration board felt that outreach wasn’t necessary, and voters should just continue to register in the downtown locations. But that wasn’t enough for the League. They went to the Mishawaka Enterprise and the South Bend Tribune about the brush-off. After the bad publicity, the board gave in, and off-site voter registration was launched.

With this victory, as well as what else was happening in the nation, League members were beginning to think of themselves as feminists. In one document, dated November 1972, League members try to analyze why a county reorganization referendum, which they had supported, had been lost. One of the reasons listed for the loss was "The League is associated with women's lib."

They involved their families in their work. Ted Kommers, now a Chicago attorney and son of Nancy Kommers, who was our president in 1973, '74 and '75, remembers licking the stamps on what seemed like thousands of envelopes for the many mailings she always seemed to be sending out. He and his sisters still joke about it.

Education was of particular interest. In January of 1973, the League's board had a special meeting to discuss what was dubbed the "Riley Marshall topic," also known as the "Riley-Jackson question." As with any school redistricting controversy, there were several plans in the air. The League was most concerned about white flight from Riley High School and called for stabilization of the racial and economic balance at Riley. "We urge you to find a solution now which will insure access to a quality education for all students on the south side," said the resulting League statement.

There was some controversy over the local League board's favoring the idea of Marshall school district becoming a feeder system for Riley High School and not Jackson High School, which was the suburban school. This led to an incident with racist overtones. According to a South Bend Tribune article in July of 1972, four board members resigned over the controversy. The remaining members of the board held fast to their position, which they said was consistent with national League policy of favoring integrated equal education for all students.

In May of 1974, Nancy Kommers reported that she had been to the national convention, where a vote was held to allow men to become members. The vote was 969 for, 433 against. We voted "for".g (South Bend Tribune Managing Editor John J. Powers – "Jack" to many of us – was one of the first male members locally, and in the entire state.)

In 1975, of course, the Equal Rights Amendment was added as an issue of great importance to the local League, as well as the national and state Leagues. Other issues, locally, included Notre Dame student renters who were changing the makeup of the Harter Heights neighborhood, and alternative education (what is it, does it meet the needs that are not currently being met by the public school system.)

1976 was the year for public meetings on establishing a women's shelter here for "women in crisis" and "women in transition," and the League was a leader in holding these discussions.

Of course, the League needed some money to get all their work done. In the 70s, there were quite a variety of ideas, including a collection of grocery receipts at Wilts Food grocery stores (Does anyone remember where those were?). And there was the lobster bake idea. Helen Westmann, a member in 1977, even offered her barn for it. But it looks like it didn't happen, because the lobster bake is never mentioned again.

Voter registration was astounding! In one weekend in 1977, the League registered 600 new voters and helped another 400 update their registrations. Voter registration volunteers went to the shopping malls and grocery stores to get the registrations.

By January of 1978, membership stood at around 100, with “the highest number of new members in the state this year and the fewest number of dropped memberships, Our ERA fundraising was very successful, and there was great interest in the upcoming appearance of Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, at Saint Marys College in April.

In that same year, the League also urged the South Bend school board to create its own 29-member task force on school integration, thinking that it was better for the community to come up with its own plan than to have someone else’s plan forced on it. Kathy Barnard was local League president at the time, and she urged creation of the task force to create the plan for the six different high school districts – Riley, LaSalle, Washington, Adams, Clay and North Liberty.

By 1979, our voter registration was running full steam. Our volunteers were “deputized” back then, down at the County-City Building. To register people, they went out to the “new Sears” at University Park Mall, Scottsdale Mall, the Farmers Market, and the “new LaSalle Square” on Bendix Drive.

### The LWVSBA in the 1980s

The 1980s started off with a celebration of the League’s 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, with proclamations by the mayors of South Bend and Mishawaka. At that time, the average age of League members was 40, and there was a better mix of professional women, new graduates, and homemakers. The League marked as one of its achievements the January 18, 1977 ratification of the ERA by the Indiana legislature.

The 1980’s saw more women in the workforce, and the League also lost some board members due to this phenomenon. Ann Kolata resigned from the board due to her new job as Deputy Redevelopment Director for South Bend. Kathy Barnard, League president from 1975 to 1978, resigned from the board to become director for the “newly formed Neighborhood Code Enforcement.”

We see Lois Clark’s name for the first time in board minutes; She was the social services coordinator of Head Start and requested, through a League member, a volunteer to facilitate a parents group concerned with child abuse in the Walkerton area.

In 1981, when the city of South Bend was undertaking a redistricting process, the League called for neighborhood cohesion and diversity in socio-economic background. The League also wanted equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats in each city district. This is the time period when Glenda Rae Hernandez first got involved in the League, in an effort to prevent her Southeast Side precinct from being split three ways – again. It had been split three in 1974 with the last city redistricting.

In candidate forums, town halls and letters-to-the-editor, the League continued to be concerned with local issues, such as the need for a county landfill or housing for the homeless, and poor relief, but branched out to national debates such as those concerned with racial discrimination, reproductive rights and nuclear non-proliferation.

In 1982, the League got involved in the school integration process, again, by conducting a survey to see how current integration efforts were going. Among their findings were that some school librarians were, indeed, gathering literary sources appealing to black students. The League also found, however, that students in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program were being given tickets of a different color than

those of paying students. Their advice was to stop this, and find another way that would protect the identity of lunch program recipients.

In 1984, the League held a forum on elected vs appointed school boards. (The South Bend system had an appointed board back then.) By 1986, however, it had been decided to go with an elected board. Problem was, so many candidates were running that the National Education Association in South Bend had to cancel its all-candidate, one-night forum. Instead, they partnered with the League to host five separate forums, one for each school district.

The environment and public health continued to be of great concern. In August of 1984, the board decided to join the Lake Michigan Inter-League for \$20 a year. (An inter-league is where several local leagues join together and work on a regional level to most effectively solve problems.) In the mid-80s, "Acid rain" was a big concern, and there was a call for a town hall meeting on regional hazardous waste.

Here's a nugget for League members who've worked on the Citizen's Guide: it cost only \$400 to print. And, it was sold at cost to groups." (It now costs about \$1,500 to print 4,000 copies, and it's given out for free.)

In the 1980's, it looks like "phone trees" were our favorite form of communication within the League family. If you'll remember, you called 10 people, who called 10 other people, and so on until hundreds, even thousands were lined up to attend a meeting or get information out. It was political at its best, with personal contact and conversations. The landline phone was essential.

And we see Glenda Rae Hernandez as a board member for the first time as well. She was elected to a two-year board position and promptly appointed to the Community Development Citizens Advisory Council. And in 1988, she was elected League president. One of her first duties as president would be to write a letter to the editor of the South Bend Tribune urging the Senate to quickly pass the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, curbing nuclear proliferation.

Annual dues are up to \$15.00 per member.

### The LWVSBA in the 1990s

Having been elected League president in 1988, Glenda Rae Hernandez remained president through half of the 1990's – until 1995 when Dorothy Jaffe swapped her treasurer's job for the presidency. Glenda Rae remains our treasurer to this day.

In the second half of the nineties, we became concerned with welfare reform, participating in a town hall forum on the subject in March of 1996. The local League was also concerned with teen violence and the need for recycling.

Nationally, in 1993 the League fought for and won passage of the National Voter Registration Act, or "motor voter" law which requires state government to offer voter registration to anyone applying for a driver's license, or renewing their license, or anyone applying for public assistance.

Here's something you might not have known about the "motor voter" legislation: In March 1991, the American rock band R.E.M. placed a mail-away petition in support of the act on the back of their album *Out of Time* and encouraged their fans to fill them out and mail them to Rock the Vote. Rock the

Vote received over 100,000 such petitions from the band's fans, and subsequently delivered them to the United States Senate in April 1991. The band's campaign has been credited with raising significant public awareness and support of the act before it was signed into law.

In the late 1990s, our Citizen's Guide to Representative Government became very popular as a handout. Some 2,500 copies were distributed one year, and the CG even went into a second printing of 2,500, which we quickly ran out of as well.

Membership declined quite a bit, down to 25 members, but the League continued to sponsor election forums, Meet the Candidates nights, a voter's guide, and programming issues on land use, gun control and also a state tax study.

By Judy Bradford