

The League from 2000-2007

By the year 2000, our membership numbers were down, to the point that it would be addressed in a co-president's annual report in the spring of 2000. "LWVSBA remains a small but stalwart group," wrote co-presidents Nikki Hutchinson and Emily Conway. "Though facing the aging phenomena within our group we continue in vitality of purpose and endeavors."

That year, the group hosted numerous candidate debates and forums, a voter registration day during the Riverpark Fair, and worked on getting out the vote. Working with two predominantly black and college educated sororities, Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta, along with La Casa de Amistad, the League registered 235 new voters on National Voter Registration Day in the fall.

In 2001, the League issued a strong statement on school districting, in light of news that some South Bend schools were still out of compliance with the 1981 Federal Court Consent Decree. The League statement called for "integration as a necessary condition for equal access to integration." They did not agree with the idea of going back to neighborhood schools. They suggested pairing west side and east side schools in bus routes, and supported separation of primary and intermediate grade levels. The recommended a broad-based community task force to come up with a viable plan. The League supported "Plan Z" as long as it addressed the lack of racial balance in primary centers.

By 2003, however, membership numbers had dropped very low, and the League felt a need to increase its visibility, and its funding to support voter registration and voter education.

We also launched our own website, following national and state Leagues in this endeavor. By September of 2003, there had been 380 visits to the website.

IN 2004 and 2005, we worked with many other organizations, including the IUSB Office of Campus Diversity, to accomplish our goals. We registered voters at naturalization ceremonies, Hope Rescue Mission, the YWCA, the Junior League Thrift Store, Davenport University, St. Margaret's House and Karl King Towers. We begin to see the partnership with the American Democracy Project, headed by Elizabeth Bennion, who is now our director of voter services and education.

And in the 04-05 year, we added a new section to the Citizen's Guide: This new section outlined the regulations and procedures for voter registration, and covers voting procedures in St. Joseph County. This section remains in the CG to this day.

And in that program year, we had two new programs: "One League, One Book," which did not continue past that point, but also "Lunch with the League," which held its first meeting on May 20, 2005 at the 222 Italian Steakhouse (the restaurant area that is currently vacant, and located between South Bend Brew Werks and CJ's Pub. The steakhouse was in front of what used to be Club Fever, which closed in April of 2018.) The topic for the first Lunch with the League was Perspectives on Social Security Reform, featuring Notre Dame Associate Professor Marty Wolfson and Elder-Law Attorney James Knepp. Lunch With the League continues to this day!

In 2006-2007, we really spread our wings, too, working with so many other organizations to hold election debates and forums, including the Real Estate Investors Association, the American Association of University Women, the Women's Alliance, the Healthy Communities Initiative, the American

Democracy Project and the Political Science Club of IUSB. But part of the reason for these partnerships was because our own membership numbers, and thus our own woman power, continued to decrease.

Glenda Rae Hernandez, who is now our treasurer, credits Lisa Plencner for bringing new life and increasing the membership of the League during this period. “We looked at all our members and realized, it's just us, we're all getting older, and the local League is going to die out if we don't get some younger members, and soon!” Glenda Rae says of this era.

Lisa joined the League in 2005 and was president from 2007 through 2011, and co-president with Kelly Sanford 2011-2012.

The League from 2011 to Present Day

The final stretch in the local League’s history saw a surge in technology, primarily as a means of communication and record-keeping. We added a Facebook page and Twitter account to our communication efforts, and we started keeping electronic records.

We also launched a high school voter registration program. In 2011, Elizabeth Bennion and Lisa Plencner went to Washington, D.C. for the training, and our program was launched in the winter of 2012. It has been running continuously ever since and has expanded to many community activities, where we also register voters.

The Naturalization voter registration program began in June of 2015. Since then, we have registered 2,175 new voters after watching them take the oath to become citizens – a truly inspiring experience!

Vote411.org, began in 2016 and is managed by Elizabeth Bennion. It makes voting intelligently a lot easier, by bringing up your personalized ballot and allowing you to compare candidates side-by-side. The new candidate information, written by the candidates themselves, is loaded a few weeks before each election.

For many years, we have educated voters about the need to stop gerrymandering, through the showing of films and distribution of pamphlets, and advocating at the state level for a nonpartisan redistricting commission. For about a one-year period, roughly late 2017 and early 2018, Lisa Plencner presented a one-woman road show which we informally called The Redistricting Roadshow to explain what gerrymandering is and how to top it.

We continue to see dramatic gains in our membership, which stood at 53 in 2011, and has steadily climbed to 129 in 2020, with rapid growth beginning in 2017.

We have also developed additional partnerships with educational institutions and community organizations -- raising League visibility, enhancing civic engagement, and offering voter services throughout the community.

By Judy Bradford