

CELEBRATE OUR HISTORY: LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF KENT
Volume II: 2013 - 2019

As part of our celebration of sixty-five years, we decided to update our “Celebrate Our History – Fifty Years of Excellence” which we published in 2003 when we marked our 50th anniversary. Thanks to Iris Meltzer, the history of our first fifty years has been transferred to a readable electronic form (likely the original version was prepared electronically though in a format and saved in a way that is now in a museum!) The story of our first fifty years can be found on our website (www.kentlww.org) – something we did not have 15 years ago. And thank you to our former presidents who have shared their recollections for this volume.

At our 50th, we commented how much had changed, yet how much has stayed the same. The same holds true fifteen years later. Our commitment to educating the voters (and encouraging them to vote!), our advocacy for issues dear to us and, above all, our gratitude for the very special friendships we have made through League continue to be unwavering.

Jane Preston Rose, April 12, 2019

2003 – 2005: JANET RUSNACK, COORDINATOR

Once again, LWV-Kent found itself in the position with no candidate to fill the presidency. I agreed to serve as “Coordinator” and, again, in true league fashion, volunteers stepped up to the plate and the various League responsibilities were covered. Actually, more than covered as we continued to be a leader among leagues.

One of our biggest coups was being the first league in Ohio to launch a website using League Easy Website (LEW), a set of templates created by the League of Women Voters of California and made available at a reasonable cost to leagues throughout the country. Audrey Kessler was our VOTER editor and webmaster. She spent many hours on the website and putting our VOTER on line as well. Under her very able guidance, our webpages included About the League, Calendar, Elections, Join the League, Membership Form, Support LWV Kent, Contact the League and Newsletters.

We reinstated a daytime unit meeting along with the traditional evening meeting. In October, 2003, the meetings were focused on the Mental Health replacement levy and the Kent Free Library bond issue. Other programs topics were “Make Democracy Work” and international relations. We sponsored a tour of the Portage County recycling center. Members volunteered to serve as facilitators for Leadership Institute, a leadership development program for high school girls sponsored by Portage and Summit County Leagues of Women Voters.

During these years we were active studying and developing positions so that we could take action on important current issues. In 2004, we participated in a statewide study of the death penalty, out of which came LWV Ohio’s position to support abolishing the death penalty and a moratorium on the use of the death penalty. We also participated in an expansion and update of the LWVUS position on presidential selection. Our position, which has been in place since 1970, supports direct election of the president and the abandonment of the Electoral College. It was extended to take into account the entire presidential selection process and supports a process that produces the best possible candidates, informed voters and optimum voter participation.

2005 – 2008: BARBARA HIPSMAN SPRINGER, PRESIDENT

A highlight of these years was the recognition of the League of Women Voters of Ohio by the Joyce Foundation of Chicago as one of the top two leagues in the nation for empowering voters in their state. A very tangible result was a \$250,000 two-year grant (which subsequently was renewed) to help further citizens' understanding of government and to show how each person can have an effect in the political process. imPACT (Political Accountability for Citizens Today) was created by the Ohio League and financial support was provided to local leagues who furthered the objectives of the grant. LWV Kent hosted town hall meetings which addressed subjects such as accountability and election administration and worked in other ways to encourage citizens to become involved in democracy.

Our participation in the LWVUS national study on immigration included a visit to the International Institute of Akron. We took the first steps to join in on the reapportionment struggles that continue today.

Our voter education activities included sponsoring a debate featuring the two candidates for Portage County Commissioner, Brett McClafferty and Christopher Smeiles. We also sponsored a few lively forums on the proposed county-wide senior levy which preceded the eventual failure of the levy after much local opposition to the taxing plan. Our traditional booth at Kent Heritage Fest was supplemented with "voterwalking" – registering voters as we walked around the festival. We recognized the leadership of two election officials, Lois Enlow and Glenda Enders, directors of the Portage County Board of Elections who agreed to reinstate a polling place on Kent State University's campus in time for the 2008 national election. We also celebrated the contributions of Bill Schultz, an advocate for voting on the Kent City Council and Helen Dix, who led the effort for voter education through the printing of our Voters Guide.

These years saw the beginning of VOTE411.org. Since 2002, we had been involved in DNet, an earlier on-line Voters' Guide effort, administered locally by Nena Hankins. Under Nena's guidance, we were early participants in a successor on-line voter information source, VOTE411.org, and have been a leader in the expansion of this respected resource for voters.

In the spring of 2007 the membership committee launched the Women in Public Service speakers series as a means to attract prospective members. The first speaker was Kathleen Chandler, legislator in the Ohio House of Representatives, followed by Portage County Auditor, Janet Esposito, in 2008.

2008 – 2011: TERRIE NIELSEN, PRESIDENT

During my tenure as President of the League of Women Voters of Kent, we adopted through concurrence with a position developed by leagues in the Cleveland area, our position on Intergovernmental Cooperation and Regional Tax-Base Revenue Sharing which addresses issues such as regionalism and cost sharing strategies between communities with shared needs and goals. Regionalism was the subject of our 2009 Holiday Brunch, where the speaker, Don Schjeldahl, discussed regionalism opportunities in Portage County.

We participated in the LWVUS national study on Immigration. This study brought several leagues in our region together to discuss the facts and fallacies of immigration in America. One of conclusions I drew

from this study was how complicated the immigration issue is and how much it varies depending upon where you live.

In March, 2009, we held an Open Forum with the Kent Environmental Council and the Portage Democratic Coalition to examine whether or not there should be a change in the Kent City Charter recall provision and, if so, what the details should be. That spring we also participated in the LWVUS National Popular Vote consensus.

We participated a LWV-Ohio study regarding State Finances and Taxation which we kicked off with our speaker, John Begala, Executive Director for the Center for Community Solutions, on the topic at our Fall, 2010 general meeting. In addition to working on the various studies mentioned above, members were encouraged to participate in leadership events which were sponsored by LWV-Ohio.

In furtherance of LWV-Kent's core value of voter participation, we received a grant from LWV-Ohio to work with high school students to register them to vote. Members of LWV-Kent went to some of the Portage County high schools and talked with them about why voting was important and how their vote could affect the outcome of elections that directly affected their lives. The students were encouraged to register to vote and those who did received an email reminding them to vote.

In 2009, LWV-Ohio settled a lawsuit filed against the Secretary of State regarding the rules surrounding who can be a provisional voter, the state-wide voter database updates and precinct election official training. LWV-Kent members met with the Board of Elections to discuss the terms of the settlement agreement to make sure they were being followed at the local level.

We continued our tradition of candidate events so the public could come and inform themselves about contests in upcoming elections. We also continued the "Elected Officials Event" where officials were invited to an informal meet and greet, so they could learn more about LWV-Kent and we could discern their goals while they were in office. Our Women in Public Service series continued with Kent State University President Dr. Carol Cartwright in 2009, Judge Barbara Watson in 2010, and Christine Craycroft, Portage Park District Executive Director, in 2011.

During the time that I served as President of LWVK, I was also on the LWV-Ohio Board, so I represented LWV at both the state and local level.

2011 – 2013: ROBERTA O'KEEFE, PRESIDENT

A highlight of these years was the inauguration of a different format to provide voters an opportunity to interact with candidates for public office. For many years, our "Candidates' Night" format included opening remarks by the candidates to the entire audience, and a question and answer period followed by closing remarks by the candidates.

Our Face2Face format, fondly referred to as "speed dating" for candidates and voters, provides an opportunity for candidates and voters to interact in a small group setting. The program begins with each candidate introducing him/herself to the entire audience. After these introductions, the candidates are assigned to a table of 8-10 for their first session with voters. They move from table to table after approximately ten minutes at each table. By the end of the forum each candidate has had an opportunity to meet in this small group setting with all attendees. Candidates and voters alike favor this format, which provides an opportunity to interact on a more personal basis.

These years were also marked by active studies and the development of positions which would enable LWV to take action on important current issues. We participated in the LWV-Ohio study of Human Trafficking. The study kicked-off at our fall, 2011, general meeting with a presentation by former Hiram police chief, Roger Cram, on "Human Trafficking in the USA and Ohio: Is it real and what can you do about it?" Under this state-wide position, the league supports legislation to stop human forced labor and sex trafficking, advocates for adult and child victim service, and aggressive enforcement of laws that include cooperation among agencies and strategies to reduce demand, training, and necessary funding.

During the 2011-2012 program year, we participate in two LWVUS national studies. The first addressed the role of the federal government in public education. The second, which we undertook in conjunction with other local leagues, examined the privatization of government assets, services and functions. At our holiday brunch, Roger DiPaolo and Brad Tansey from the Record Courier helped us understand the mysterious, emerging ways to communicate, Facebook and Twitter. In March, 2012, our annual Conversation with Women in Public Service featured Dr. Alfreda Brown, KSU Vice President, Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Our Public Officials Reception was held in April in an attempt to avoid the challenges of Ohio winter weather that often raised its ugly head during our traditional January date.

The 2012-2013 program year was very active with a wide variety of activities. It began with a presentation by Todd Peetz, Director of Portage County Regional Planning, on "Envisioning the Portage County of our Dreams." As part of an update on our Kent City Finance position, we toured the Kent, police station which we found was well beyond its useful life. In September, we participated in one of the early National Voter Registration Days as well as a KSU Political Science Fair which provided an opportunity for students to engage with candidates at the local and state level. At our 2012 holiday brunch, Douglas Brattebo, Hiram College faculty member, discussed "Demographic Change and Presidential Politics in 2013 and Beyond.

During the winter we undertook an in-depth study of Kent City School's programs, future plans, and finances in preparation for an 8.9 mill levy request on the May ballot. We decided to support the levy after our investigations. Kathleen Clyde, a member of the Ohio House of Representatives, participated in our Conversations with Women in Public Service series. In May, 2013 we sponsored a seminar on fracking with a focus on our local water supply and water table.

All in all, it was a very busy, productive two years for LWV Kent. The support of the LWV Kent board and membership made my second stint as President a stimulating, educational and very enjoyable one.

2013 – 2017: IRIS J. MELTZER, PRESIDENT

Looking back on my four year tenure, three key pieces stand out for me: Community outreach and involvement, diversity and membership growth. These, of course, did not keep us from the usual work of the League.

We established both a diversity vision and diversity statements as we moved toward development of a diversity plan for our League. Those plans are in place and being implemented. We affirmed our commitment to build a diverse organization that supports a community of respect, celebration and empowerment for people of all backgrounds, generations and cultures to participate in government.

In 2016, our membership increased to such an extent that fully 1/3 of our members had joined since 2014. Between the 2015 and 2017 State Conventions, our numbers increased by just under 50% from 84 to 123. At the end of my tenure, membership stood at 131.

Our community involvement continued to increase with our participation in both the Portage Park District Foundation's Environmental Awards Dinner and the Kent Rotary Auction. We established the Edith Chase Symposium to honor Edith, a Life Member of our League. Our partner in this effort was the Kent Environmental Council. Recognizing our role in supporting women in our community, we launched the Helen Dix Scholarship for non-traditional women students attending either Kent State University or Hiram College. Administered through the Portage Foundation, this scholarship continues to be awarded to deserving students. We partnered with the girls in the C.A.R.E.S. program of Skeels Community Center to implement the *Women's Voices: The Next Gen* grant we received. We also partnered with the Girl Scouts of Northeast Ohio to implement a Citizen badge program. Now known as "Voter Girl", this partnership is being replicated throughout the country.

Voter Girl is just one example of how our League's efforts lead Ohio in a number of ways. The Kent League began participation in the first LWV-Ohio's wave of MLD (Membership, Leadership and Development). From the start, our coach let us know that many of the strategies encouraged by MLD were ones in which we were already engaged. Our use of the phrase "Positions and Priorities" has become standard language for LWV-Ohio, replacing the easily misunderstood "Program Planning". Finally, in terms of leadership, the Kent League's model for candidates' forums, Face2Face, is catching on with Leagues throughout the US. (In fact, a Texas local League developed a planning guide for this model). Also being replicated is our reliance on co-sponsors for these events, broadening the reach of our public relations outreach and garnering new partners for us.

During my time as President we, of course, participated in National and State Studies and local Position updates. We participated in the LWVUS Agriculture, Constitutional Amendments and Money in Politics Studies; the Ohio study on the Primary Election System; and initiated updates of the Portage County Justice System position and the Kent City Charter position.

The Kent League was part of the success of the passage of State Issue 1 - a ballot measure that will make it harder for politicians to manipulate the state legislative districts. After Ohio's Secretary of State purged 1.2 million voters from the rolls, some due to inactivity, the League of Women Voters of Ohio partnered with the Ohio Voting Rights Coalition to make telephone calls to purged voters suggesting that they needed to re-register by the October 11 deadline. Members of the Kent League stepped up, took lists of names and spent time (and cell phone minutes) calling people on the list of 1,000 names we were given.

We started the practice of registering voters at the Haymaker Farmers Market. And, prior to the 2016 Presidential election, we also registered students, staff, and faculty at NEOMED, Theodore Roosevelt, Streetsboro, and Ravenna High Schools.

Our Women in Public Service series continued with Ann Womer Benjamin, Mayor of Aurora in 2014, Dr. Lori Varlotta, President of Hiram College in 2015, Iris Harvey, CEO, Planned Parenthood of Greater Ohio, in 2016, and M.L. Schultze, Digital Editor and Producer for WKSU in 2017.

Looking back, we accomplished a great deal during my four year presidency thanks to the support not only of our vibrant and committed board, but to all of our dedicated and devoted members.

During my tenure as LWV-Kent President, I was appointed Secretary of the LWV-Ohio board and will stand for election as President of the League of Women Voters of Ohio at the May, 2019 Convention.

2017 - present: STACY YANIGLOS, PRESIDENT

When my term began in July 2017, we were gearing up for the signature drive for a constitutional amendment to redefine how legislative districts are drawn in Ohio. We expanded our existing voter registration events and sites, which gave us the opportunity to register even more voters while collecting signatures at the same events. Dozens of Kent Leaguers collected thousands of signatures into 2018, in concert with other Ohio canvassers forcing the legislature to place a similar amendment on the spring ballot, which passed overwhelmingly on May 8, 2018.

Meanwhile, a talented and enthusiastic group was developing our Voter Girl Project (VGP). The program offered all levels of Girl Scouts – Daisies through Ambassadors – the opportunity to complete their citizenship badges, usually in one 3-hour session. Two hundred girls participated in the first event in October 2017 at the KSU Twinsburg campus; 240 attended in 2018. The VGP was selected to present a forum on the program at the 2018 LWVUS convention, and to take part in the LWV Marketplace. The committee worked tirelessly to develop detailed manuals and to copyright the information for sale in time for the convention. As of this writing, eighteen other Leagues are implementing this project all over the US, and planning is underway for the Kent's VGP event in fall 2019.

Early in 2018, we instituted All-member Monthly Meetings (AMM's) which rapidly developed into a popular forum for apprising members of board activities as well as presenting programs on timely topics. As our membership grew by about a dozen members per year, (141 members in June 2018, and about 155 members in spring 2019), these meetings provided a great opportunity for new members to engage.

After several years of work we attained 501(c)3 status in June 2018. In December 2018 we moved to a new platform and updated our website, gaining substantially more flexibility and functionality. During this biennium, we completed the Portage County Justice position update and began the Portage County Land Use position update, both with League of Women Voters of Northern Portage County. We also worked hard to keep national, state and local programs in front of the membership by having copies available of the relevant position at each presentation or meeting; this made way for less position review and more discussion and priority-setting at our annual Positions and Priorities meeting.

Our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion team created two subcommittees, one seeking to engage diverse groups within the Kent community and the other looking at League tools, events and processes, to identify barriers to achieving a more diverse membership and a voice in the community in support of diversity. The Kent League was honored to receive the *Social Justice and Education Award*, given by NAACP Portage County Branch, in October 2018.

That fall we participated in *Kent State Votes*, a program which brought together KSU and community stakeholders to promote Voter Registration, Education and Voting – *REV it up!*. We also participated as a co-sponsor in the #ElectHer program, a KSU Women's Center seminar for women seeking election to student government positions, and recruited six KSU student members to the League as a result of this sponsorship.

As this review goes to press, we are preparing to celebrate our 65th anniversary with an extra special Women in Public Service event, complete with cocktail party and invitations to members, friends, and all Portage County elected officials. Our speaker will be Carla D. Moore, Retired Judge of the Ohio Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Next Up? Planning is already ongoing for the centennial of women's suffrage and the founding of the League of Women Voters US!