

## Defining the Common Good: The Global and Local Story of the Frederick County League of Women Voters

By Hoda Zaki, with assistance from Brielle Rozmus and Nailah Russell

A founder of the League of Women Voters of Frederick County was a refugee fleeing persecution.

Her name was Ruth Hallo Landman. Born in Germany in 1927, Ruth and her siblings fled their home in 1939 in the wake of anti-Jewish riots targeting synagogues and businesses.

The riots, “Kristallnacht,” led to an international and multi-faith effort to rescue Jewish children. Ruth was one of 10,000 children who were taken to safe havens. She was 13 when she arrived in the United States.

An excellent student, she graduated from Vassar College Phi Beta Kappa at age 20 studying anthropology under Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead.

Ruth married a refugee from Germany, Otto Landman in 1948, and followed him to Yale for graduate study. Ruth earned an M.A. and a Ph.D. in anthropology while Otto earned graduate degrees in chemistry and microbiology. The family moved to Frederick when Otto accepted employment at Fort Detrick as a geneticist.

While living in Frederick, Ruth, then a mother of three, helped to found Frederick’s chapter of the League of Women Voters. She served as the chapter’s first provisional president from 1959-1960.

In the mid-1960s she and her family moved to Bethesda. Otto obtained a faculty position at Georgetown University and Ruth joined the faculty at American University. The Landmans cared about the well-being of their community. They were founding members of the Bethesda Jewish Congregation and actively supported the Democratic Party of Montgomery County. Ruth authored a book “Creating Community in the City: Cooperatives and Community Gardens in Washington, D.C.” in 1993 exploring the ways cooperative gardens, houses, and food stores help to create dense communities in urban environments.

Ruth was a “Fort Detrick wife,” one of many women who moved to Frederick County because of their husbands’ work at Fort Detrick. Many of the wives were young mothers and participated in civic organizations to improve the education of their children.

Frederick’s League was formally founded on March 31, 1960, four decades after the establishment of the national League. Fort Detrick was not the only source of the local League’s support. Early Frederick League members found an ally in Hood College where some of its members worked as faculty or staff. Many of the chapter’s meetings were held on campus beginning with its first formal meeting on April 3, 1959.

Quite a few of its presidents were connected to Hood College. League member Claire Kondig, who led the Frederick League from 1975-1977 and from 2006 -2008, was both a Fort Detrick wife and a Hood graduate, earning two degrees from the college. Mary Ann Ford (nee Holloway), president of the League from 1977-1980, earned two Hood degrees. Sarah Matthews, a graduate of Hood, and Betty Mayfield who taught mathematics at the college, are currently serving as co-presidents.

The national League of Women Voters was established in 1920 immediately after women were given the franchise with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Its first mission was to educate women on how to vote.

The League's Principles are based on the belief in representative government, individual liberties established by the Constitution, and a balance of powers between the branches of government.

For almost one hundred years the League has defined and promoted the public interest from a strictly nonpartisan position. It has weighed in on issues of national importance from civil rights to campaign finance reform, and equal opportunity in education, employment and housing.

Men became members in 1974 and Lord Nickens, the noted civil rights leader in Frederick, was the first African American to join the League. Today Frederick's League has approximately 200 members.

The League has developed a method of determining what is in the public's interest. It involves deeply researching a topic, listening to experts, debating the pros and cons of the issue, and finally, meeting to achieve what it calls a Consensus.

Once agreement is reached, the League publishes a report and holds public forums to disseminate its findings. The process is long and it models a form of deliberative democracy that educates members and the larger community through open debate and free expression of dissenting views. The League then acts to promote its recommendations.

Local League presidents in concert with their members can select the issues they want to promote, and Frederick's League has chosen to work on problems whose resolutions have served to make Frederick a stronger and more equitable community.

For example, Ms. Kondig, a former president and current board member, focused on improving voter services. In the past Frederick County voters could only register in Winchester Hall which inhibited citizens from registering if they lived some distance from the city.

Under Kondig's leadership and with League prodding, this requirement was changed and as a result, citizens can register to vote in many locations, thus broadening voters' access to the ballot.

The League continues to emphasize the importance of voting. It registers voters annually in the county's high schools and colleges and monitors the county's elections. It publishes a voters' guide for every election.

Initially the guide was mimeographed and given away at libraries and grocery stores, but since the 1960s the League has collaborated with *The Frederick News Post* to publish its guide as a multi-page insert.

Stuart Harvey, Director of the Frederick County Board of Elections, considers the voters' guide important in helping to educate voters about the candidates. He collaborates with the League in this effort and uses the guide himself. "They really do a lot with very little," he stated.

Victims of sexual assault have access to health care in Frederick in part because of the leadership role the League played in pressuring Frederick Memorial Hospital to improve its policies for victims of sexual assault.

In 1977, a rape victim had gone to the hospital for treatment but had been denied an examination to gather legal evidence. Instead, she was taken to Washington County.

A few months prior to the assault the hospital had approved a policy on the advice of some physicians who felt unprepared to meet the standards of collecting evidence from victims of sexual assault.

The denial of care led to months of public opposition with many groups protesting the hospital's new policy. At the forefront of this protest was the Frederick League, which lobbied the hospital's board and helped to prepare six public documents published in the local newspaper.

The hospital changed its policy and began to provide the specialized training that was required.

In 1973 Frederick Community College's faculty and the Frederick County Board of Education were deadlocked in contract negotiations. The faculty declared a work stoppage and were fired. The League, under the presidency of Kay Bresee, hosted public forums to inform the public, and reached out to the faculty and members of the Board.

At that time, the Board of Education oversaw the entire public system of education, including Frederick Community College. The League then conducted a study on education in Frederick County and determined that Frederick Community College should have its own board of trustees. Its recommendation was accepted.

Recently the League focused on issues such as the privatization of Citizens Home and Montevue Assisted Living, changes by county government in land use development policies, ethics in government, and immigration.

Citizens Home and Montevue had been privatized as a solution to stem deficits. Many counties around the country which supported similar centers had moved to privatization as a way to cap costs.

This move, which especially affected the indigent and elderly, had been a source of concern for the League.

Melanie Cox, the then-current president of the League, had experience in the health care industry based on her history as a nurse educator, administrator, and vice-president for long-term health care companies. The League drew upon its members' expertise to suggest that the financial problems of Citizens Care lay in its failure to bill Medicare at rates comparable to similar centers. Both centers have reverted to the County.

The Frederick League also took on the Development Rights and Responsibilities Agreements (DRRAs) in Frederick County. It undertook a massive study to understand the potential impact of these agreements and to compare the use of DRRAs in Frederick with other counties in Maryland.

It found that Frederick had utilized DRRAs more frequently than any county, for a total of 14 agreements. Furthermore, DRRAs in Frederick stayed in effect for 20 or more years. The League's study raised concerns about whether these DRRAs provided an appropriate balance between benefits to the developer and benefits to the County, as well as the extent to which adequate public facilities would be in place concurrent with new development. The League's position was not to oppose all DRRAs, but to use them more judiciously and only in the public interest.

Open government has not always existed in Frederick. Attorney Tom Slater, an astute political observer, wrote his MA thesis on Frederick politics in 1971. His research demonstrated that in the 1950s kinship and business ties transcended party politics in Frederick. Such ties often led to conflicts of interest.

The Frederick League has for decades been vigilant in monitoring public officials for unethical behavior, promoted greater transparency and decried the weak supervision of ethics in politics. It pushed for a stronger code of ethics for public officials.

The League recommended the formation of a nonpartisan Ethics Commission whose members would periodically evaluate of the adequacy of the Ethics Law and disseminate information to employees and officials. The Ethics Commission has been enacted. Jan Gardiner, the County Executive notes that the League is very successful in providing a balanced, nonpartisan view and has “provided real leadership regarding the Ethics Commission.”

The Frederick League continues in the tradition established by its first president, Ruth Landman, a child refugee who came to the United States to save her life and who, while in Frederick, helped to establish an organization that has promoted democratic values for almost six decades.

As she noted in her book’s conclusion, a vibrant community is created when its members are connected to each other in multidimensional ways and its members are given “this sense that the pieces of their lives are a web ... [and are] encouraged to weave its threads together and to enrich the design.”

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