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**League Pioneers Hands-On Civic Education for Solano County Youth**

Where does a new 18-year old voter, or even an adult voter, go to find out exactly what their government is doing and how to vote and exercise their constitutional rights? It’s kind of like balancing your checkbook—everybody expects you to know how to do it, but nobody actually teaches it.

That’s why a new League of Women Voters of Solano County (LWVSC) program is essential for the community, extending knowledge so that citizens can get involved and make informed decisions when it’s their time to fill out a ballot. Alice Fried, a community activist from Vacaville and a LWVSC [Board] member, initiated a program called “Democracy Works,” bringing extended civic education to middle school, high school and community college students.

“What’s missing in Civics education in the classroom now is information on how you interact with your government,” Fried explains. “We are a government ‘of the people, by the people, and for the people,’ so getting this education is on each one of you. You need to know how it works.”

The program, which has already been introduced to the Solano Youth Council (SYC) and Golden Hills School, consists of three parts: Observer Corps Training, Voter Education Training and Forum Training.

A two-hour session of Observer Corps training was held on February 4 at the Suisun City Council Chambers, with 13 members of the SYC participating. The program was conducted by Fried with assistance from Solano Youth Coalition’s **Rebecca Floyd**, Project Coordinator and **Johanna Nowak-Palmer**, Program Manager,Suisun Mayor Alma Hernandez; Suisun City Manager Greg Folsom; Fairfield-Suisun School Board member Ana Petero; Vacaville City Council members Jeanette Wylie, Greg Ritchie and Sarah Chapman; former Vacaville City Council member Nolan Sullivan; and LWVSC member Sandy Coury. The session included education on what local government does that affects daily life and how to attend a city council meeting to observe and provide input. Nolan Sullivan did a slide presentation where the students were informed about California’s Sunshine Laws and the national Freedom of Information Act as well as the Brown Act that governs how local officials must conduct themselves to guarantee that their processes are transparent and open to citizens.

“You have a right to be involved, and you have an obligation to be involved,” said Sullivan to the students.

Then students were selected to serve as city council members for a mock City Council meeting, headed by the Suisun City mayor, with Wylie serving as Clerk and City Manager Folsom re-enacting his job. Other officials and students were given questions and provided their own comments in a format exactly like what takes place at most city council meetings. This gave the SYC members a real-life enactment of how to read an agenda and address the council members in a proper and constructive way.

The League also brings the education into the schools, through Voter Education Training. At the request of Dr, Valerie Garrett, Director, Education Options the latest sessions, held in January at Golden Hills School, took students through lessons on how to use critical thinking, how to learn about government issues and actions, and how to conduct themselves with elected officials. Among those giving presentations were school board member Petero, Suisun City Council member Princess Washington and Vacaville City Council member Jason Roberts.

On the final day of the sessions, Solano County Assistant Registrar of Voters John Gardiner brought his crew in with the actual equipment used during Election Day, so students could see firsthand how a person is registered to vote and how to fill out and submit a ballot through the scanner.

Gardiner pointed out to the students that young voters have the lowest percentage of turnout in recent elections and some matters are being decided without their input. “One of the latest School Board bond measures funding the schools was passed by only 3 votes,” he said.

This education program is important according to Gardiner because “if we can hook students early, then there is a higher chance they will stay involved.” He encourages them not only to vote, but to enroll in the county’s Poll Worker Program where they can help conduct the actual elections.

The final component of the Democracy Works program is Forum Education, which has been actively conducted with the SYC. The results of this will be seen at the student-led State of Solano Education Forum coming in April, 2023.

The programs have met with enthusiastic support from elected officials. “It’s absolutely wonderful to see young people involved,” said Vacaville council member Wylie. “As a retired teacher, I understand the importance of a hands-on approach. So I say to LWVSC, keep it up!”

Vacaville council member Chapman recalls [also a LWVSC Board member] that during the Civil Rights Movement, the churches were the ones teaching people how to gather information about local elections and bring it back to their members to share and educate so that important decisions wouldn’t be made without their input. “That’s what this program does for students,” she said.

Fried hopes to expand this pilot program to more high schools and community colleges in Solano County, as well as take it to LWV National so that it can be used in other communities around the country.

Captions:

*OC Training Alice:* League of Women Voters Solano member Alice Fried welcomes members of the Solano Youth Council to the League’s Observer Corps Training on February 4.

*OC Hernandez & City Manager Folsom:* Suisun City Mayor Alma Hernandez and City Manager Greg Folsom explain the procedures for a city council meeting.

*OC City Council with VVCC Greg Ritchie:* Solano Youth Corps members sit in as city council members in a mock session where they fielded comments from observers such as Vacaville City Council member Greg Ritchie.

*Golden Hills Washington*: Suisun City Council member Princess Washington talks to Golden Hills School students about the importance of making good choices in one of the League’s Voter Education Program classes in January 2023.

*Golden Hills Voting Machines*: The Solano County Registrar’s office brought election machines to students in the Voter Education Program for hands-on learning about the registration and voting process.

[Please add LWV boilerplate blurbs]

**League of Women Voters of Solano County** was first founded in Benicia in 2004 and in 2020 expanded to all of Solano County. Our membership includes over 130 members from Benicia, Cordelia, Dixon, Fairfield, Vallejo, Vacaville, Suisun City, and Rio Vista, reflecting the diversity of Solano County. You can contact us at lwvsolano@gmail.com or visit our website at <http://lwvsolanocounty.org/>

**The National League of Women Voters was founded in 1920** and is a non-partisan organization of women and men that is community-based and organized at the local, state, and national levels.  Our mission is to promote political responsibility through the informed and active participation of citizens in governance and to act on selected and studied common-good governmental issues and policies.