

OPINIONS & VIEWS

The Federation Corner

The Montgomery County Commission for Women Holds Their Annual Legislative Briefing

The Sentinel Newspapers have offered the Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) www.montgomerycivic.org an opportunity to present the issues and opinions of affiliated community organizations. The viewpoints expressed may not necessarily be those adopted by the Federation. Any resident who would like to contribute to or respond to this column should contact Federation Delegate Alyce Ortuzar at (301)774-6617.

Open Wide the Freedom Gate

The highlight of the event was the speech by Dr. Dorothy Height, Chair and President Emerita of the National Council of Negro Woman, Inc. It was indeed a privilege to hear the wonderful recapitulation of her efforts and firsthand experiences – how she worked closely with Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune in the areas of civil rights and social and economic justice for all.

Dr. Height reminded us of Mary McLeod Bethune's words "Leave no one behind." Dr. Height elaborated on the meaning of this message: "Don't be so busy getting to the top that you forget about and leave others at the bottom. We must express ourselves fully—our civil liberties are in question. Leadership is not a set of skills or tools, but an understanding of the situation in which the person is attempting to lead."

Dr. Height talked about the importance of the state Commissions for Women and the Women's Research and Educational Institute to "the daughters of the feminist revolution. Don't forget your history in order to make a proper way to the future." In 1961, the first Commission on the Status of Women was appointed by President John Kennedy.

"Equal does not always mean exactly the same... you have to see how individuals and groups are each being affected—one size does not fit all given different life experiences and circumstances. When you advance women you advance a family and you advance men. Equity equals just due and empowerment. Legislation must take into account who will be affected and how, and who will it benefit and how. We must give legislators the deepest insights possible—what will it do to people? Who will be better off? Who will be worse off? What is our knowledge of this issue or policy?"

Dr. Height reiterated the importance of the courts, and how the criminal justice system affects us and our communities. "Two-thirds of the population consist of people of color," she continued. "We must not leave them behind. Racism and sexism must be held and fought together. I will never forget a picture on the wall of the Domestic Workers' Union in Atlanta of a woman on her knees scrubbing the floor. Written underneath were the words, 'Nothing to

show for a lifetime of work.' The majority of those who are poor in our country are white; the majority of those of color are poor."

Dr. Height was critical of the disparities in health care and education, where some are always at the lower end. "In order to move ahead women must be more than equal – everyone must have full equity and opportunity to secure the education and skills of a technological society. There can be no true peace in the world without equality and development." She cited the example of South African women who looked at the Bantu education and realized that it was a deliberate system of miseducation, more damaging than not having any institutionalized education at all, and they stood up and effectively opposed it.

Rosa Parks was not physically tired when she refused to give up her seat to a white man, Dr. Height explained. The "white only" section of the bus was full, and this white man wanted to move back the sign at the back of the bus that said "Negroes Only," in order to create another row of seats for the whites. But Rosa Parks said she "was tired of a system that meant I had to get on at the front of a bus and go back to sit down." Dr. Height concluded this historical narration: "We celebrate Dr. King, but it was one woman who had the courage and who started the Montgomery Boycott. It was Dr. King who came to get her out of jail."

"Children have no vote, and those who have been denied so long, feel they have nothing to vote for. Every piece of legislation should be for the betterment of all. After a lifetime of service, I know what it means to struggle. We should draw courage from history. Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune said long before the doors had been opened that 'we must open them.' It is on their shoulders that we stand and must work "from heart and hand to combat sexism and racism... We empower ourselves when we work for peace, justice, and equality – for freedom and dignity for every man and woman."

Action Alerts for Proposed Legislation

There were five sessions to choose from, and they were all repeated once. In addition to representatives from organizations working in each area, all but one included state elected officials discussing related legislation. I managed to attend portions of three

out of the five sessions.

"Keeping Women Safe" included excellent presentations by Montgomery County State Senators Sharon Grosfeld and Rob Gara-giola, and Howard County State Delegate Neil Quinter. Leah Barrett, Executive Director of Ceasefire Maryland (www.CEASEFIREMD.org), presented alarming statistics of deaths from assault weapons compared with deaths from wars and 9/11 (it would take a total of nine more Bin Laden attacks to achieve the same number of deaths; and more people have died in the U.S. from gunshot wounds than from all of the major wars combined). In addition, 2003 FBI data state that "at least 1 in 5 police officers killed in the line of duty was slain by an assault weapon." Evidence also documents that "legislation to ban assault weapons has been proven to be effective."

Proposed legislation strengthens and extends the current assault weapon ban to other models including copy-cat weapons that have certain military characteristics.

Delegate Susan Lee's bill closes loopholes in the current stalking law by expanding the current definition to include threats and harassment through e-mail as well as via phone and "snail mail."

Delegate Anthony Brown's "No Means No" bill strengthens the

punishment for date rapes. One example that was presented included the failure to prosecute a "date rape" despite evidence that the woman who was raped had been threatened with a knife. Many male legislators (including those on the House Judiciary Committee) insist that the failure to struggle implies consent even if the woman has been threatened with a weapon or is confronted by a much stronger male.

HB 150 extends sex offender registration to transient convicted offenders.

SB 77 prohibits harassment and intimidation in public schools.

Action should be directed to individual legislators to co-sponsor these bills and to the House Judiciary Committee, especially Committee Chair Joe Vallario, whose Prince Georges district includes the gun manufacturer Beretta (who should also hear from Maryland residents) and the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee.

Action is also urged against Senator Mooney's legislation SB 137 that would eliminate all restrictions on gun ownership and on concealed weapons.

"Making 'Work & Women' Work" included Montgomery County Delegate Ana

Sol Gutierrez and Jodi Grant from the National Partnership for Women and Families. For a copy of their report call the following number: 202-986-2600; or contact via the web: www.nationalpartnership.org. Legislation in need of co-sponsors (and support): Equal Pay for Equal Work, Senate Finance Committee, sponsored by Senator Grosfeld; Short-Term Disability for Working Families Act; and Unemployment Insurance Eligibility for Part-time Work.

"Understanding the Legislative and Budget Process" with (always enthusiastic and accessible) Montgomery County Delegate Jean Cryor and Baltimore County Delegate Adrienne Jones, focused on budget and legislative advocacy.

"Protecting Our Sisters: International Women's Issues" focused on women's struggles in Afghanistan (the Feminist Majority Foundation); trafficking in compelled/enforced labor in the United States (Lou DeBaca, U.S. Department of Justice; www.BreakTheChain-Campaign.org, [202]234-9382 x244); servile marriage; immigrant access to police protection and opposition to the federal CLEAR Act (www.TAHIRIH.org).

"Protecting Women's Health" included reproductive choices (Planned Parenthood of Maryland); and health care access (Glenn Schneider www.healthcareforall.org). Prince Georges County Delegate Joanne Benson's outspoken assessment of problems and solutions captured our attention as well as our hearts. According to the Executive Summary of the 2002 Health of Maryland Women brochure – Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (410) 767-6713 – stroke and heart disease cause ten times more deaths among Maryland woman than breast cancer causes. She urged support for the Hubbard/McFadden universal health care bill and for a complete workplace smoking ban.

Domestic violence, currently a misdemeanor, should be a felony. Too many male legislators still don't get it, she said. Maryland has a high prenatal mortality rate – 10th worst in the nation. Issues of depression, substance abuse and women in prison can be linked to the failure to collect child support. When a man deserts the woman, the court system does not hold him accountable—the court system is dominated by male judges who don't enforce child-support obligations, she emphasized.

Legislation authorizing licensed pharmacists to dispense emergency contraception will be before the House Health and Government Operations Committee and the Senate Education Health and Environmental Affairs Committee.

—Alyce Ortuzar,
Sandy Spring Civic Association

