

How We Have Grown

Women's Voices Raised for Social Justice, founded by four frustrated women in the spring of 2005, brought together 25 women in an initial meeting in May, 2005. We end our second year with 141 dues-paying members and an additional 238 subscribers to our e-mail list. We have continued to craft a cohesive organizational structure by approving by-laws and electing officers and a Board of Directors. Women's Voices is registered as a not-for-profit organization in the state of Missouri; we are currently seeking 501(c)(3) status.

What We Have Learned

The first imperative in our mission statement calls for us to learn about issues of social justice. We were fortunate to have these speakers and programs this year:

John Hickey from Missouri Pro-Vote, who taught us about Missouri's minimum wage and the "Give Missourians a Raise" campaign (which was successful at the polls in November, 2006).

Jean Ponzi from the EarthWays Center, who discussed climate change and what we can do about it.

Russ Mitchell, CBS news anchor, who talked about television news and how decisions are made to get news on the air. This successful program was open to the public and proved to be a fund-raising event for the organization.

Sidney Watson, professor of health law at St. Louis University, who described the new Massachusetts health care plan and gave us insight into Missouri's health care crisis.

Michael Kinnamon, professor of theology at Eden Seminary, who discussed liberal religious values and the difficulties that arise when one religious tradition tries to impose its values on everyone.

Susan McGraugh from the St. Louis University School of Law, *Rose Rita Heulsmann* with the criminal justice ministry at St. Vincent dePaul, and *Diana Oleskevich*, justice coordinator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, who spoke about the death penalty in Missouri and problems within the criminal justice system.

Mark Rank, professor at Washington University and author of "One Nation, Underprivileged," who discussed the increasing problem of poverty in America.

We are grateful to all our speakers, who shared their time and expertise with us to help us understand some of the critical issues facing us today.

What We Have Done

After we learn about issues, members of Women's Voices are called upon to act and to work for social justice throughout our community. Here are some of our accomplishments during the past year:

We initiated a friend-of-the-court brief in the Missouri Voter ID case that went before the Missouri Supreme Court in October, 2006. We were joined in this effort by the Jewish Community Relations Council of St. Louis, the Missouri Women's Coalition, the St. Louis Chapter of the National Organization for Women, and the 37 million members of the AARP. Thanks to the pro bono work of Attorney Cynthia Holmes, our effort was successful; the court ruled the proposed voter ID law unconstitutional.

We walked, marched and rallied with other community groups. For the second year, we marched in the Gay Pride Parade to demonstrate our commitment to inclusiveness and equal rights for all, and we participated in the "Walk as One" event sponsored by the National Conference for Communities and Justice. For the first time, we marched in the Annie Malone Parade to demonstrate our support for the African-American community. In April we joined with Planned Parenthood, NARAL Pro-Choice Missouri and the Missouri Religious Coalition to co-sponsor a rally showing our commitment to reproductive choice for Missouri women and comprehensive sex education for Missouri's school children.

We gave back to our community. In November, our successful "Shopping for Justice" program in cooperation with Plowsharing Crafts enabled us to support that organization while contributing \$647 to the "100 Neediest Cases" program. We also bought 26 books for the library at Wyman Elementary School in the city and five flocks for ducks for the Heifer International Project. Our booklet, "Women's Voices Put Justice Into Giving," was distributed to members prior to the holiday season and was mentioned in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

We joined with others. At the invitation of the Freedom of Choice Council, we became a member of that group to continue to work with others on reproductive choice issues. We also joined the Save Darfur Coalition. Three of our members traveled to Columbia to participate in the Missouri Women's Summit, six of us traveled to Jefferson City to attend a conference on health care sponsored by the Missouri Association of Social Welfare, two of us traveled to Columbia to attend the Annual Conservation Summit sponsored by Missouri Votes Conservation, five of us attended the two-day Climate Change and Energy Policy Forum at the Missouri Botanical Garden, three of us traveled to Jefferson City on an ACLU bus to advocate for a moratorium on the death penalty, and two of us attended a day-long program on the death penalty in Missouri sponsored by the School of Law at St. Louis University. We also joined with other organizations and activists to mark the fourth anniversary of the War in Iraq, and we continue to participate in programs and vigils to demonstrate our opposition to this war.

What We Have Done continued

We spoke out. We approved a position paper on Health Care for All Missourians and endorsed a resolution calling for a moratorium on the death penalty in the state. Many of our members wrote letters to the editor, which were published in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Suburban Journals, the Webster-Kirkwood Times, the South County Times, and Time magazine.

We caused some controversy. Along with Americans United for the Separation of Church and State and several other state-wide organizations, we co-sponsored a “First Freedom” dinner in Jefferson City for members of the Missouri legislature. The purpose of the event was to reinforce our commitment to the separation of church and state and our opposition to school vouchers and tax credit schemes which would take money away from public education. The event became controversial when a legislator from out-state Missouri discovered the Women’s Voices web site and circulated a letter to other members of the House and Senate, condemning our organization for our stance on equal rights, reproductive choice, and other progressive positions. We plan to co-sponsor the event again in 2008.

Our Focus Groups Are Working

Much of the work of Women’s Voices is done through Focus Groups. These are small groups of women who share a passion about a particular issue. Focus Groups meet in members’ homes throughout the year.

The Education Focus Group has worked with teachers at the Wyman Elementary School in south St. Louis for two years. In addition to helping with class projects and parties, one of our members regularly visits a classroom as a story-teller. The group’s initial effort to facilitate a project called “Book by Book,” in which area book clubs would provide books for classrooms in the city schools, proved difficult to continue because of apparent lack of interest. The Education Focus Group will be seeking new directions during the coming year.

The Environmental Focus Group has continued to work with others in the conservation community and has spearheaded a number of efforts, including a campaign to encourage mayors’ commitment to the U. S. Mayors’ Climate Protection Agreement. In April the group sponsored a booth in the St. Louis Earth Day festival, where hundreds of people received information about environmentally friendly modes of travel and the importance of replacing standard light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs. The group also created “Sniff, the Clean Air Dragon,” who drew much attention at the celebration and was featured on the front page of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

The Health Care Focus Group continues to struggle with the crisis of health care in Missouri, caused by sharp cuts in the Medicaid program and the increasing number of uninsured residents. Members of the group have learned more about this complicated issue from Ruth Ehresman from the Missouri Budget Project, Aaron Burnett from Jobs with Justice, and Alberta Slavin, former chair of the board of the Missouri Foundation for Health. In addition to authoring a position paper and participating in a conference sponsored by the Missouri Association for Social Welfare, members have lobbied state senators and representatives both at home and in Jefferson City.

Our Focus Groups Are Working continued

The Politics/Religion Focus Group has continued to work with others to promote freedom of choice and first amendment rights. For the third time members traveled to Jefferson City to participate in pro-choice “Lobby Day” events and promote Prevention First legislation. The group will coordinate our involvement in the “First Freedom” event next January and will continue to monitor legislation concerning school vouchers, education tax credits, stem cell research and reproductive choice.

and finally On Behalf of the Four Founders

Thank you to all who have served on our initial Advisory Board, those who have chaired Focus Groups, committees and programs, those who have made phone calls, written letters, walked, marched, rallied and lobbied, those who have given time, talent and treasure to make this organization as successful as it has become in only two short years. We are grateful to each and every one of you. As someone wrote to us several weeks ago: *“Women’s Voices rocks!!”*

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