

Ten Years, Lessons Learned

by Barbara Finch

It was ten years ago this winter that Ruth Ann Cioci, Joanne Kelly, Ann Ruger and I got mad. That's mad as in 'angry,' not mad as in 'insane.' But maybe we were a little nuts. Just like some kids say, "Let's put on a show," the four of us said, "Let's start an organization."

Did we have a clue what we were getting into? No. We really didn't know much about not-for-profit status or bylaws or how to get a logo. We had no idea how to do a website (thank you forever, Chery Green!), and we didn't know if people would show up for a program even if we were lucky enough to get a speaker.

What an interesting ten years it has been! During that time, Women's Voices has become the only multi-issue advocacy group in St. Louis that is not affiliated with a faith tradition. We have more than 230 members and more than 500 friends on our email list... that's more than some religious congregations. We've hosted 116 speakers on a variety of topics and they seem to have been happy to talk to us (and we haven't paid any of them). We've had nine programs a year for ten years... that's 90 educational efforts, all of them open to the public, free of charge.

With all of this going on, we're bound to have learned a few things. Here is my personal assessment of ten things I've learned during the past decade:

1. **Advocacy is exhausting.** Early on we decided we had to couple our educational programs with some sort of advocacy; Ruth Ann Cioci made that clear when she said, "I don't want to make sandwiches for the homeless, I want to cure homelessness!" We have had strong advocacy efforts on a number of fronts, including health care for all, Medicaid expansion, women's reproductive health and sensible gun laws. In Missouri, these issues have been non-starters. Personally, I would rather have a root canal than go to Jefferson City.
2. **There are different ways to work.** Some of our members enjoy our advocacy efforts. Some like to plan meetings. Some agree to serve on the board. Some want to sit at the door and greet people. All are necessary and all are valuable. If you can say "social justice," we can find a place for you.
3. **People like to talk to us.** To date, we have had no trouble finding wonderful speakers, and I can't remember one of them asking to be paid. For out-of-town speakers who do require a fee, we have been able to partner with other better-heeled organizations to bring them into town. More than one of them has said, "I love to talk to intelligent groups." That's us!
4. **It's good to be nimble.** Because we are relatively small and because we are local, we don't have bureaucratic hoops to jump through when we need to make decisions or take action. "Power," such as it is, is vested in the Board and everyone on the Board has email, which they check frequently, if not daily (or hourly). When we say, "we'll get back to you," we do it. Fast.

5. **You can exceed your expectations.** During our very early years we met at the Alberici headquarters on Page Ave. in a room that held 30 people. We thought we'd never fill it. But we did, and we moved to the Ethical Society, where we often get almost 100 for a meeting. At our "Safe & Sound" forum on gun violence last year, we registered 250.
6. **Money helps.** The four founders of Women's Voices made a point to say, on the first page of our web site: "We are not fund-raisers." (We didn't want to stuff envelopes, either.) But we have learned that, in order to be effective advocates, we need to have a little money. We are determined to keep dues low so that membership is available to all, but during the past few years we have learned that we do need money to be effective. Our thanks go to our current president, Lise Bernstein, who has shown us how to apply for grants when we have specific needs.
7. **Numbers help, too.** In our advocacy efforts we make a point of saying that we represent an organization of XXX women. Obviously, a group of 500 has more clout than a group of 50. So, if you believe in what we stand for, but you don't want to come to meetings, join us anyway. We will be your voice and we will be louder because of you.
8. **You can't do anything by yourself.** No matter how much money you have to pour into a cause, no matter how hard you work, you can't be effective as a lone voice in the wilderness. Making change means working together, not only within Women's Voices, but with Women's Voices working with other groups.
9. **We need you.** Not only do we need more members to have a louder voice, we need more of our members to step up to the plate to help us work. We need you to serve on the board. We need you to volunteer for an advocacy committee. We need you to lend us your expertise, whether it's in calling new members or working on the web site or designing a brochure or arranging a speaker. Remember, it's nice to be needed.
10. **People make mistakes,** and I made one when I said that I had learned 10 lessons. Actually, I've only come up with nine. But, on behalf of all the founders, THANK YOU for a DECADE of MAKING a DIFFERENCE. Each one of you has made a huge difference in my life, and I am grateful.

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