



Diane Mack

GUEST VIEWPOINT

NW Florida needs more connections

A few weeks ago, on the twenty-second floor of the Florida Capitol, Brown Barge Middle School student Grace Stanley stood proud and tall before an audience of 200-plus women as she read her winning essay, “To Help Our Women Veterans.” The occasion was the annual Women’s History Month celebration and student awards luncheon of the Florida Commission on the Status of Women. Grace’s entry in the commission’s 2017 essay contest won out over students from throughout the state in the grades 8-9 category. Her mother, Eurydice Stanley, a U.S. Army veteran and recipient of numerous service awards, teared up as she listened.

The surprise for us at the Institute was not that Grace won, but that she and her mother knew of the Florida Commission on the Status of Women (FCSW) and its essay contest—because the Board of IWP did not know that the commission existed until FCSW invited us to participate in their 2017 educational forum, “Understanding the Legislative Process,” in Tallahassee in March.

What this experience demonstrates, as we have seen time and again, is that our region’s connections to the seats of power, knowledge, and influence in our state are not as many as there should be and not as strong and effective, perhaps, as they could be. For our part the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida will work to establish a strong connection with the Florida Commission on the Status of Women, a connection that will be of benefit to our region as well as to the commission. So let’s begin with a little history.

The concept of such commissions dates back to 1961 when President John F. Kennedy initiated the creation of the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. In Florida from 1964 until 1991 commissions on the status of the state’s women were created by its governors, some with more enthusiasm and support, some with a great deal less. In 1991 the present FCSW was established by Florida Statute 14.24 in the office of the attorney general and was given the responsibility to “study the changing and developing roles of women in American society.”

The statute enumerates six areas that the commission “shall” study while providing leeway to include others. Two of these study areas relate directly to the mission and work of our Institute: “the development of individual potential” and “the encouragement of women to utilize their capabilities and assume leadership roles.” A third area, “the identification and recognition of contributions made by women to the community, state, and nation,” is on our bucket list.

Every year since 1992 the FCSW has published an annual report “to the Governor, the Attorney General, the Cabinet, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the President of the Senate, and the minority leaders of the House and Senate on the study carried out under the provisions of this section.”

The commission has done impressive work, as evidenced by its annual reports. A “Benchmark Study” in 1996 was accompanied by a separate report on “Women and Health” (1996) and succeeded by “Prevention by Intervention: Girls in Florida’s Juvenile Justice System” (2001), “Creating Change, Challenging Tradition: Florida Women Public Officials” (2002), and “Florida’s Women Veterans: Challenges and Needs of Those Who Served” (2011), to name just a sampling. Every report published by FCSW is available at <http://fcsw.net/publications/fcsw-annual-reports/>.

In March the commission launched on-line its “Florida Women’s Resource Directory,” which is described as “an effort to connect groups and organizations vital to improving the status of women and families in Florida.” Only three organizations from Escambia and Santa Rosa counties are included in the directory at present; one of these is our Institute. Every organization in Northwest Florida that provides resources and services to women and families should be listed in this directory. Information on how to request a listing may be found at <http://fcsw.net/resources/directory/>.

Diane Mack is a former Pensacola City Councilwoman and was the founding president of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida. She currently serves as treasurer. This Viewpoint is offered on behalf of the IWP Board of Directors. To inquire about membership in the Institute, email contact@iwppflorida.org.

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