

More than Ourselves

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Recently I heard a friend describe his mother as a “joiner,” and I had to laugh out loud. I knew exactly what he meant. He was talking about his mother, but he described me.

In elementary school, I became a Girl Scout because I liked the uniform with its fancy badges and exotic beret. As a young teenager, I was the only junior majorette in the marching band and struggled to keep up with the senior girls, who didn’t want to be caught dead with an 8th grader; and in high school, I joined the Yearbook Committee as a photographer to be with the cool kids, even though I didn’t own a camera.

Even as an adult, I didn’t change my ways. True to my history, I joined St. Andrew’s Woman’s Club as a young mother in 1989, with no knowledge or skill in community service or civic engagement.

But you understand, right? You’re joiners too.

So, here’s the not-so-surprising outcome: I perfected new skills as a scout and began to discover my natural talents, as well as the joys and pitfalls of group dynamics. The marching band took me beyond my small, rural town and broadened my horizons, giving me a better understanding of culture and communities, and pushing me towards larger goals in life. I learned to keep up with the big girls, or failing that, to just smile and be the cute one, a trick that’s not as useful at 64 as it was then. I found that even without a camera my creative talents were a much-needed asset and, surprisingly, I discovered the cool kids weren’t really that different from anyone else, perhaps a bit more self-assured on the outside, but just as uncertain and apprehensive on the inside.

Being a “joiner” has its benefits. I know you’ve discovered them too. In time, through success and failure, and the revelation of new experiences and self-knowledge, it’s what makes us MORE THAN OURSELVES. And, of course, this is especially true of our

membership in the General Federation of Women's Clubs, which has helped each of us grow in so many new and exciting directions.

And I could provide a long list about the benefits of belong to GFWC, tell you of the many friends I've made, the personal and professional skills I've gained, and the opportunities that have come my way, but I know I don't need to — because you've done the same.

All of these benefits are valuable, not only to each of us individually, but to our communities and to society as a whole.

Each of us here today has an enormous amount of individual power. We have the ability to speak up, to frame conversations in ways that influence and inspire others, and we have the initiative to take things in hand, to use our personal gifts for the greater good.

But individual power is not always enough — that's why joining together is vital for sustained progress. As a group, GFWC gives us the POWER of CONNECTION, uniting our abilities, our talents, and perhaps most importantly, our best intentions, and in doing so, multiplies our personal power.

In the more than 130 years since we became a Federation, our work has taught us the value of joining forces.

Together, we learned the POWER of COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY when we fought for the enactment of child labor laws, the eight-hour workday, workplace safety, mandatory seat belts, and the very recent 5-year reauthorization of VAWA—the Violence Against Women Act, which was signed into law in March.

Together, we learned the POWER of COLLECTIVE EFFORT when we established more than 5,000 free libraries in the 1930s, trained young women and sent them to Europe to help wounded soldiers, improved education and health facilities on Native American Reservations, and founded the Women's History and Resource Center.

Together, we learned the POWER of COLLECTIVE GIVING when we pooled our money to purchase our Headquarters in Washington, DC, buy 431 bombers during World War II, give the NY Fire Department a fully equipped ambulance after 9-11, fund healthcare and schools in many countries around the world, and, most recently, provide more than \$40,000 (and still counting) to UNICEF for the welfare of the children of Ukraine.

Together, we realized the POWER of COLLECTIVE THINKING when we established the Community Achievement Program (now known as the Community Impact Program) to improve the towns and cities where we live, participated in the conference that formed the United Nations, and created a citizen-based grassroots campaign during the Ford Administration to address a startling rise in crime.

In effect, it's working together that makes change — change that will advance society into more enlightened times.

Collective advocacy gives us a louder voice. Collective effort and collective giving drives bigger improvement and broader influence. Collective thinking produces better ideas.

Through GFWC, (or what my Boeing-engineer son would call) our “force multiplier,” we have the ability to conceive, design, and create change.

Change that protects women from violence, builds free libraries, provides vaccinations, helps war victims, and makes communities safer and so, so much more. Together, collectively, we have the POWER to change the fabric of our culture, and it's that change that will create a better future.

Since the beginning of this Administration in July 2020, our GFWC Executive Committee and GFWC Staff have worked together to reenergize the spirit of leadership and comradery within our Federation and to effect change that is meaningful and lasting in our work and procedures. Our goal is simple—to advance GFWC as one of the most important and hardworking volunteer organizations—so that GFWC clubwomen continue to make history every day.

One highpoint of this Administration was a meeting in August 2021 that included our Legislative Consultant, Debby Bryant, and two key members of the White House Council on Gender Policy: Rosie Hidalgo, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Advisor on Gender-Based Violence, and Dr. Shilpa Padke, Deputy Director of the Council and a specialist on pay equity and economic issues impacting women.

The purpose of the meeting was to explore opportunities to collaborate on gender issues, especially those relating to our Signature Program: Domestic and Sexual Violence Awareness and Prevention.

During the meeting I outlined past relationships with the White House and spoke about our recent expansion of the Signature Program to include sexual violence and to outline eight specific focus areas. Debby shared information on GFWC's support of recent bills and member engagement through the Legislative Action Center. She also highlighted future opportunities for engagement with the GFWC Executive Committee, Board of Directors, and Clubwomen.

In response, we learned about upcoming bills and programs from Dr. Phadke that correspond with our work, including a White House strategy to develop a comprehensive action plan on gender-based violence.

Ms. Hidalgo emphasized that the Biden/Harris Administration is embracing a more holistic approach to gender issues, noting that discrimination protection for pregnant workers, affordable childcare and housing, job training, and lowering the wage gap, are all crucial in improving the wellbeing of women and children.

Both Council members indicated they would like to engage more readily and frequently with GFWC and said they hoped this would be the first of many dialogs, and noted the Council seeks bipartisan involvement, with candid and open discussion.

In short, it was an exciting and productive meeting that is already proving beneficial. At January's 2022-2024 Orientation, led by President-elect Deb Strahanoski, GFWC's incoming leaders heard from Jennifer Klein, Co-Chair and Executive Director of the White House

Gender Policy Council, who shared information on their work, with particular attention to barriers facing women and girls, and praised GFWC for our efforts towards domestic and sexual violence, as well as education and civic engagement.

And in March I was honored to visit the White House for an event observing the 5-year reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and shake the president's hand and tell him about the more than 2,000 letters sent to the Senate and House by GFWC clubwomen to advocate for this vital law that will protect and support women.

GFWC has taken other important steps forward in this Administration. One that I'm especially proud of is the selection of a Teen Dating and Healthy Relationship emphasis for the Signature Program's Challenge Project. Over the years, our members have been committed to securing and providing much-need support to victims and survivors, such as housing and scholarships, but now we must step outside that comfort zone and do more. To be game changers in the persistent problem of gender violence, we must also work collectively to change the behaviors are acceptable in personal relationships and educating young women (and young men) is the surest and most expedient way to end the tolerance for abuse in America.

In this Administration we have also realigned the Community Service Programs to regroup projects into more clearly defined and compatible focus areas, we rewrote the GFWC Club Manual to standardize its format and add new features and information, we instituted remote meetings (including remote Region Conferences) and electronic webinars, and we've undertaken the mammoth job of revising the GFWC Resolutions to clarify and further define GFWC's scope of work...and to reduce their number by simplifying and broadening.

More recently, we have transitioned to an electronic *Clubwoman Magazine* so that it is now available to all clubwomen at less cost than the printed version that was provided free to 3,000 club presidents and by subscription to just 1,200 members. We've also worked hard to improve all communications, expanding the weekly newsletter, News & Notes, to include more articles and features such as highlighting the work of our International Clubs and spotlighting the blog that shares club success stories, and

enhancing the website, particularly with new clubwomen profiles. I hope that you have noticed the many efforts being made to connect with our members and to offer information and inspiration. Whenever you can, please reinforce these efforts by encouraging your club members to build their connection to GFWC by subscribing to the Legislative Action Center, learning to access the Member Portal, and taking advantage of other opportunities.

I'm tremendously proud of all the achievements of the GFWC Executive Committee and Staff over the past 23 months and applaud their foresight and fearlessness to step into the future. With Deb Strahanoski on deck as our next President, I have no doubt that GFWC will continue to make positive and progressive changes.

Before I switch gears, I'd like to mention one more thing—something that I need your help with. More members need to understand how we select the issues that we work on as a Federation and how our programs have evolved to meet the needs of local and global communities.

Since I became President, I've learned that one of the biggest misconceptions about GFWC is that we are nonpolitical. But the truth is that since 1890, the Federation has brought together women with diverse beliefs to work collectively on issues that primarily relate to women, children, and families. Some of that work includes advocating for legal protections and advancements, such as the recent Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2022. So, it is correct to say we are bipartisan, but we are often involved in legislation and policy, particularly when it involves a bipartisan issue that falls within our scope of work.

The programs and projects outlined in the GFWC Club Manual correlate to the GFWC Resolutions, which identify our issues of common concern and the remedies that we have agreed, by vote at convention, to work on together.

If, however, a member or club does not agree with a viewpoint adopted at convention by GFWC members, they are not required to support a position that conflicts with their personal beliefs and can speak against it publicly as a club member, or even as a club, by noting they represent the "GFWC minority view."

Our country is currently divided on many important issues, so I hope you will help members understand that Unity in Diversity does not mean that we all think alike or believe the same things. It means that we come together, despite differences, to work on issues that we, collectively, agree must be addressed for the benefit of our society.

Despite the challenges of the past two years, I know you, the members of GFWC Connecticut, have done a tremendous job in your state. I was thrilled to hear that your October 2021 Fall Conference featured a speaker from a local shelter for domestic and sexual violence victims, and that you distributed purple ribbons for Domestic Violence Month and participated in numerous projects to donate funds, as well as much needed items such as pajamas and toiletry supplies.

Congratulations to all clubs for participating in providing care bags for children, a project featured on the GFWC/CT Feeder Facebook page and shared on many club pages. I was particularly impressed by your many club projects to support Veterans and active Service Members, your two walking/exercising contests to improve physical and mental health, and your donation of more than 40,000 corks to the CorkClub for recycling.

I have enjoyed reading your state reports and especially your *GFWC Volunteers in Action Blog* submissions during this Administration from several GFWC Connecticut clubs, including the GFWC Woman's Club of Madison, the GFWC Manchester Women's Club, the GFWC Windsor Woman's Club, and the GFWC Woman's Club of Danbury/New Fairfield. And a big congratulations to the clubwomen of GFWC Woman's Club of Madison as winner of this month's "President's Pick," for their 22-year partnership with The Village, an organization that works to build healthier children and families in Greater Hartford, and their donation of more than 1,000 hand crocheted or knitted blankets.

GFWC Connecticut has certainly lived up to its Administration theme, "We Rise by Lifting Others." As President Fiore noted in her Administration Report, "The pandemic shook our world with uncertainty, but we overcame the obstacles." Congratulations to you, Debbie, and to your Executive Committee on a successful club year, and many thanks to each of you, for all you do for the Federation and to support communities near and far.

On a personal note, I would like to say that serving as GFWC International President has been a challenging and sometimes exhausting job, but it has also been an honor and the thrill of a lifetime. I wouldn't have made it this far, however, without the help of a very capable and dedicated Board of Directors, filled with amazing clubwomen like those from GFWC Connecticut: JoAnn Calnen, Region President; Debbie Fiore, Connecticut President; and Nancy Kalyan, Communications and Public Relations Committee Member.

I also want to thank each GFWC Connecticut club member. GFWC clubwomen are such an encouragement to me, and it is your support that gives me courage and confidence to carry out the duties and responsibilities of being GFWC President.

In closing, I want to remind you that GFWC is a proud and distinguished Federation, with many accomplishments and credits to our name, but our work is not done.

Many people in the world only want to live out their own dream, and many others don't have enough hope to dream for anything better. But we are the lucky ones; the ones with the will and the drive to make a difference and the wisdom to join together to make change happen.

It is the work that each of us does now and along the way that will shape who we become in the future, and it is the collective work we do now and along the way that will shape the future of the Federation and our ability to impact the world.

When you leave this meeting for home, please remember this one essential point: being a "joiner" is a good thing, it offers many benefits such as personal growth, but more importantly it is the POWER OF CONNECTION through GFWC that makes us "MORE THAN OURSELVES" so that we can be game-changers in our communities, state, and nation, and continue, as clubwomen, to make history every day.

Thank you!