

Local women influential in quests for equality

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Pam

Chapman talks about her mother Alice Chapman, one of the founders of the Women's Center of Greater Danbury, during an women's studies panel at Western Connecticut State University, Wednesday, March 12, 2014. The subject was "We stand on the shoulders of women who came before us."

DANBURY -- Working for women's rights, creating a path to male-dominated jobs, overcoming societal restrictions on women.

These efforts are essential, according to six women who spoke at Western Connecticut State University this week to commemorate Women's History Month.

The women shared stories that varied by generation and experience, but with a common sense of urgency: Women still struggle for equality.

"We stand on the shoulders of women who came before us," organizer and education professor Darla Shaw said in the introduction.

"I was lucky to be the daughter of someone who changed the world," said Pam Chapman, whose mother, Alice Chapman, founded the Women's Center of Greater Danbury in 1975 with Mary Elizabeth Corso and Bonnie Law.

"This little group of three women had a vision that was so far ahead of their time. It's an unbelievable service to the community."

The Women's Center started as a place for women to go because they couldn't stand at a bar in those days, Chapman said during the one-hour program.

"But what started as a place to hang out emerged as a place where women came who needed help. It became a social service agency."

Chapman's mother told her that once she went to the Police Department to ask about the number of rapes in Danbury. The officer she asked said, Where is that file of the "frustrated females?"

The center serves more than 20,000 people a year, and its free, confidential services are available 24 hours a day.

Betti Corso was born in the segregated South, married a military man and was raised to be racist, said her daughter, Rachel Poland. "She was told that colored women can't be ladies."

But once Corso understood racism, she became vigilant in opposing it. When the family, which included nine children, moved to Danbury, Corso blossomed as an activist.

"There was so much opportunity for her. She got her bachelor's degree and worked at the hospital. There was a light in her eye. It was incredible to see," Poland said.

"Since 1972, she was actively working for women's rights and upholding her standard of integrity."

When Josette Williams, of Ridgefield, learned suffragist and women's-rights activist Alice Paul was living in a nursing home in Ridgefield in the 1970s, she visited her.

In 1916, Paul founded the National Women's Party and at age 35 helped lead the successful effort for a woman's right to vote in the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

Many women stopped fighting for the cause then, Williams said. However, Paul told her the work was just beginning, so she fought for the Equal Rights Amendment of 1972 to ensure all people regardless of gender, would have an equal application of the Constitution. The ERA failed to be ratified by 38 states before the final, Congress-mandates deadline mandated of June 30, 1982, so it was not adopted. .

Williams benefited from one provision that Paul helped passed.

Prior to 1934, children born outside the jurisdiction of the U.S. whose fathers were citizens acquired citizenship at birth, but U.S. mothers could not transmit their citizenship.

In 1934, the year Williams was born in Japan to a Canadian father and American mother, Congress passed a law advocated by Paul to allow children to have the citizenship of their mother.

"It may shock you to know that if Alice Paul had not sponsored this legislation and fought for this right for women, Ted Cruz, who was born in Canada of a Canadian father and an American mother, could not run for U.S. president today," Williams said. "Also the birther arguments against President (Barack) Obama's eligibility are moot in light of his mother's citizenship, but I have never heard any analyst or politician refer to this fact."

Williams called Paul "an intellectual leader who carefully prepared herself, even in the last years of her life, for each level of her escalating battle for women to assume their rights and responsibilities."

"If Alice Paul were here, she would tell you to study hard so you learn and can effectively use the weapons of civil battle. Above all, she would say in her firm 92-year-old's voice, 'Stay aware of rights that have not been firmly established, or rights that have been earned, but not exercised. Regardless of gender, male or female, you will benefit from building a society strong in civil rights.' "

Retired teacher Rona Rothhouse spoke about breaking ground as a teacher and Sharon Nisch described the obstacles her daughter faced as a teacher to ensure her school upheld Title IX, the law that requires equal opportunities for girls in schools.

Local political activist Lynn Taborsak described how young women still were urged to be teachers or enter the "helping" professions in the early 1960s.

She became a teacher, but she was restless and in her 30s, became a licensed plumber. In what was then very much a man's world, she was a member of the steamfitters' union.

In December 1986, she spent a month in the sunshine installing a roof drain that will collect rain for 100 years.

"Work is an important source of personal satisfaction and esteem, and as women we ignore the satisfaction of work," Taborsak said. "Find work that has variety and physical exercise. It's impossible to find happiness and personal fulfillment if you spend 40 hours in a job you hate."

So many wonderful women have come before and are working now, Shaw said. "Be aware. Lean in. Your life needs to be one of equality."

Nineteen-year-old Western sophomore Emilee Tabora was among the 50 people on hand for the talk Wednesday.

"I was surprised how strongly these women were advocating for women's rights," Tabora said. "Even today, I see that males are more dominant in my field of business. I didn't know bad it was."