

COMMENTARY

# Year of the Woman? That was 1972

Permit a state history side trip, aided by the four living female members of the Minnesota House Class of 1972.

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Several presidential campaign outrages ago, the buzz was all about contraception funding, invasive ultrasounds, the definition of rape, the GOP male understanding of reproductive biology, and the gender gap in pay and politics.

The Republican candidate's wife felt obliged to declare her love for American women during GOP convention primetime. And the Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota summoned a visiting scholar to discuss the question: "Is 2012 the Year of the Woman?"

American University Prof. Jennifer Lawless answered: "This is not, at least on the policy front, the year of the woman. This is the year of 'You've got to be kidding me.'"

With due respect for Lawless, her trip to Minnesota was 40 years late. Minnesota's modern-era Year of the Woman was 1972.

Permit a state history side trip, aided by the four living female members of the Minnesota House Class of 1972 -- three DFLers, Phyllis Kahn, Joan Grove and Linda Berglin, and one Republican, Ernee McArthur.

Two other women elected in 1972 have died -- Republican Mary Forsythe and DFLer Helen McMillan, who for four years prior to 1972 had been the Legislature's one and only female member.

Those six constituted a still-deep minority in the 201-member Legislature. Yet their arrival was hailed as a breakthrough from which there would be no turning back. It looks that way still. It was Minnesota's Year of the Woman, and the dawn was dawning for the female half of the state's population.

Theirs was not a coordinated move into elective politics, the four survivors said. Each had her own motivation for running.

But each was affected by a quickening sense -- a full half-century after women gained the right to vote and serve in elective office -- that American women could and should play more important roles than they had been allowed in the past. Each of the four survivors seized an opportunity in 1972 that only a few years earlier she would not have seen, let alone thought herself able to attain.

Each also believed -- then and now -- that government governs better when its decisions are made by representatives who have lived the life experiences of all the people, not the male half alone.

Kahn is acting on that belief this year by seeking her 21st term in the House. She and fellow DFL Rep. Lyndon Carlson rank as the Legislature's most senior members.

Grove, who went on to serve 24 years as secretary of state, and Berglin, who became a national health policy leader in the state Senate before leaving the Legislature last year for a Hennepin County post, are still active DFLers.

McArthur served only one term. A Republican and executive director of the Brooklyn Center Chamber of Commerce, she was defeated in 1974 on a wave of post-Watergate anti-GOP sentiment.



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Minnesota Olympic marathon runner Janis Klecker (cq/source) speaks with fellow marathon runner and DFL House...

She says she also lost support because she opposed Roe vs. Wade, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion that was handed down only three weeks after the Class of 1972 took office. She says she convinced a somewhat hesitant Forsythe, of Edina, to vote with her on the issue.

The DFL women were on the abortion-rights side. Already then, social issues were dividing women who otherwise agreed that more women should sit at the tables of governmental power.

In that respect, little has changed. Witness the split in the delegation Minnesota sends to Congress: DFLers Amy Klobuchar and Betty McCollum, firmly prochoice; Republican Michele Bachmann, stridently opposed to legal abortion. It's hard to overstate the power of that "women's issue" to push Minnesotans into opposing camps.

But it's also hard to see how that division -- or any other major rift in the American body politic -- can ever be bridged without women significantly involved in the bridge-building.

Forty years after the modern American women's movement blossomed, women have yet to reach the "significant" level in Washington. The U.S. Congress is only 17 percent female.

Women's voices are stronger in St. Paul. The 2011-12 Legislature convened with 66 women, roughly a third of the total body. That's close to where its female share has been for two decades -- and that's the story in legislatures around the country, Lawless said.

"We are not seeing widespread change in the number of women running for local and state office. We have plateaued at the state legislative level. Unless we can really increase those numbers, we're not going to have the broad range of people to then run for federal office," she said.

By quick count, women are running this year in 31 state Senate and 64 state House districts. To borrow from my favorite baseball ad: Get to know 'em.

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Lori writes editorials and a weekly column about topics she has covered for more than 35 years on state government and politics. She's also a regular panelist on the Playing Politics podcast. Lori joined the Minneapolis Tribune as a summer replacement reporter in 1975, returned as a reporter in 1976, and was lead Capitol reporter and a newsroom assignment editor before joining the editorial staff in 1992. A native of South Dakota, Lori is a graduate of Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and a member of that institution's Board of Trustees. She has been the author, ghostwriter or editor of ten books, including "A Man's Reach: The Autobiography of Elmer L. Andersen," "Her Honor: Rosalie Wahl and the Minnesota Women's Movement," and "The Pillsburys of Minnesota." Her latest book is "Creating a Real School: the Lake Country School Story," by Larry and Pat Schaefer, released in 2016. She is a three-time winner of the Minnesota Book Award. Lori lives in St. Paul with her husband; they have three grown children. Follow @sturdevant.

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