

My experiences as a 50 year member of the Greater Lafayette League of Women Voters

## **Sonya Margerum**

My mother was a staunch League member and she encouraged me to join when I moved to West Lafayette in 1954. She said that the women I would meet in the League would be interesting women who cared about their community and were willing to study and take a stand on community issues. I believe that is as good a definition of the League and League members that I know. It has also proved to be true.

When we moved to West Lafayette, we lived on South Wood St. We had only lived there about two weeks when a Leaguer came to our apartment and asked if I would like to sign a petition to build a new library in West Lafayette. Of course, I did and also offered to carry a petition myself. Thus began my League involvement. I didn't actually join the League until 1961.

After working and having two children, I felt the need to get involved and I joined the League and the newly formed Wabash River Study Committee. The chairman was Eleanor Laird who was a fine New Englander, who with her husband, Donald, wrote popular books on psychology. They lived on the North River Road and were very aware of the Wabash River. We did an extensive study of the Wabash, including the controversial Lafayette Lake. I later became a member of the Wabash River Commission, established by the County Commissioners. We fought the damming of the Wabash and were successful in stopping that effort. It is very satisfying to see the establishment of the present Wabash River Parkway Commission and hear about its excellent plan for development along the River. Eleanor would be proud.

Most women at this time, were stay at home Moms and it was important to our intellectual development to be able to study and discuss national and local issues. I joined the Board as the Wabash River chair when Elaine Pearlman was the president. I had a baby then that I was nursing so I brought him along to the Board meetings and no one seemed to mind. At this time, there was a West Lafayette and a Lafayette League. In 1959, the Area Plan commission was organized and League members wanted to conduct a study of the new Area Plan and its ordinances. By then, I had become President and in 1961(?), we joined the two Leagues so that we could work on county wide issues. Madge Middleton was the Lafayette League President and it was a decision approved by everyone. The League has had "support for Area Plan and the planning process" on its agenda ever since. I think the League has played a major role in establishing the good, working relationship between all three levels of government. Elected officials, both Democrats and Republicans, who were also League members have been major players in supporting progressive and cooperative governmental initiatives such as, highway planning, solid waste districts, and economic development.

The major issue of the 60's was school reorganization. The echoes of that controversy still exist. The League was split down the middle on this issue even after studying it at length. Sally Ulstrup was the West Lafayette League member on the School Reorganization committee. The choices of a single county system, a two school corporation system or the present three school corporations caused bitter fights. Dinner party guests were carefully scrutinized as to their preference so as to avoid violent arguments. I was president at the time and spent many hours on the telephone trying to reconcile the differences. The League chose to conduct the public hearings in all 11 townships instead of taking a stand. The other bitter opposition came from the 11 township school systems that were being abolished. The boundaries of the districts were set but provisions were made to allow the two adjoining systems to mutually adjust the boundaries in the future. It has helped to provide us with three good school corporations.

Those three issues have defined the League and along with the strong voter participation efforts have made the League a major player in Tippecanoe County and gained respect and trust by the public.

The greatest value that the league has provided for me is the concept of grass roots participation by the members who study issues, come to consensus and then take a stand. As I began to get active in party politics, I had to withdraw somewhat from League work, but I have always credited the League with developing the grass roots participation and consensus concepts long before they became popular.

I was elected to the City Council in 1976 and then elected Mayor in 1980 and served 6 terms until 2004 when I retired.

The League of Women Voters gave me my start in community affairs and educated me in the importance of careful study and consensus before taking action. I would encourage anyone interested in their community to get involved and meet some interesting women who want to make a positive difference in the world.

Thanks, Mom!