

Democratic women

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by **Steven Higgs**

Jill Lesh responds without reflection when asked what role the Democratic Women's Caucus played in her status as soon-to-be county councilwoman.

"I wouldn't be in this situation without the Democratic Women's Caucus," she says. "No question about that."

Valeri Haughton, who is running for Circuit Court Judge, isn't quite as emphatic. But, as she talks about the "encouragement and support" she got from the DWC in her three-way Primary race last spring, her message is the same.

Neither goes as far as calling the three-year-old political action committee a political power. But when the question is posed, looks of satisfaction flash across their faces.

The Democratic Women's Caucus has become, in fact, the predominant political force in local Monroe County politics today. And its legion of engaged and empowered women are out to change the face of the local political scene, literally, from nearly all white male to something more representative of the community.

"I don't think that this group's mission is forums or educating the public," Lesh says. "Its mission is getting women into office."

The DWC's seeds were sewn during City Clerk Regina Moore's eight years as vice chair of the Monroe County Democratic Party. Whenever she sat in policy or other sorts of strategic meetings, Moore was always cognizant of her minority status. "I was surrounded by all men," she says, "or mostly men."

The seeds sprouted in 2003 as Moore and other Democratic Party organizers sought a candidate for the District 2 City Council seat held by Republican Jason Banach.

"We probably asked six or seven women if they wanted to run," she says, "and they all had some reason or excuse."

That led Moore to question why and to invite to lunch a handful of veteran women political figures – including former County Commissioner Charlotte Zietlow, former City Clerk Pat Williams and City Plan Commission member Susan Fernandez – to whom she posed the question.

"It was such an empowering meeting," Moore says. Susan Sandberg came away from it comfortable that she would have the support she needed to run in the District 2 race that year.

Moore and Sandberg were the only women on the ballot that fall, and when the votes were tallied, the council was all male for the first time since 1971, when Zietlow became the city's first city councilwoman. City Clerk Moore was the only elected female official in city government.

The DWC explains the situation on the history page of its Web site, "Not only was there a lack of women winning elected offices, but a lack of women running for elected offices! Something had to be done!"

The DWC held its first official meeting at the Village Deli in January 2004 and has met monthly ever since. A lunch meeting in March of that year drew 45 women, from college students to former mayors, and featured talks by all three female Democratic candidates on the ballot – Sophia Travis, Iris Kiesling and Sandy Newmann.

The caucus didn't have a formal endorsement process at that time, but members did lend their support to all three women candidates.

“Ever since then we've really taken off,” Moore says. Travis was elected to the County Council, Kiesling was re-elected county commissioner, and Newmann was elected as the first Democratic county auditor in decades.

Today, the DWC has a formal process through which candidates submit applications for endorsement. And success carries with it substantially more than just rhetorical support.

For Lesh and Haughton the DWC provided the building blocks of any successful campaign in their contested Primary races last spring. “They provided the volunteers for my campaign and my campaign managers,” Lesh says, estimating “a total of 12 to 14 people. I didn't get to every door, but somebody did.”

Moore says DWC endorsed three candidates for judge and county council and contributed \$6,000 to their Primary campaigns: \$3,000 to Haughton, \$2,000 to Lesh and \$1,000 to Teresa Harper, who is also running for a circuit court judge seat.

In May, Haughton defeated former Monroe County Prosecutor Bob Miller and attorney Alphonso Manns and is now running against Republican Francie Hill. Lesh defeated environmental and community activist Bill Hayden and is running unopposed for County Council.

Harper is running against Republican Jeffrey Chalfant, who was appointed by Gov. Mitch Daniels to a new circuit court judgeship.

This fall, the caucus has contributed \$2,000 each to Haughton's and Harper's campaigns.

The DWC's Web site declares as its purpose “to inspire, recruit, train, support, and fund progressive women to increase the numbers of women in the electoral process and in elected and appointed positions.”

And while Haughton and Moore struggle a bit to define the term progressive – “making progress, not going back in time,” Moore says – one criteria does seem sacrosanct.

“I don't think we would endorse someone who was not pro choice,” Moore says. In fact, the online application criteria begin with, “Pro Choice Democratic Women candidates in the local area of Monroe County.”

But Moore bristles when she recalls criticisms in the Primary that the DWC endorses candidates solely on the basis of gender.

Miller served as a former county prosecutor for eight years, while Haughton worked as a deputy prosecutor under his successor, Republican Carl Salzman.

Sources say there was intense debate within the DWC over its recruitment of Lesh to run against Hayden, a progressive community activist for more than three decades. Lesh has only lived in Bloomington 2 ½ years and says she doesn't know enough about the community today to say whether

it is headed in the right direction.

“No, no, no,” Moore says. “I don’t think so.”

First and foremost they are Democrats, she says. And they want to see more Democratic women in process.

“That doesn’t mean that we’re against men,” Moore says. “If a woman came to me and said I want to run against Dave Rollo, I would say, ‘You must be crazy. This man has done everything right. Why would you want to run against an incumbent, who’s doing a good job?’”

Still, she says, there are some people who don’t like the fact that the DWC endorses women.

Up to this point, the caucus has not faced a decision between a clear contradiction of candidate and philosophy.

“People asked what we would do if Gretchen Clearwater asked for an endorsement,” Moore says of progressive, anti-war candidate Gretchen Clearwater, who challenged moderate Baron Hill in the Democratic Primary for the Ninth District U.S. House seat.

“Now, here’s a Democratic man who’s maybe not as progressive as I would like him to be, or as liberal as his opponents think he is, but she didn’t ask, so we didn’t have to make that decision. If we had, I think it would have been a very interesting discussion.”

And with an all-male cast of Democratic characters in the mayor’s office and city council, next year’s city elections could be a test.

“I don’t know,” Moore says when asked what if a progressive woman said she was going to run against Democratic Councilman Mike Diekhoff, “we haven’t come to that yet.”

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