

How 100 years of women's right to vote changed our community

Local leadership shows significant progress for women in past 20 years.



Susan Hesselgesser, executive director of the League of Women Voters of the Greater Dayton Area, says the work of Dayton suffragists still continues.

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One hundred years ago this week women in the U.S. received the right to vote, and the anniversary is a benchmark to gauge how well our society is doing benefiting from the full participation of half the population.

Dayton's suffrage movement was unusually active, passionate and inclusive, leading to the formation of one of the earliest chapters of the League of Women Voters in the country. As the nation celebrates the Aug. 18 anniversary of the adoption of the 19th amendment, people still see much remains to be done.

Women today vote at a consistently higher rate than men. In the 2018 midterms, 55% of eligible women turned out to vote, compared with 51.8% of men, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Women hold four of the seven seats on the Ohio Supreme Court, and Maureen O'Connor has been chief justice since 2011.

But by many benchmarks, women trail. Women comprise 29% of elected officeholders in Ohio, across all levels of government.

Ohio has not elected a woman as United States senator, governor, nor state senate president. In Montgomery County, women hold 106 of 413 local and statewide offices, including judges, mayors, school boards, community offices and state senate, according to League of Women Voter statistics.

“Considering the 72-year struggle from Seneca Falls to the 19th Amendment in 1920, I believe our Dayton suffragists would be happy,” said Susan Hesselgesser, executive director of the League of Women Voters (LWV) of the Greater Dayton area. “I am sure it was beyond their imagination to think, 100 years later, that a woman could be nominated for the presidency and vice presidency of our country. The suffragists were feisty yet practical ladies, and I think they would be well pleased.”

Premier Health President and CEO Mary Boosalis, the head of the region's largest hospital system which employs 13,000 people, said there is reason for pride but that Dayton suffragists might be disappointed that women haven't achieved fuller equality in government and business. “I am glad we are progressing,” she said.

“But when you look at the aggregate data for women in 2020, we still have a good way to go.”

In the Miami Valley, as in the rest of the United States, women lag behind economically, earning less than men and suffering higher poverty rates. In the Dayton metropolitan area, 31.9% of female headed family households live at or below the poverty level, compared with 12.8% of households headed by men, according to Census Bureau statistics.

(That's higher than the national poverty level of 25.7 for female-headed households.) Ohio women earn an average hourly wage of \$16.15 compared with \$19.29 for men.

“Women are more likely to be in precarious jobs, more likely to be in jobs that are poverty-level wages, and less likely to have job safety in times of crisis,” said Hannah Halbert, executive director of Policy Matters Ohio. “During the pandemic, women are really feeling the squeeze.

They are often still expected to bear the brunt of child care at home at a time when child care is not accessible. And they are over-represented in fields such as retail and food service where people are being laid off.”

A snapshot of local leadership, however, reveals significant progress for women during the past 20 years:

- Rhine McLin became Dayton’s first female mayor in 2001 – nearly 200 years after Dayton’s first town council was initiated. Current Mayor Nan Whaley took office four years after McLin’s departure.
- With the swearing-in of Carolyn Rice in 2019, women held all three seats on the Montgomery County Commission for the first time in its history.
- Col. Colleen M. Ryan made history in 2012 when she became the first female commander in the history of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.
- Wright State University’s first female president – Cheryl B. Schrader, who took the helm in 2017 – was succeeded this year by the university’s eighth president, Susan Edwards.
- At Premier Health, about 60% of executives at the vice president level and above are women, as are the top two executives and the chair of the locally led board of trustees.

Boosalis has found Dayton to be a supportive community for women ever since she accepted a post-graduate fellowship at Miami Valley Hospital in 1985. She passed on another fellowship when an interviewer called her “a little lady.”

“Dayton has a long history of being collaborative and working together for the common good,” she said.

“I have had an exceptional experience in Dayton. That has a lot to do with the organization I’m with and the opportunities I have had.”

Yet Boosalis sometimes still finds herself the only woman in the boardroom.

She gently nudges them -- “Hey guys, it is 2020!” – believing that constructive dialogue is more persuasive than angry confrontation.

Inclusivity isn't only beneficial for women in the workforce, Boosalis said; it's critical to the success of the business itself. “From a business perspective, it's important to reflect the communities you serve,” she said. “Whatever your business, you will have a better product with a diverse workforce. And my other general principle is that excellence is hard to find. Why would you exclude half the opportunities for finding it?”

Dayton-area women in business have made considerable strides in recent years, according to Stephanie Keinath, director of public policy and economic development for the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce. In the private sector, women serve as chief executive of 144 out of 620 Dayton-area companies. (Women held only 7.4% of CEO roles, by contrast, on this year's Fortune 500 list.) “I've really seen shifts taking place since I started at the Chamber 13 years ago,”

Keinath said. “We've seen a lot of movement, particularly in leadership roles. But we still have a long way to go, nationally as well as locally.”

Dayton has some built-in advantages, Keinath said, from its history as an entrepreneurial epicenter to a low cost of living that keeps overhead down. “But there continue to be challenges, particularly for women of color, to access capital and obtain technical support,” she said.

The Chamber strives to connect women with resources such as investors and bankers, Keinath said: “A strong network is the key. We're helping women to develop their own networks.”

That's one of the reasons the Chamber launched Empower, a 10-month program that provides professional business coaching as well as leadership workshops for Dayton-area women business leaders.

Recent graduates Errin Siske of Centerville and Charlynda Scales of Beavercreek said the Empower program has proven invaluable to their personal and professional growth.

Siske built her business — the design company Spark Space Creative — while working full-time at another job.

After 18 exhausting months of moonlighting, she decided nearly 10 years ago to devote herself to her business fulltime.

“It felt so monumental,” she recalled.

The Empower program provided the perfect kind of networking for Siske, who feels uncomfortable walking into a room where she doesn’t know anyone. It’s in keeping with the deeper relationships she likes to cultivate with her clients in the nonprofit sector.

“You walk in not knowing who anyone is, but over time you build relationships based on the stories you are sharing with this group, and a supportive, warm community is created,” Siske said.

Scales, too, loved connecting with other talented women in the region. “It’s a sisterhood,” she said of her fellow Empower participants.

“The challenge is to be in the room; that’s where the conversation changes, where people evolve and move forward.”

Scales was a career Air Force officer stationed at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base who never dreamed of starting her own business.

One night at the dinner table in 2013, she was missing her beloved grandfather, Charlie Ferrell, also an Air Force veteran. He died in 2005, without, she believed, ever revealing the secret to his famous sauce that had graced nearly every family meal since the 1950s.

She lamented to her mother, Marsha Sanders, “My food doesn’t taste right. I miss Grandpa’s sauce!” Sanders handed her a mysterious envelope — her grandfather’s handwritten recipe for the sauce. “He wanted you to have it,” her mother said. She had held onto it for all those years for fear that the rest of the family would hate that Ferrell had singled her out.

Scales’ mentor with the Dayton SCORE small business mentorship program, John Tutor, encouraged her to consider the product’s commercial potential. “He had me thinking bigger — that I could bottle this sauce in mass

quantities, instead of just giving it away for free to family members,” Scales recalled.

Today Mutt’s Sauce – named in honor of her grandfather’s Air Force call number – is sold in 57 stores throughout Ohio, as well as local chains such as Dorothy Lane Market and Dot’s Market. Far from being resentful, her extended family members are big boosters of the brand.

As an African-American woman and an entrepreneur, Scales said, “I am an anomaly. My presence still has a wow factor – ‘I can’t believe she did that.’ But it shouldn’t be amazing. It should be part of the nor-