

Women describe their 70 years of liberation

Speakers urge younger women to take up leadership work

By **JOHN BRANTON**
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When Val Ogden was about to graduate from high school, around 1941, she told her father she wanted to go to college.

"He said, 'You know, your brother is our priority, because he will be the breadwinner. He will be the one who will have to go out and support the family,'" Ogden said.

She spoke to a crowd of more than 100 people Friday night in a celebration of International Women's Day at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver.

Her family was supportive, Ogden said, but there was a strong male-centered mindset in those times.

Ogden, a retired Washington state representative, described some challenges and progress toward women's equality over the past 50 years.

Her travels after college took her to Florida, where she got a job and joined an interracial group that was controversial at the time.

"We had a wonderful, wonderful time," she said.

But she learned that "In Florida in 1944, only men could own property."

Later, she was married with three children in Pullman and started working with a women's group.

The newspaper headline said, "Housewife doing job for the YWCA," she recalled.

The news story referred to her as Mrs. Daniel Odgen Jr., she said. "Not once in the article did they ever mention my given name."

Ogden said she resented the headline but cherished being able to raise her children at home.

Many women today don't have a chance to do that, she said.

And she spoke of a time when, especially at colleges in the South, YWCA members who held interracial meetings were in grave danger.

"Here we are today, and we can point to many great things and great progress," she said.

Yet today, only 3 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are women, she said.

Further goals

Like other speakers Friday, Ogden urged women to seek leadership positions, "because there is power when you are in leadership."

She called for a world with equality in leadership and respect, and also where men and women share equally in hands-on care for family members.

"Only then will we have a nation built on the principle that the work women have done for the millennia is every bit as important for the survival and advancement of the human race as the work men have done."

She added, "This is the path our nation is on."

Ann Virtu Snyder, an instructor of women's studies at Clark College, looked back to the early 1900s, when her grandmother wasn't allowed to vote.

She, too, called for women to oppose gender inequality and take the lead, because those in power make the decisions, such as who gets education and health care "and who gets to live next to the toxic waste dump."

Looking at feminism worldwide, Snyder suggested that folks do Google searches for international women's organizations.

She said woman "make up more than half of the population of the planet," and said "There can be no human rights without women's rights."

Looking farther back, she said, "Rape has been a part of war since war has existed, and women have been the spoils of war," considered a man's property to do with as he liked.

The third speaker, Laura Nitti, recently graduated from a small Quaker school in Indiana, has been an advocate for survivors of domestic assault and has focused on women's and Hispanic studies. She has worked on border studies in El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and at an emergency



Val Ogden
Retired Washington
State representative



Ann Virtu Snyder
Women's studies
instructor at Clark
College



The Rev. Shelly Fayette
First lesbian
associate priest at
the Church of the
Good Shepherd

shelter for victims of domestic violence in Portland.

"Violence and unequal safety continue to be a problem in our community," she said.

Last to speak was the Rev. Shelly Fayette, the first lesbian associate priest at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Vancouver.

Fayette, a charismatic speaker who has been called "liquid sunshine," spoke of her early life, including her discovery of books about women's studies in seventh grade.

Her mother, an honored science teacher, was called a witch by fundamentalist Christians, she said.

As she grew up, she felt a call to work at a shelter for pregnant, homeless women, operated by nuns in South Central Los Angeles. The women were poor and spoke different languages.

She said only women could be there, and recalled their friendships, laughter, living and eat-

ing together, caring for babies, and going to church.

"It was awesome," she told the crowd.

She spoke of her "feminist dad, who taught me that making nice and making justice are tendencies usually at odds with each other, and that making justice was more important."

Her experiences have molded her into a complex, outspoken person and an opponent of oppressions and exclusions, she said.

"I'm a priest ..., I'm queer, I'm femme, I'm pissed off, I'm grateful, I'm a women's sympathizer with a feminist background," she said. "I am anti-racist, I am a trans-ally, I'm fact-positive and sex-positive and I am a beloved creature of God."

"I am a person whose primary commitment in this life is the liberation of all beings, especially those who are working marginalized and hurt, because that's the side God's on."

She called for people to recognize "the way power duplicates itself and protects itself" and she made it seem possible that better times may come.

By working together, she said, folks can make "a just and beautiful world, a world to make both our foremothers and forefathers, and our children, proud."

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