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Leading women to run and win

Wednesday, March 24, 2010

BY CINDY FORREST
NEIGHBOR NEWS (BOONTON EDITION)
STAFF WRITER

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Nationwide, women make up almost 52 percent of the voting age population and a larger percentage of women than men vote. However, in 2010 women hold only 16.8 percent of the 535 seats in the 111th U.S. Congress – 17 of the 100 seats in the Senate and 73 of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives. Seventy-two women hold 22.9 percent of the 315 available elective executive office positions, according to the Center for American Women and Politics.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CINDY FORREST

Mountain Lakes High School students participating in the League of Women Voters' third 'Running and Winning' workshop. Louise Davis, Mountain Lakes deputy mayor, assisted one of the Running and Winning teams.

With this in mind, the Mountain Lakes League of Women Voters ran its third biennial "Running and Winning" workshop at the high school for sophomore, junior and senior girls. The League believes that to achieve greater representational gender parity, young women must be inspired at an early age to take an interest in public service and develop leadership potential.

During the daylong workshop more than 60 female students were introduced to the world of politics by some of the region's most influential women and given the opportunity to explore public service as a career.

The morning began with motivational speeches from Mountain Lakes High School Principal Dr. Anne Mucci and Blair MacInnes, a fundraising consultant and former New Jersey State Senate Candidate.

"I love the title of this event; the concept of Running and Winning is so inspiring," said Dr. Mucci. "Every month I proudly represent MLHS at NJAC meetings, this group is over 40 high schools in the area. Among the principals in the room I am one of only three women, every time — and that includes the little nun from Villa

Walsh who has been there forever. Women are still underrepresented in political office and higher-level management positions. All of the amazing women that you meet today are going to share their stories and answer questions ... listen, use their expertise to inform choices that you make about your life." Then the League program chairwoman, Roberta Spray, gave the young women an overview of the day, which included interviews, campaign work, speeches and a presentation. Twenty female politicians and political operatives led small group discussions about successfully running for office.



Among the local politicians who participated are: Annelise Catanzaro, a former Parsippany Council candidate; Louise Davis, Mountain Lakes deputy mayor; Mimi Letts, former mayor of Parsippany; Deborah Nielson, Montville committeewoman; Margaret Nordstrom, Morris County freeholder; Cindy Romaine, Dover alderwoman; and Blair Schleicher Bravo, mayor of Mountain Lakes.

"This is a great program," said Romaine. "It gives the girls an opportunity to ask questions, understand the process and not be afraid to think about public office."

In the interviews, the students questioned how and why the women decided to run for office and what the process entailed. They also asked about the challenges and rewards of public life and how politicians balance

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"Most of the politicians got involved because someone asked them and they told us that they hoped that wouldn't be the case for us," observed 12th-grader Alex Mintz, "that we would just step up and get involved."

Then it was time to get to work. The premise was that each team of four or five students would be campaigning for the office of governor. In each group, one girl would take on the role of either the candidate, the campaign manager, the press spokesperson or the communications consultant.

The politicians helped the girls with the tasks associated with each job such as writing a two-minute speech and creating a slogan. The girls were told that they have been invited to speak to their "constituents" about their position on giving in-state tuition to unauthorized immigrants. There were five possible positions and each team was assigned one that it would have to promote and defend in their speeches.

During the wrapup, Dr. Stephanie Hoopes Halpin led a question-and-answer session that delved into lessons learned.

"There is no mold to be a woman politician. Women from many different backgrounds go into politics for many different reasons. Each one of you is qualified and capable of running for office," she said.

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