

90 years after suffrage, Gloucester County political women reflect

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It was 90 years ago today that the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution went into effect. That amendment prohibited each state and the federal government from denying any citizen the right to vote based on sex.

The first woman elected to any political office in the United States was Susanna Madora Salter, who served as mayor of Argonia, a town in Kansas with a current population of about 534. Oddly enough, her elected position came about 30 years before the 19th Amendment was ratified, in 1887.

Salter's election fueled not only a surge in women voters, but women in politics. In Gloucester County, there are 22 women in municipally elected positions and one woman freeholder.

There are 130 men in municipally elected positions and six male freeholders in the county.

"There's a place in government for any woman that's interested and I would encourage more women to get involved," said Gloucester County Freeholder Jean DuBois.

Prior to DuBois' election to freeholder in 2007, she began her career in government in 1974, serving Mantua Township, and as treasurer and county finance officer with Gloucester County.

"It was really amazing, because, of course, it's an appointed position, but I worked through both Republican and Democrat freeholders," DuBois said. "I would encourage any woman who is interested and likes politics and wants to make a difference."

In New Jersey, according to Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics, there are no women members of the U.S. Senate or U.S. House, there is one woman who's a statewide elected executive, there are eight women out of 40 state senators and finally, there are 26 women out of 80 state Assembly members.

"What they proved (90 years ago) is that women are citizens more than anything else," said Assemblywoman Celeste M. Riley, D-3, of Bridgeton.

Riley has served in the state Assembly since 2009 and is the first woman to represent the 3rd District. Prior to being an assemblywoman, Riley spent three years on Bridgeton City Council in Cumberland County.

Niki Trunk, deputy mayor of Harrison Township, said it's important to recognize the 19th Amendment.

"That's why our country was founded," she said, "so people have the opportunity to speak out. I think it's always important to have different minds up there."

Trunk is now in her third year on the committee in Harrison Township.

Michelle Martin, a councilman in Washington Township who has served nine years, said she'd like to move up in the political arena, but it's not always been easy journey.

"Women have come leaps and bounds from then to now," said Michelle Martin, councilwoman for Washington Township.

"It took a while to get some respect from some people," Martin said. "Personally, I got involved because it was people helping people. I don't often think of it as women versus men."

Several events around the state are scheduled today to mark the 90th anniversary of the 19th Amendment. The day is known as Women's Equality Day. This morning, N.J. Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg visits the Douglass Campus Center at Rutgers, joining women leaders from across the state.

Several state elected officials will meet at the Statehouse in Trenton to speak about the road ahead for women. Among those officials are Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver and Senate Majority Leader Barbara Buono.

"The day is certainly something that should be recognized and celebrated," said Ingres Simpson, councilwoman in Glassboro. "We obviously have come a long way in 90 years in terms of speaking up and having our voices heard."

Simpson is completing her 12th year as councilwoman this year and was initially told by friends she should pursue her interest in government.

"Women are certainly capable of being leaders and being integral parts of American society," Simpson said. "As mothers, of course, we are the backbone. We have branched out far beyond in other areas to really be major players."

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