

Julie McDonald Commentary: Lewis County AAUW Branch Celebrates Its First Century



From left, Priscilla Tiller, Jan Leth and Luana Graves pose for a photo at the Lewis County Historical Museum.

By Julie McDonald / For The Chronicle, January 31, 2023

Do you believe women pursuing a college education can impair their fertility? Today, such a notion sounds absurd, but that was a prevailing myth dispelled only after a small group of college graduates formed the American Association of University Women in 1881 and published a research report four years later.

AAUW, the oldest and largest organization advocating for the professional and educational advancement of women, has grown to include more than 170,000 members and nearly a thousand branches, including one in Lewis County.

On Feb. 3, 1923, Zella McMicken called to order the first meeting of the Lewis County branch of the AAUW. Among the nine women was Margaret Corbet, the first principal of Centralia Junior College. Members — all college graduates — paid \$3 in dues. The branch formed a Creative

Reading Group that met twice a month and offered scholarships through the college in the form of loans.

“I think really that’s a milestone achievement for a group to be viable and active for such a long time,” said Toledo’s Sharon Lyons, head of a five-person committee planning a Feb. 25 centennial celebration at Centralia College. “This branch is really one of the most active in the state.”

One of the early members, Dorothy Dysart, helped organize the Washington State AAUW in the 1920s and chaired the local branch committee that hosted the Washington State AAUW Convention at the Lewis and Clark Hotel in Centralia in 1940. The convention was held in the Twin Cities again a decade later.

Since its beginning, nearly 80 presidents have led the local branch, which today counts more than 85 members whose mission is to advance gender equity for women and girls through research, education and advocacy. They gather regularly for educational programs, book clubs, discussion groups, movie outings, garden tours, art projects, traveling, baking and hiking. Dues today are \$87 a year.

Many people hear about AAUW in the early spring when it holds a huge book sale at the Lewis County Mall, an event held annually since the 1970s. The sale raises about \$10,000 a year for scholarships to help young women attend Centralia College and to assist middle and high school girls who participate in science, technology, engineering and math camps.

Others may have bought a LUNAFEST 48-hour pass in April to watch seven to nine international short films directed by and about women. All proceeds from the world’s first all-female traveling film festival benefit AAUW scholarships and Hope Alliance, formerly the Human Response Network, which helps survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence.

And many parents have sent their sixth- through ninth-grade girls to Expanding Your Horizons, a Saturday program offered each October since 1993 in conjunction with the Centralia College TRIO Talent Search. The event introduces girls to careers in science, technology, engineering, art and math through workshops taught by professional women working in radiation, physical therapy, electronics, aerodynamics, chemistry, crime scene investigation and veterinary sciences. Dr. Brandy Fay, a local veterinarian who participated in Expanding Your Horizons while in middle school, volunteers each year to share her profession with young girls. Architect Marnie Boomer Roberts has volunteered for more than two decades.

I wrote a column after my daughter and I attended EYH in 2014, when I figured she’d pursue her love of writing, but she’s graduating in May with a degree in genetics and cell biology. I also remember speaking to local AAUW members in May 2013 about the lives of Margaret Corbet and Katharine Kemp, the two remarkable women who kept Centralia College open during the Great Depression.

“I have really, really enjoyed this group,” said Lyons, a retired teacher who joined in 1967, moved away for a while, and raised a family before rejoining in the mid-1990s. “It has really enriched my life.”

Three local AAUW members — Priscilla Tiller, Luana Graves and Jan Leth — have belonged to the branch for more than a half century and each served terms as president. They were featured recently in the branch’s newsletters.

Tiller joined the local AAUW branch in 1965 when dues were \$10 a year.

“When I first joined, I was registered as Mrs. Laurel (Priscilla) Tiller,” she wrote in an AAUW newsletter article. “It seemed that my husband was a member whereas I was incidental. It was not until 1980 that women were listed as themselves with no reference to husbands.”

She served three terms as president: 1971-1972, 1990-1991 and 2011-2013.

“It was my 1990–91 term that proved highly challenging because our branch was about to fold,” she wrote. “Many service organizations had already collapsed as women entered the workforce in large numbers. Our membership dwindled to 32 mostly inactive persons. In desperation, I volunteered to be president if Sandy Godsey would be vice president. She agreed. Together we committed ourselves to one year of dedicated effort to revitalize the branch.”

It worked, and membership soon climbed to 56 and, a year later, 74. Their marketing efforts gained national attention when the Lewis County branch was one of four chapters to win a \$300 first prize in a membership planning contest. The local chapter also was featured in the 1991 issue of Outlook magazine.

Graves, who taught physical education at Winlock before working as an employment counselor for the state Department of Employment Security, joined AAUW in 1966.

“As a member, I took on leadership roles, somewhat reluctantly, particularly as president twice and more willingly as program chair,” she wrote in the newsletter. “The importance of AAUW for me has been the educational component including providing scholarships and sponsoring Expanding Your Horizons.”

Leth, a retired Centralia Junior High teacher and guidance counselor, became a 50-year member in 2020.

“AAUW has enriched my life in ways I could never have imagined,” she wrote in the newsletter. “Over the years I have seen LCAAUW change, adapt and grow. Under the direction of talented leadership, in addition to our monthly meetings, we now have many interest groups open to all members.”

Since 1955, nearly 60 full-tuition scholarships have been awarded each year in honor of Dr. Kate Gregg, a step great-granddaughter of John and Matilda Jackson who in 1916 was the first woman to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Washington. Gregg, who worked on the Boeing assembly line during World War II, was a college English professor who authored four books of American western frontier history. She died in 1954.

The branch also has awarded dozens of other scholarships in honor of longtime members such as Minnie Lingreen, a 55-year chapter member who served as the AAUW's Washington State Division first vice president for program development; former branch president and historian Carol Alexandra "Sandy" (Champion) Godsey, a Centralia home economics teacher and Weyerhaeuser Forestry Research Center library assistant who joined AAUW in 1959; three-time president and former historian Tiller and her husband, Laurel, who provided pro bono legal services to establish the branch's nonprofit status and its charity, Women Supporting Women Scholarships; the late Chronicle features page editor Ann Trout Blinks, who joined AAUW in 1950; Dysart, a deacon at Centralia Presbyterian Church who joined the local branch two months after it formed and served a term as president and 61 years as historian; Alice Marie "Billie" (White) Forth, the first Margaret Corbet Scholar who taught secretarial sciences, headed the Centralia College business department, and served as dean of students; Marian (Fagerness) Osterby, head librarian at Centralia Timberland Regional Library who published her recipes into a book called From the Kitchen of Family and Friends; and Shirley Waugh, a Navy lieutenant in the WAVES during WWII and later a home economics teacher, extension agent, and college librarian who joined AAUW in 1950 and, as president in 1975, organized the first used-book sale.

Scholarships also honored friends of AAUW such as watercolor artist Linda Smouse Ropka, who died in May 2021; Gerald M. Vandebroe, a gifted Woodley High School English teacher with ties to the county; and Brian Lee "Ranger" Elder, an outstanding Centralia High School athlete who set five track records and later worked at Green Hill School, the state Department of Social and Health Services, and the state Department of Health.

A newer member, Betty Garrett, who volunteers at the Lewis County Historical Museum, put together "AAUW: The First Hundred Years," a pictorial display depicting the organization's programs and activities through the decades. It can be seen at the museum until the centennial celebration Feb. 25, when it will be displayed at Centralia College.

The centennial celebration culminates from 2 to 4 p.m. Feb. 25 with an afternoon at Centralia College, where drama students will present a series of short monologues about women and the branch's history will be recounted through a slide show and other presentations. Dessert and beverages will be served.

A stained glass mosaic created by talented artist Marcy Anholt of Chehalis commemorating the AAUW branch's centennial will be unveiled at the event and presented as a gift to the Centralia College Foundation to hang in the Kirk Library.

"The mosaic, representing our 100 years of activity in the community, will be on display at the library because of our partnership with the college in presenting Expanding Your Horizons

STEM conferences for sixth- through ninth-grade girls since 1993 as well as the many scholarships we have provided to women enrolled at CC.”

AAUW branch meetings begin at 6:45 p.m. the first Thursday of each month from September through May at the Gathering Place at Stillwater Estates in Centralia. For information about joining, contact the membership chairs, Kathy Halsan or Cathy Cavness, at aauwlcmembership@gmail.com.

In the coming weeks, I’ll share a bit about longtime AAUW members in honor of the organization’s centennial.

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