

Suzanne Kerlin Interview - July 14, 2014

1. Why did you join AAUW?

- When I graduated college in New Zealand, I was given a membership to IFUW (International Federation of University Women) by my mother. From then on I did not do very much with the New Zealand Federation of University Women. It wasn't until I arrived in State College, which was in 1987 having been in America since 1969. So you can see there was a big period in there where I did nothing with AAUW or New Zealand Federation of University Women. But then once I joined AAUW State College Branch I have been very active. I have also been, I have tried to continue to be active with International Federation of University Women because that is where I started, but unfortunately AAUW is no longer a member of IFUW. So I have now joined Graduate Women USA, which is the American organization that has joined IFUW.

2. Why have you remained committed to the organization for so many decades?

- Friends are my big, big reason and I have a lot of friends in the organization as I have with most organizations. Friends are very important to me. The mission, education for women and girls, I mean nothing is more important. My mother always said education tops everything as far as your life is concerned. And the projects that our Branch undertakes I think are admirable and they get better and better every year. We go out into the community. We see the need. I really appreciate the people who put so much time and effort into the projects and all the different aspects of our mission within this community.

3. What would you tell potential members about the organization?

- I would tell them that I enjoy the camaraderie a lot and also, I just believe in the mission. I have also become very much a part of the state organization too and I enjoy that part of it. Sometimes I have a big part of the state board, other times I just have a small part or I am not part of the state board at all. But you know I am always interested in the state. Because I think the state gives us the go between, between our Branch and the national organization, which is not always down at the grassroots. So we have to rely on the state to just get us there. You know to hear our needs and our wishes, so I think the state is very important.

4. What would you tell current members?

- Get involved! Just get involved. Don't sit there with but get involved and do whatever it is you want to do. Of course, my big love is the Used Book Sale. And I have spent many, many years 24-7 working with the Used Book Sale. Now I have stepped down from the leadership of it after a few years and it

doesn't seem to have stopped the number of hours I put into it even now. I love it. I just do! It's been a very integral part of my life and the people that I am with and the people, the customers, the people that donate books I may swear and curse at them because they come at the wrong time and leave the wrong sort of books, but they are wonderful. They are just wonderful. It's a community effort.

5. What were the biggest challenges you faced as branch president and/or Used Book Sale chair? How did you resolve or address those challenges?

- When I was president, we had a lot of issues with the Catholic Church and our stance on abortion and women's choice. That was a very difficult time for me because I believe very, very firmly that women have the right to choose what they do with their bodies and how their choice in this issue. And not only was it just letters to the editor by people. And at that time, and this was several years ago, they had this gentleman who wrote and I use that term very loosely. The paper said that they were going to have to publish his letter and would we like a rebuttal in at the same time? So I was very appreciative of the paper and we haven't always had that courtesy from the Centre Daily Times, but that was one time.

The other time, there was some animosity in the past amongst some of the board members and I find that very difficult in an organization. That members are not willing to listen. To me communication is probably the biggest thing in our society, all over the world. I think if we can sit down and talk and listen to each other. We don't need to agree, but we at least need to listen and say okay I don't agree, but this is what I think. And then come to some compromise. At one point there was a lot of animosity. To the point of people recommending that people not rejoin the Branch and that was so hard to deal with. I hated it! I could not bring myself to not join the Branch because I am such a believer in the mission. And I had so many people around me that supported me, but it was very hard to see that animosity. And we lost a lot of members over it. That and choice, we lost a lot of members and that was hard.

6. What impact has AAUW made nationally and locally on women's issues? Or how has AAUW contributed to the status of women in State College and at Penn State University?

- The research that they do. I think the research is outstanding. The first one was *Hostile Hallways* and how girls were treated in middle school and high school. I always remember my son doing a research paper and using that as his research model. He was so intrigued by the research that was done, *Hostile*

Hallways. Then Title IX, I have always been for Title IX and the bullying research. The other thing that I really like is our public policy affection. The national organization has lobbying core which is wonderful because it lobbies to our legislators and senators for our rights in which our organization believes. They are all volunteers. They come from Maryland branches and northern Virginia branches and they meet every Thursday morning and they lobby heavily within that arena. Now we also have a public policy advocate, her name is Lisa Maatz and she is one of the most phenomenal people to meet. And she is just wonderful with her lobbying and legislation. She is public policy per se. I really like what she does and I think she has our interest, women's interest at heart.

J.E.—What about locally?

- Locally we have given...well, first of all STEM. First of all, let's back up and say the Used Book Sale has provided us with a lot of funding and this has enabled us to give money. Whereas we can give money to things we have also been hands on with a lot of things too, which makes me very proud. As much as I am proud of the money we earn and all that sort of thing and we put it in the right place I feel, I like the STEM projects for these young middle school girls. Not only State College School District, it's Bellefonte School District, its Bald Eagle, yes and I think we are trying to get into Penns Valley. Of course it is very dependent on whether you have teachers who are willing to give up their time. They are paid, but they have to be willing to give up their time because it's no small potatoes as far as they are concerned. Unfortunately we have lost a big promoter of it and that is Donna Ricketts who was in Community Education and she has retired. And I don't know where it is going to from there because I feel very apprehensive is a word I am going to use because she was such a good person to get this off the ground for us in State College, not so much Bellefonte and the other school districts.

We have given money to such things as Women's Resource Center and I think that is so important. The libraries are funded, as you know, and all of the other projects to which we give money. Along with the STEM project, there is a Math project, which is Reading Math and Science for the younger children in the summer program. Many volunteers are involved in these projects. We have also given to Volunteers of Medicine. So we have given to many community organizations that are very much for women, women's education and about women and girls. So I think that is important for our Branch.

7. What were some of the challenges of being members of an early feminist organization?

- I think the conservative issues were very hard on the women's organizations. Their ideals were not at all what the general population expected. I think it was the conservatism and also the fact that they were treated as elitists because they were educated, high-thinking type of women they sometimes didn't relate to the ordinary person on the street. So I think that made it very difficult for them. Therefore they were called weird or odd or lesbian or whatever else anyone wanted to call them. I have read many articles on it and it seemed as though they were just separate from everyone else. I am very glad that they persevered.

8. What opposition did the local branch face over the years as a women's organization? From whom?

- I have mentioned the Catholic Church and that is a given. But also we were treated as elitists. Because our membership relied on the fact that we had to have a degree from an accredited university. For instance I had a friend who has a degree from McGill University in Canada. Well you see that wasn't an American university, so she wasn't allowed to join. I have a degree from an American university, a master's degree so I had no trouble. But whether or not my degree from Otago would have been enough I don't know. It was also felt that we had to be part of the University, which is not true. We did have to have a degree, but we did not have to be part of Penn State.

9. What are the next important steps for AAUW nationally and locally toward equity for women and girls? Or where would you like to see AAUW go in the future?

- Pay equity. That is my big issue. Pay equity and women's health I think is enormous. Day care I think is important too. It is affecting so many women because it is so expensive. I look at my daughters and I think, oh my word. They pay an enormous amount. My daughter in D.C., if she were not working, her husband's entire pay would go towards daycare. Now that's ridiculous because they have a house payment and food and that sort of thing. Other issues are maternity leave and women's education. I just think that all of those things, I know I am generalizing, but I think that we can't lose the fact that women still have to be considered as well and we need to see to their rights being taken care of. They are the people that we are going to rely on for our families.

10. What programs/needs/causes has the local branch supported over the years?

- I think I have gone over this. Libraries. I like to see the public libraries; not only Schlow but also we have given to all the little libraries, all within Centre County; all the Centre County branch libraries have received money from us over many years. I am glad to know that most of them are still in existence. Women's Resource Center, Youth Service Bureau with Stormbreak and the

housing for runaway girls and the youth within State College and Centre County. Volunteers in Medicine, which I think is very important in this society. There are others too like the Park Forest Day Nursery. It is for children who otherwise would not be able to have a preschool experience. They also help the parents, by teaching the parents to read to their children. They have been the recipient of many of our books and things like that and a lot of money.

AAUW State College Branch started a program, *PhoneFriend*, for children home alone after school to be able to call-a-volunteer for homework help or just to talk if lonely or scared about being alone. This program folded because after school programs in the school districts began to address the issue and phone calls began to decrease for one reason or another. The Branch also helped create Family Health Services and supported them with a donation that celebrates the Branch's 75th anniversary.

11. What impact did AAUW have on the State College area, on Penn State University, and on women's leadership opportunities locally?

- We support Leadership Centre County with money and I know a number of people who have come out of Leadership Centre County onto the boards and organizations within the University and in the community. They are the people that are taking leadership roles. There are many organizations within Penn State and the State College Community where AAUW members serve in leadership positions. AAUW State College Branch members have been conspicuous in the leadership roles of these organizations. Our mission and outreach have encouraged women and girls to have the confidence to step up and lead in our community.

12. During your membership in AAUW, how has women's role in society evolved?

- We are leaders in the community now. The Mayor is a member of AAUW and there are people on Borough Council who are AAUW members and in the township leadership. We are no longer looked at as elitists and I am pleased to say that. First of all, our rules have changed in that we don't need a full degree. We can have an associate's degree and I think it was high time that was changed. But also we have opened up our doors to anybody that would like to come in and not only work for us, but still be part of us and enjoy the projects that we do. There is a big core of people who do STEM and I am amazed at how many people say I was there; I went to volunteer for the middle school girls one afternoon. We are asked many more questions now about AAUW than we used to be. Maybe because of our publicity. Our PR has been done by very good people on the Board and I think our name is out there far more than it used to be. Not just at the Used Book Sale, but it is always

around Used Book Sale time we are asked a lot of questions. But people are interested now. Interested in what we do, what we really think, what does it mean? What does it mean to belong? How can we make so much money? How come we are so well known for the books, for instance? Well that has evolved over the years, but it is nice to be asked these questions because then the door is open for us to answer them and to encourage people to join and be part of our organization.

13. What are the most notable or most meaningful changes you've seen during your involvement in AAUW?

- We have started to crack the glass ceiling. I look at my daughters and they aren't nearly as intimidated as I was when I was going through and getting jobs. I look back now and I think I took very menial jobs in my field in research as the lab assistant, for instance. I wasn't the professor. But my daughters just keep on moving up and up and up and I think that is wonderful. They don't see any reason why they shouldn't be hired over a male. Whereas I was more grateful that I had a job. But they are not satisfied with just the job. I have got the education, so therefore, I am just as good as you are. And you will give me the job. I will be able to do what anybody asks of me. Just like their brothers. They have two brothers and they are on a par with those two boys. I think it is great. I love it the way Bridget and Nicola are just so confident that they don't see a glass ceiling. I'm sure they know it is there, but as far as they are concerned, they can get whatever they want.

14. Over time what has the branch done to raise funds? What form has branch philanthropy take over time?

- The Used Book Sale and calendars. Calendars were very minimal. We no longer sell calendars. The Used Book Sale has grown from strength to strength and the community has been behind us enormously. It is just an amazing event. I am very privileged to be part of it and be working with people that I have worked with over the years.

15. Are there other AAUW issues you would like to discuss?

- I would like them to see what AAUW can do about bullying. I think bullying is an enormous issue in this country. I don't know that research is what it's going to take. It is going to take someone to initiate something that is going to stop these children, not just children, but it does start as a child. But parents ought to understand that you have got to be proactive about bullying not just say, well a boy is a boy or a girl is a girl. That is the way it is. That is what girls do. That's not right. And I think we have a lot of problems in this country, in any country, I am not saying just this country, any country, because the bullying is so prevalent.

The other thing I would like to see is gun control. But I don't know how AAUW is going to control guns against the NRA. They are fighting an uphill battle there. And human trafficking.

16. What recommendations would you have for the Branch as it looks at its next 100 years?

- It is important that we introduce new blood and new ideas into the Branch. At the moment we have two co-presidents who have brought our Branch so far into the 21st Century. So much further than I could have ever done as a Branch president. It is because they think outside of the box. They've pushed buttons and I just really appreciate that. I like where they are bringing the Branch and how far they have brought it. This history project is enormous. Interviewing people and capturing the Branch history is so important. I like the way the co-presidents involve people outside of the Branch. I would like to see more of this cooperation with other organizations such as Commission for Women on campus and Discovery Space in the community. I really liked the project with radium celebrating Marie Curie. I think we can do a lot with Discovery Space. I think that I would like to see the Branch continue to not be stagnant and to roll with where the world is going. We have got to be diverse. We have got to not be close-minded to ideas from different countries, different religions open our minds to things and are up in the 21st Century and what is presented to us.

17. You have been involved with the state. What recommendations do you have for the state?

- The state organization is important to keep up with all that national is presenting because national can be a devil. They will introduce things and we really don't know anything about them. Suddenly we realized they have been implemented and something to do with our funds. For instance, back when you [Jackie] might have been president, they said that if we were to fold all of our funds from the Branch would have to go to Association, which is our national organization. Well, of course, that just blew us away because we had many thousands of dollars, so we invested it elsewhere. Charlene [Harrison] went to a conference and suddenly they came out that the Branch's funds should all be coming to Association we should not be giving to any local organizations. But we had never been told of this and unfortunately neither had the state. So Charlene was able to tell the state and then Sally Kalin got involved. You have to keep your ears open.

I think that is where the state should be, they should be keeping their ears open to the Association and then coming back to our grassroots, to the branches and I am hoping for better things now. Had not four of us from our Branch been on the state board then we would have known nothing about

what was going on with the state organization. Our district representatives were very uncommunicative. It is important that we be kept informed from the state that should be kept informed from the Association.

18. What are your last words about the Branch as it looks towards its next 100 years?

- Individual needs of women. Leadership training for our young college students. Community involvement.