

Linda Higginson Interview – June 30, 2014

1. Why did you join AAUW?

- That is an absolutely great question. I was a very young Penn State staff person in the early 1970's working in student affairs and Marion Davison was Associate Dean of Students at the time. Marion was very active in AAUW and she literally took me by the elbow one day and said I want to take you to an AAUW meeting. When I got to the first meeting I was by far the youngest person in the room, but I continued to go back. What was attractive to me was exactly that, I was the youngest person in the room. Because my whole world was being in a doctoral program. Being with people who were in their early to mid 20's and working in student affairs. And so to meet the women in AAUW who were professors' wives, wives of very distinguished professors and a few were professional women themselves was just an amazing opportunity for me. So one thing led to another and Marion nudged me and I joined.

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

- It's really because it's an opportunity to be a role model for other women, younger women. It is an opportunity to give back. I received a lot from AAUW. What I got from AAUW in the early '70's was the opportunity to be a leader and the opportunity to practice and hone leadership skills. As a young 20/30 something staff member on campus in that era, those opportunities were not especially open to women. But I had the chance to develop my leadership skills in AAUW. And so many years ago, I simply decided that I was going to become a life member. That is one of the ways in which I have remained committed to the organization. And the other way is, I think for the past fifteen years, I have been the Branch Auditor.

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

- I have talked to women who are not yet AAUW members about the networking and leadership opportunities. That really stuck with me. And even though there are many more opportunities for women on campus and in the community today compared to the 1970's, AAUW is still a very fertile ground. As the branch membership has shrunk and as probably the average age, unbelievably, has increased, there are even more opportunities for potential, particularly younger, members.

4. What would you tell current members?

- I have been relatively inactive over the last ten years, so I am not up-to-date on current AAUW involvements. However, I would say the same thing to current members that I would say to prospective members – seize the leadership opportunities inherent in membership.

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?

- My time as Branch president was really a transition period between the Marge Dunaways and Louise Tukeys and E-Tu Suns and Sarah Godbeys to the next generation of presidents and to the next generation in AAUW. What I really put my finger on is that the time I was president was also the time that the Branch's values were changing regarding what we were going to do with our philanthropic dollars. When Marion Davison took me into AAUW, one of the things that she used to talk to me about was how AAUW was committed to developing, to earning money for national projects, and providing scholarships for women to participate in higher education. So the Branch's Used Book Sale when I joined AAUW was really in its infancy and had really been developed as a fundraiser so that the State College Branch could do its part in contributing to the national endowment fund. The book sale was wildly successful in those days earing \$10,000, \$15,000 even \$25,000 and of course well over of \$100,000 today. I was actually president for four years. I think I am the only four-year president.

During those four years there was tremendous tension between the old guard who (and I have to admit I was kind of in that camp) were so committed to sending money nationally to support women fellows, AAUW fellows nationally. And the other Branch contingent who was really starting to pressure the Branch to give the money locally and not necessarily be exclusive to women in higher education. So, that was actually a very difficult time. And the Used Book Sale committee has always been an important committee, but in the early 1980's, the Used Book Sale committee actually rivaled the Board in terms of its power, influence and persuasiveness. It didn't get completely resolved on my watch. What we did during my time as president was really talk about the two values and how values were changing. I don't think that it was during my watch that the Branch Endowment Fund was established; but I can't remember the timing on that.

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?

- Well, I actually have thoughts about both of those questions. I want to start with the latter one, the status of women in State College and Penn State. I think AAUW has been woefully absent. And AAUW could have been taking a real leadership role locally and with Penn State. When I think about it, I actually think I was the Penn State representative to AAUW, or was it the other way around? Whatever that position is, I actually held that role myself for a couple of years. I will pin some of the responsibility for this lack of leadership at Penn State and within State College on AAUW nationally because from my short experience as the Representative to Penn State I can tell you that there was nothing that was coming from AAUW nationally to provide guidance. When I think about some of the women who preceded me in being the representative, Jane McCormack immediately preceded me and before her it was Dr. Doris Seward who was an assistant to the president. I, as a member of the Branch and as a staff member at Penn State, didn't see any evidence that AAUW was involved with the University or that AAUW was very prominent in the local community other than the book sale.

When we get to the question about what would I wish for the future, I really think for the 21st century the Branch could be strongly connecting with the University and much more visible in the community than we have been. On the other question, what is the impact of AAUW nationally on women's issues? What I feel really proud of for AAUW is the studies AAUW has funded and undertaken over the years regarding girls and women's development. What I think of, especially, is the bullying studies, but there have been so many others in terms of girl's achievements in college and high school and what they need to be successful in the educational realm. And the other thing that I think of is much more recent. I am a couple of months behind in reading my AAUW journal, but the one that I have right now is the one where the Windsor Case is highlighted. To see AAUW coming out of its relatively mainstream, safe position and to become an advocate for, not just gender equity but LGBT equity and all kinds of people equity and a really bold leader in that area, I think those are tremendous accomplishments.

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

- Honestly, I have never seen AAUW as a feminist organization until recently. I have always seen AAUW in State College as extremely mainstream. So the answer to the question is, I just didn't see the challenges. Because this AAUW

Branch when I joined it was so white, middle-class, highly educated professor's wives mostly (because there weren't that many professional women on campus in the 1970's). I just didn't see it as feminist. NOW was a feminist organization, in some ways, the League of Women Voters was more of a feminist organization than AAUW. So again, that is a 21st century hope for me that AAUW will actually ratchet itself up and advertise itself more as a feminist organization than I think it has in the last thirty years.

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

- I did not observe any opposition to AAUW locally because it was so mainstream.

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?

- I really think there is an opportunity for AAUW to have a much stronger tie with Penn State. We have a new president. We are in 2014. AAUW, I think, has missed opportunities to connect with the Center for Women Students, the Commission for Women, the academic department in women's studies. I know there are other opportunities. There is the Center for Leadership and Ethical Development in Student Affairs. AAUW could pick any one of these, or all of them, and have a much stronger connection. And I think that it is actually because we haven't done a good job from the Branch's perspective in being connected to the University that we haven't attracted younger members. So I actually see this a win, win. I think there are many strengths that AAUW could bring to any of those components of the University and I think AAUW would get a great deal in return. It is really sad to me to have an AAUW branch sitting right across College Avenue from Penn State University and to not have a vibrant student chapter or vibrant student component of our Branch.

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

- Well, the one that was very, very big when I was in my infancy in AAUW and when I was president was Phone Friend. Phone Friend was focused on helping kids after school who were home alone because they had working mothers. And working mothers in that era, Jackie knows, was a novelty because that was when women were beginning to return to the workforce, so kids were coming home to an empty house. I was actually latchkey child myself, I had a string around my neck and carried the house key under my blouse when I

went to school because my mother went back to teaching. So what Phone Friend was all about was a phone with a trained person who was available to take a call from a child who got home from school and was frightened by something. Phone Friend became a national model; it took off like wild fire. And there were people all over the country, lots of AAUW branches, but other communities contacting the leaders here in State College about how to start a Phone Friend. It was BIG.

And the other thing that I recall about the Branch's leadership is the sustained focus on helping adult women who wanted to return to higher education. So that was the seed for establishing some of the Branch Endowment Funds. Also, the Branch was very active in connecting with an AAUW Fellow who might have been within driving distance of State College. Having these women come and visit with the Branch and talk about what their higher education was. The other notable Branch project is the STEM program that Mary Dupuis has been taking tremendous leadership for in recent times. And the Branch's involvement with STEM education for girls and women has been very long standing. Being a math major as an undergraduate myself, that is near and dear to my heart and I just think that is a tremendous initiative.

11. Identify notable branch projects and/or community projects supported by the branch such as Phone Friend, the scholarship endowment, Women's Resource Center, Schlow Centre Region Library, Family Health Center. (Directions branch is headed in)

- I know that the Branch has given money to Schlow Library forever. In fact, one of the programs is a book program. Whenever a person finishes her term as president of the Branch there is a book given to Schlow in her honor.

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

- Well, I have already talked from a personal perspective about how AAUW gave me the place to develop and practice leadership skills. And I know that I would not have had some of the opportunities that I had at Penn State if I had not been able to go back and talk about my experiences in AAUW and some of the things that I learned. But more broadly, in the '80's when I was president, even though AAUW in theory can't support candidates, Sylvia Stein became a candidate for Senate in Pennsylvania, and AAUW was very involved in supporting Sylvia. That was the era where women did not run; there were no women candidates. Women did not run. But beyond that fomenting and people like Trudy Levine and Mary Dupuis coming in and saying to the Board, by the way there is a really hot candidate out here and we

need to get behind her. But beyond that, I don't think AAUW has been especially visible in terms of women's leadership locally. If you look at the township supervisors, there aren't women. But why is that? There have rarely been women. At least there are women on the State College Borough Council. At least there are women on the school board. But the Centre Region is a lot broader than State College and the school board. I think AAUW has a place in encouraging women to get involved.

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

- Well the most notable and meaningful changes I have seen probably don't have anything to do with my involvement with AAUW, but that time coincides with my forty-two years at Penn State. What I will say about the University is that I see a disappointing backsliding. In the 1970's at the beginning there were no women in leadership positions at the University. By the end of the 1970's and into the 1980's, that had changed markedly. But if you look at the leadership again today, in many ways, we have gone backwards. That has occurred during an AAUW era. I think AAUW locally, in having better connections with the University and in making itself much more visible in the community, could have influence, very positive influence.

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

- Well that was not a hard question to answer. When I think back over the last forty+ years, there has been a huge increase in numbers of professional women. Being a professional woman is common today. When I started out at the University I was twenty-three when I went on the payroll. I actually was the first woman to serve as an academic advisor in the division of undergraduate studies. The first. And I was the only woman on the staff for years. It wasn't until a number of years later that I had a coworker who was married and had a family. The only professional women that you saw in the 1970's, and even early 1980's, were women who were single. What we see today is that women represent huge proportions of the workforce. They have families, they have husbands, and they are doing it all. But that is not what it was like in the 1970's.

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

- There are only two ways that the Branch has ever raised money. The Used Book Sale is one. And then for many years, Louise Tukey sold calendars. Thank goodness we stopped making them. But Louise Tukey bought these calendars and then we all had to go around and sell calendars. And we probably made about \$150 a year. For the effort, it wasn't a lot of money.
- And then of course, there was the Used Book Sale. The Used Book Sale has been wildly successful. But when I was president, one of the questions that I was starting to raise was how do we think about raising money in the future? Because it was the same group of women who were doing all of the heavy lifting, literally heavy lifting for the book sale. They were doing the pricing and sorting. They were packing the boxes and they were picking those boxes up and stacking them. While I was president, I did some pricing for the book sale. But I had a back problem. I was in my thirties, but I had a back problem. I said to these women – all older than I -- I can pack the boxes but I can't move them. So these women twenty years older than I was were moving the boxes. What I said to them was the workforce for the book sale is aging. We have to think to the future about how to manage the Used Book Sale and/or how to diversify the way in which we earn our money for philanthropy.

Well, you can see that hasn't happened. But now there is an additional challenge to the Used Book Sale. We still have the workforce challenge with an aging infrastructure, but today we have the different challenge of the digital materials and just how long will this Used Book Sale that sells old-fashioned books garner the kind of money that we have been accustomed to. There have been tremendous discussions in the Branch over the years about wanting to ensure that the Branch has money to give to our projects in perpetuity. Well, how do you do that with the history of a Used Book Sale and the current challenges? The philanthropy, as I said, shifted between a focus on supporting AAUW scholarships nationally and now supporting many local initiatives.

What I think was one of the most important accomplishments the Branch had in the area of philanthropy though, was the establishment of the Branch Endowment Fund. Because that was one very concrete way the Branch could guarantee that we can give this money in perpetuity and recognize that we might not make as much money on the Used Book Sale. We have worked to build an endowment that will allow us to give money in the future. And as I said before, the other way in which philanthropy has changed radically is there has been much more interest in giving locally. When I think of giving money to AAUW nationally, that is what Marge Dunaway was all about. In

fact, she ultimately chaired the National Fellowships Committee. And I know that Marge had a great deal of heartache as this schism was developing in the Branch. This Branch had been, for years, a leader nationally in giving to AAUW. In fact, one of the years that I was president, I remember Jean Pellegrin and I went to the AAUW National Conference in San Francisco. It was the first time I had ever been to San Francisco. Jean and I went up on stage and received the Branch's award for the highest per capita donation to the national scholarship fund: the highest per capita donation of any branch in the country. I mean that was the level of giving. And at the time, the Branch had 250 members, so you are talking about a lot of money from this medium sized branch in Pennsylvania. That is what Marge believed in and E-Tu Sun believed in and others who had preceded me.

16. Are there other AAUW issues you would like to talk about?

- No, I think we have covered the waterfront of what I am able to remember.

17. Last words. What should the State College Branch be focusing on in the next 100 years?

- I appreciate the chance to have that last word so I get a chance to re-emphasize some things I've already said. I really think the Branch has a great opportunity for a much stronger and fruitful partnership with Penn State. I think the Branch also has a great opportunity for some partnerships with some other branches locally that would enable AAUW writ large to have stronger connections with institutions like Bucknell, Lock Haven, Juniata and so on. I think that is what AAUW in the 21st century can really do. It will help the institutions and it will help AAUW. And then nationally, as I've said, I would like to see AAUW be more visible and more assertive in terms of issues affecting women and families.