



Iowa Branch Connector

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A Monthly Electronic Bulletin for AAUW Leaders in Iowa
The Value of Affiliation with AAUW: By joining AAUW, you belong to a community that breaks through educational and economic barriers so that all women have a fair chance.

Welcome to this monthly electronic publication. You are invited to share this information with other members and branch leaders by forwarding it to them or providing a hard copy.

Ann Gale, AAUW Iowa President 2016-18

This article is by Carletta Knox-Seymour, President of Cedar Rapids local branch, and AAUW Iowa Board Member as Diversity Director.

Diversity Is Necessary for Growth

Dictionary.com defines diversity as the state or fact of being diverse; difference; unlikeness: ...the inclusion of individuals representing more than one national origin, color, religion, socioeconomic stratum, sexual orientation, etc.

In 2015, I was nominated and elected as president of the AAUW local branch in Cedar Rapids. It was not until 2016, that it was recognized that I had in fact become the first Black local president. In fact, in all of Cedar Rapids' eighty-eight AAUW presidential history, there had not yet been a Black woman. In all fairness to Cedar Rapids as a whole, its population at that time was about 99% White, meaning the population of Blacks was roughly one percent. Since then, the Black population has grown to close to seven percent. We are now in the 21st Century. It has taken a considerable amount of time to fully engage a woman of color, specifically a Black woman, as president. The reason for this is varied. One reason is that communication between the two races was not as open as it is in our community today. And, in understanding that the foundational concept of the national organization was to engage females of higher education, eighty-eight years ago there may have been very few Black women in Cedar Rapids with post-secondary education to engage with. These reasons may not have been to specifically keep Black women out, as much as there was not a reason to push forth and do more reaching out.

Beginning eighty-eight years ago, Cedar Rapids has seen a great deal of diversity in our communities, and women from all different backgrounds, nationalities and races have achieved post-secondary degrees and higher. And throughout the years, a few of these women have become members of the Cedar Rapids local branch. When I joined in 2014, there was one active member of color. I spoke up right away and said that we needed to get more women of color to become members. For me, the reason was simple. This fine organization had a great deal to offer females of every class, race, and socioeconomic level, and I especially wanted more Black women with higher degrees in Cedar Rapids to become involved. I felt very strongly that it was more than necessary to get them involved. To our

credit, we already had one member from Africa, another member from the Philippines, and one from Japan. I fully believed that in order for the local branch to grow in size and scope, it needed to embrace more change and push forward to reach out into the Black community.

When I became president, I charged my branch to specifically go after and recruit as many new women as we could, and to specifically recruit Black women. And because I knew more Black women than many of my members, I took responsibility to make the push. From various public functions, and with the help of the membership director, our membership numbers increased with Black women. We went from having two Black women in our branch, to now having seven within a span of two years. Diversity is the life blood of any progressive organization. The same way a financial portfolio needs to be diverse in order to be strong, so too must our local branches be diverse in as many ways as possible in order to encourage, strengthen and support one another. And, lift up and support females who are different from ourselves right in our own communities.

This year, 2017, marks 90 years of AAUW Cedar Rapids branch existence. Not once did this branch fold up or disengage as a unit to the national organization. They had the programming, and the passion to keep it alive all these years. That speaks volumes to any branch of any organization to have such longevity of sound, ethical, educational, philanthropic practices. And this, is all to the effort of expanding the horizons and changing the lives of young girls and women of every nationality, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic stratum and color in every area of their lives. This is why I joined. This year, our State Conference theme is, "Building a More Inclusive World." How do we build a more inclusive world if we do not start with our local branches first? This is where the real work is done.