

Small turnout for OCC women in politics forum

BY JANICE TIGAN-KRAMER

A lively discussion to mark the 76th anniversary of women's suffrage last week drew a sparse audience to Oakland Community College's Orchard Ridge Campus in Farmington Hills.

"The Long and Winding Road: Women in Politics — 76 Years" aimed to celebrate a milestone in U.S. history. But as one

middle-aged audience member lamented, "It looks like the era's been forgotten by young women." Only 14 people — mostly older women and OCC faculty members — heard the panel's potent messages. We won't know where we're going until we know where we've been, and don't complain about the problem unless you become part of the solution.

Panelists included State Repre-

sentatives Maxine Berman (36th-Southfield, Lathrup), Lyn Bankes (19th-Livonia, Bedford Township) and Jan Dolan (37th-Farmington, Farmington Hills), Detroit City Council president Maryann Mahaffey and former Detroit council president Elna Henderson.

"This is like the Olympics," said Carol Brown, dean of the Orchard Ridge Campus. "These women represent the best of the brightest Michigan politicians."

Panelists weren't daunted by the low turnout, but one said it symbolized women's overall lack of interest in politics.

"The number of people here shows we're complacent about what we've won. But remember, women haven't won enough," said Berman.

She told the small but attentive audience that women tend to come forward only when they're riled about an issue, such as Anita Hill's sexual harassment charge in 1991 against Clarence

Thomas, now a Supreme Court

Judge, and the last-ditch effort to get ERA passed in 1982.

"The trouble is, who can stay mad for long? We need to stay interested in politics," she said, adding that women can have political power because, in most families, they make the majority of financial decisions.

"Nothing fuels an election like the economy," Berman said.

Pat Isahm of Farmington Hills said the panelists were inspiring, but the low attendance was disappointing.

"There just isn't enough interest in getting women into politics," she said.

Both Berman and Dolan — a Democrat and Republican, respectively — said the country sorely needs more elected women officials as role models. Both lawmakers said running for office, on the local or state level, doesn't have to be a planned career move, but it should be a real option.

"I got into politics on a dare," said Dolan, a former Farmington Hills councilwoman now in her

fourth term in the House. "We should all mentor young women and encourage their interest in government and schools at the local or state level. Women bring unique problem-solving skills to government."

Why aren't more women in politics? Panelists offered a range of answers:

Berman: "Politics isn't something women naturally choose to enter. There were 12 women in the House in my first term (1982), and now there's 30. Some call that progress — I call it stunted growth. We don't have the representation we deserve in any (legislative) body. It's difficult. How many women with young children can go to Lansing?"

Banker: "What I miss in 25 years of feminism is ERA. To get young women involved, we need to get excited about ERA. Nothing before it was such a unifying entity."

Mahaffey: "Too often, politicians are portrayed as hard and

scuzzy. If we want to clean up politics, let's get in and clean it up."

Henderson: "Put politics where it belongs — in the learning center of our lives. Historically, we don't look at politics as a part of our life, but political issues need to be the bread butter of our existence."

After the conference, Frances Gibson of Farmington Hills said it's a shame more people didn't attend because the forum's message wasn't gender specific.

"We're discussing human rights, not just women's issues," she said.

Arlene Frank, director of OCC's Womencenter, said it's essential for people of all ages to remember women's 70-year struggle for the right to vote.

"Women who grew up after women's suffrage aren't conscious of the rights we've won. You can't understand the struggle until you experience it first-hand through discrimination, sexual harassment or inequities in the legal system," she said.

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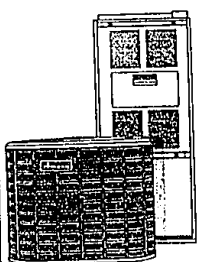
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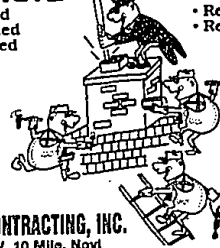
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