

Presented to Newark AAUW meeting Sept. 28, 1992 by Dorothy Munroe - part of
a 4-member panel of women who early had served in some
governmental position. Program entitled Women in Politics.

Thirty-five years ago two members of our own Newark branch of AAUW came to me with a proposal. I will digress for a moment to give a bit of background for their visit. At the time these two women, Carmen Nelson and Mae Carter, were actively engaged in an AAUW education study group focusing on our local school system. In those days every school district in the state with the exception of Wilmington had a four member appointed board of education. As this group studied the Newark Special School District--the term special attached to a school district denoted certain additional areas of autonomy--they saw a local board consisting of four persons, three of whom were over 72 years of age and the fourth member was 65--and, not surprisingly all were men! Moreover, these same four men had been appointed and reappointed year after year by the resident judge of the Superior Court of Delaware. Now our study group thought this situation should not be allowed to continue. Since a new younger resident judge, Andrew Christie, had just been appointed they felt this was the time to press for a change. Incidentally, Judge Christie has just retired as chief justice of the Supreme Court of Delaware. Thus the proposal presented to me was, "Would I be willing to serve if the judge could be persuaded to appoint me?" My answer was an enthusiastic yes, and I felt honored to have the confidence of such a worthy group. Judge Christie proved agreeable to the suggestion and several weeks later he conducted a lengthy interview with me--by phone. The result was that on July 1, 1958, I replaced Mr. Pierce Cann, a 72 year old local attorney who was also treasurer of the University of Delaware, as the first woman to serve on the Newark Board of Education.

This was a period of tremendous growth for our district. The next few years were to see our school district surpass the Wilmington public school system in number of students in grades 1 to 12. Newark still didn't have a kindergarten--none of the state schools did outside of Wilmington. The new Newark High School had just been completed--in fact the cafeteria wing was just being finished though the school had been in operation for a year or so. In the succeeding six years during my tenure on the Newark Board we were building and planning several new schools each year, including a new high school--Christiana-, two more junior high schools, and many additional elementary schools.

There was a growing concern throughout the state with appointed school boards and legislation was soon enacted requiring all boards in the state to be elected--with one exception--the Alfred I. DuPont District. It was the only district in the state with an endowment and Henry Belin duPont, who financed many worthy projects in the state, headed this board and had other wealthy members serving with him. Nevertheless all four members of our board filed for election in the spring of 1960 and so did eight other people

in our district. Some had ulterior motives. One candidate admitted he had not had a happy time in high school in Newark and he was hoping for a chance to get back at some he blamed for his misery during those years. I am happy to say the voters placed him 12th in the field of 12 candidates. I had the very active support of our AAUW branch which scheduled for me more coffees than I can remember and I had a chance to meet voters in many areas of our large school district which at the time covered some 80 square miles. Thanks to this vigorous and enthusiastic support I won the most votes. The other 11 candidates were all men and they didn't have the AAUW working actively for them!

I will never forget the candidates' meeting held in the old Newark Junior High when all 12 of us had the opportunity of speaking before a packed audience. Would that we could have the same turnout at candidates' meetings in Newark today! I recall one amusing statement made that evening by one of those candidates who had an axe to grind. Sensing the support that I was getting, he reminded the audience that each voter could vote for 4 of the 12 candidates and he closed his 5 minute campaign speech by urging a vote for me among their 4 votes. His rather obvious effort to benefit from my support failed and he placed among the bottom four instead of among the top four.

My experience on the Newark Board was very rewarding. As the only woman and often the most easily accessible at home, I had almost daily contacts with concerns of citizens in the district. As we were growing so rapidly, overcrowding in some schools required changes in attendance areas. Nothing caused louder protests among the citizenry and nothing brought out larger crowds to our monthly public meetings than an announcement of a pending change in an attendance area. I wish I could say as much concern was exhibited for proposed changes in our curriculum.

Women on our boards of education, on our city and county councils, and in our state legislature are not unusual now but we have to work harder to see that we have more representation in all of these areas of government. It is indeed heartening to know that the number of women filing for congressional races in 1992 is more than double the number who did so in 1990. In some races, both locally and nationally, we find women opposing each other. At least we know a woman will win in those races. I believe there are several factors which will work in favor of women at the federal level this year--and we certainly need to increase our representation at that level--anti-incumbent sentiment, higher number of congressional retirements, plus redistricting as a result of the 1990 census. Also, who can forget the Clarence Thomas hearing which resulted for the first time ever in selecting a supreme court justice without committee approval. Also who can forget watching that

judiciary committee day after day, composed entirely of men.

In closing I would like to support the sentiment seen recently on a T-shirt which claimed, "Woman's Place is in the House (and in the Senate, too.)"

Dorothy Munroe
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