

Voter forums have national, local history

By *GLEND A WOLIN*

When people think of the League of Women Voters, the first two things that come to mind are likely to be voter registration and candidate forums.

Nationally, perhaps the League is best-known for sponsoring the first televised presidential debate, the one in 1960 between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. But the League didn't do that one.

There were three debates that year, and they were sponsored by the three television networks – NBC, CBS and ABC. There was not another televised debate until 1976, when the League stepped in as a third party to meet Federal Communications Commission rules on equal time.

“The League of Women voters institutionalized presidential debates,” former League president Dorothy Ridings said



Phyllis Ingram (right), League voter services chair, discusses guidelines for the District 7 city council voter forum with candidates Michele Dalbis-Robledo (from left), Ana Sandoval and Cris Medina. The forum was held March 13 at Jefferson United Methodist Church and sponsored by the Jefferson, Monticello and Woodlawn Lake Neighborhood Associations.

in a video history (<http://bit.ly/2nPT0oe>) prepared by the organization.

The League also sponsored the debates in 1980 and 1984, but after the 1984 election, the Democrats and Republicans decided to put the debates under control of the parties. The League challenged the move and sparked a national discussion, but the parties created the Commission on Presidential Debates, which sponsors the debates to this day.

The commission did ask the League to sponsor the last of the three 1988 debates, but after initially accepting, it withdrew after seeing the agreement.

“The League of Women Voters is withdrawing its sponsorship of the presidential debate scheduled for mid-October because the demands of the two campaign organizations would perpetrate a fraud on the American voter,” League President

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Nancy M. Neuman said in a press release at the time.

“It has become clear to us that the candidates’ organizations aim to add debates to their list of campaign-trail charades devoid of substance, spontaneity and honest answers to tough questions,” Neuman said. “The League has no intention of becoming an accessory to the hoodwinking of the American public.”

Most objectionable to the League, Neuman said, were conditions in the agreement that gave the campaigns unprecedented control over the proceedings. Neuman called “outrageous” the campaigns’ demands that they control the selection of questioners, the composition of the audience, hall access for the press and other issues.

Locally, candidate forums – the term preferred over debates – may sometimes be contentious in their subject matter, but following LWV guidelines guarantees running them goes much more



President Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter meet at the Walnut Street Theater in Philadelphia to debate domestic policy during the first of the three Ford-Carter Debates Sept. 23, 1976. This was the first debate sponsored by the League of Women Voters.

smoothly.

Phyllis Ingram has been moderating most of the San Antonio Area League’s forums for about six years and has seen everything from chaos when organizations do all their own planning and

just want the League to come in at the end to moderate, to near-perfection when the League makes all the arrangements from the start.

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League tools help voters choose candidates

As the May elections draw close, the League’s tools that help voters choose their candidates are ready for use.

Vote411.org, the website that lets you find your polling place, see the races on your ballot, compare the candidates on your ballot side by side, print out a ballot-like form with your preferences marked to take to the polls with you, and much more, is already active.

The Voters Guide, which for decades has been the go-to source for unbiased, nonpartisan information about candidates, is expected to be available at the Central Library on April 15 and at all other libraries the following week. It contains the same information about the candidates as Vote411 except it has all the candidates for all races, not customized for

individual addresses.

The San Antonio League is also part of Represent! Us, a nonpartisan movement to double voter turnout using innovative technology and a grassroots campaign. Part of the effort is an app for both iOS and Android devices called The Voter App, produced by Austin’s ThinkVoting, which includes Vote411. It also allows users to scan their drivers license, which fills out a voter registration form that they can print out, sign and mail in, and provides customized voter information and polling places.

You can take printed lists into the voting booth but you cannot use cellphones, so if you select the candidates you want to vote for on an electronic device, be sure to either print out a list or write them on a piece of paper.

“The League has great credibility,” she said. “The candidates and hosts always say we do such a professional job. The key is following the guidelines.”

Those guidelines include getting all questions from the audience in advance and having the moderator read them to the candidates rather than having people asking them live. This avoids repetitive questions, audience members making speeches and generally allowing the candidates time for more answers.

Ingram said when she is moderating, she asks another league member to sort the questions by topic and asks the most pressing questions first, making sure to get to topics important to each candidate. If there’s no one available to help, she sorts as she goes.

The guidelines also mean the moderator must be strong about holding the candidates to their time limits, whether it is their

opening statements, answers to questions or closing statements.

Many organizations hold forums, but not all invite every candidate like the League does. This year, quite a few races have many candidates: The mayoral race has 14, and the Districts 9 and 10 City Council races each have 10.

In races that involve party candidates, unlike the upcoming nonpartisan municipal election, the League receives a lot of thanks and appreciation from Libertarian and Green Party candidates, who aren’t consistently invited to other candidate forums, said Kathy Hill, vice president for community engagement. “Since they’re not usually the front runners, they don’t get a lot of news coverage. But I find they add a valuable lens through which to see some issues and I learn something I wouldn’t have otherwise.”

The League receives invitations from neighborhood associations, schools and other groups to handle forums. This year so far it has moderated forums with the Tejano Democrats, Council Districts 5, 7 and 9, and the city of Leon Valley.

Among the most important forums are the ones with judicial candidates, Ingram said. “We always try to do the judicial elections – we partner with UTSA – because people don’t know enough about the judges.” Before the November elections, which included the judicial races, the League and UTSA had a large turnout for their forum.

As complicated as planning and executing a forum can be, the League considers it one of its major roles in the community, and one to take pride in.

“The reward,” Ingram said, “is to see how well respected we are to the candidates and the city leaders.”

2016-17 Leadership Team

Secretary:

Diann Andy
210-262-1499
diannandy@lww@gmail.com

Treasurer:

Theresa Poenisch
210-732-3789
taxp@grandecom.net

VP Organization:

Martha Lankford
210-340-5366
mblankford1@gmail.com

VP Community Engagement

Kathryn Hill
210-313-7484
kathy@khillpr.com

VP Program

Madhu Sridhar
210-668-1250
Madhusridhar2012@gmail.com

Finance Chair:

Nancy Price
210-223-8986; W-266-6843
nanknox@sbcglobal.net

Membership:

Sybil Morgan
210-349-7012
sybilmorgan349@gmail.com

Voter Service:

Phyllis Ingram
210-764-1557
pingram1@satx.rr.com

Editor, The Voter

Glenda Wolin
210-378-4614
gwolin@gmail.com

Directors at Large

Olga Benavides
210-545-3798
granble@aol.com

Evelyn Bonavita
210-828-1368
ebonavita@satx.rr.com

Sue Robertson Dodd
830-481-3030
jsuerobertsondodd@gmail.com

Tina Torres
210-643-5222
tinactorres@aol.com

Anne Wiatrowski
210-260-4899
wiatrowski@earthlink.com

2017-18 board gets nod

At the March Board of Directors meeting, Evelyn Bonavita, chair of the Nominating Committee, announced the committee's nominations for the 2017-18 Board of Directors. The board will be elected at the Annual Meeting on May 20 from the committee's nominations and nominations from the floor.

The Nominating Committee for 2016-17 comprises Evelyn Bonavita, chair; and members Leslye Altemeier, Phyllis Ingram, Nancy Price and Elaine Talarski.

Following are the Nominating Committee's nominations.

OFFICERS

President:

Madhu Sridhar (1 year)

Secretary:

Sue Robertson-Dodd

VP Community Engagement:

Kathy Hill

Vice President Program:

Elaine Talarski (1 year)

ELECTED DIRECTORS

Voter Services:

Chris Forbrich

Finance:

Nancy Price

At Large:

Annalisa Peace (1 year)

At Large:

Gayna Dupont (1 year)

At Large:

Linda Arronge

CARRY-OVER BOARD

MEMBERS (1 year remaining)

Treasurer:

Theresa Poenisch

Vice President Organization:

Martha Lankford

Membership:

Sybil Morgan

Editor, the Voter:

Glenda Wolin

Evelyn Bonavita: At Large

NOMINATING COMMITTEE

2017-18

Phyllis Ingram: chair

Diann Andy, member

Marian Edson, member

New Member

Lee Tinker

Since 2016, I have helped improve the lives of people with epilepsy as the development director for the Epilepsy Foundation Central & South Texas. While the foundation receives grant funding, it still needs to raise about half its budget from community resources and individuals. Previously I was director of development for ARTS San Antonio, a nonprofit performing arts organization.

In 2010, I moved to San Antonio from Oregon where I raised funds for several educational and social service nonprofit organizations. My previous business career in Dallas was in training, consulting and software development.

After growing up in Philadelphia, I enrolled at Middlebury College in Vermont. After graduation, I moved to Boston where I worked for several years in fundraising and for technology companies before receiving my MBA from Simmons School of Management. Then I moved to Dallas where I spent most of my time working as a manager for SBC, a telecommunications company.

My husband and I have an abundant vegetable garden and two lively dogs.

Unhappy Hour focuses on Equal Pay Day

What kind of event would charge different prices for men and for women of various ethnicities?

How about one that honors Equal Pay Day, the day on which women's earnings symbolically catch up with what men earned the previous year? This year, April 4 is the day through which white women on average have to work to earn as much as a man worked in 2016. African-American women and Latinas have to work even longer.

So on that evening, the price of Unhappy Hour, which is from 5:30 to 7:30 at the Work-

ery, 221 W. Poplar St., varies: It's \$10 for men, \$7.90 for white women, \$6.30 for African-American women and \$5.40 for Latinas.

That doesn't mean you have to be unhappy at the event, which will feature light appetizers, drinks, a postcard mailing campaign, door prizes, a raffle and speakers, expected to be Hope Andrade, Sherilee Smith and Renee Watson. The League will also have an information table there.

Pat Jasso, organizer of the Unhappy Hour, says there will be three more during the year to continue to raise awareness of the pay gap.

League's new Website on the way

Get ready for a new and re-freshed, vibrant and robust LWVSanAntonio.org!

Our website is in the middle of a redesign. Our goal with the updated website is to make it inviting, fun, interactive and easy to navigate. We hope to improve the structure of the content with many new features and some small but impactful changes. Integrated social media buttons for Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn will foster improved communication. We plan to constantly update our content with helpful and timely information, articles, blogs, newsletters, announcements and success stories in Making Democracy Work.

Chris Forbrich, a League member and professional computer guru with his own

IT company, is putting together the new website with the help of the League Website Committee members, who gathered material from the existing website, searched sources for new ideas, and asked Chris a lot of questions – even some good ones.

The new website will clearly direct both Leaguers and members of the community to where they can find nonpartisan information on voting and voter registration, who their

government officials are and how to contact them, local League activities, what the League stands for and what action it takes at all levels, and much more.

The League welcomes your contribution of time, skills and creativity to this new project by helping us maintain and update the website, writing a blog or a news article or, if you really want to have fun, taking charge of questions for a weekly or monthly quiz that we plan to feature on government, history, current affairs and such.

If you are interested, please email league@LWVSanAntonio.org.

We hope to go live with the website before Fiesta, which as San Antonians, you all know starts April 20. You'll be the first to hear when it's ready.



Upcoming

Get deputized! Become a volunteer deputy registrar so you can register people to vote. If you have been deputized in the past, you need to take the class again this year. The next classes at the Elections office are April 11 at 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.; advance sign-up is required. The schedule for classes at the Bexar County Elections Department is at www.bit.ly/dep_reg.

City Council District 5 forum, Monday, April 5, 6:30 p.m., UTSA Downtown Campus, Aula Canaria Room, Buena Vista Building, 501 W César E Chávez Blvd.

Last day to register to vote in the May election is April 6.

Meet & Greet for all members, new and long-standing, Saturday, April 8, 10:30 a.m., at the home of Glenda Wolin, 2731 Marlborough Dr. RSVP to Glenda @ 210-378-4614 or gwolin@gmail.com

City Council District 1 Forum, Thursday, April 13, 7 p.m., Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, 922 San Pedro.

Leon Valley City Council forum, Thursday, April 20,

6 p.m., Leon Valley Conference Center, 6421 Evers Rd.

Fiesta, April 20-30, various sites. For details go to <https://www.fiesta-sa.org/>

City Council District 9 forum, Saturday, April 22, 10 a.m., The Vineyard Community Center, Loop 1604 and Huebner

Municipal elections are May 6. Early voting begins April 24. San Antonio voters will elect a mayor and 10 city council representatives and vote on an \$850 million bond issue. Several school boards will also be having elections.