

League of Women Voters Presents Three Democracy in Action Awards

Last year the League of Women Voters launched Democracy in Action Awards. We continued that tradition at our annual meeting held on May 13, at the Aull Center by presenting three Democracy in Action Awards to The Community Coalition for Social Justice, Mr. John Sonnenday of the Coordinating Council on Homelessness, and League member Lyndell Millechia. The meeting began with a very informative presentation by guest speaker Barb Howe on the "Evolution of the Voting Rights Act (up to 1965)".

The League recognized the Community Coalition for Social Justice with a Democracy in Action Award. The CCSJ was represented by Al Anderson, Susan Brown, Nora Sheets and Barb Howe. It was chartered in 2000 with a mission to promote the principles of social and economic justice, respect all people and oppose discrimination and hate motivated violence. In addition to individual members the CCSJ is joined by religious organizations, labor councils and community advocacy groups and most recently by the League of Women Voters as an organizational member.

The CCSJ has sponsored events such as forums on fair housing and religious diversity and they provide a wide range of books on social justice themes to local libraries. Their most visible activity is the annual program to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The event educates us about where we have been and where we are going as a country and as a community in terms of civil rights. The award was accepted by Al Anderson on behalf of the Coalition for Social Justice.

The second award of the evening was presented to Mr. John Sonnenday for his tireless work on behalf of the homeless population in Morgantown and Monongalia County. In the spring of 2010, the Morgantown City Council and the Mon County Commission created a task force to study and develop a plan to reduce homeless. Mr. Sonnenday was the chair of the task force and since that time, he has been instrumental in guiding a dedicated group of people who continue to work toward eliminating homelessness in our area.

The work of the original task force led to the creation of the Coordinating Council on Homelessness, which was launched in February 2014 with John Sonnenday as the Executive Director. Under his guidance, 145 people were moved into permanent housing in 2013 and 206 in 2014, including 39 chronically homeless people. The Council has received federal grants and participated in nation-wide campaigns and under his direction. Our community was chosen as one of 71 communities in the country to participate in Zero:2016, with the goal of ending veteran homelessness by the end of 2015 and chronic homelessness by the end of 2016. The League was honored to present Mr. Sonnenday with the Democracy in Action award.

Last but far from least, the League honored one of our own, Lyndell Millechia. League President Jonathan Rosenbaum, presented her with a Democracy in Action award. Lyndell has been a League member for over 40 years. She is the go-to person of the organization, Board member, past President, current Treasurer, Newsletter Editor, she maintains our membership list and mailing list, updates our Guide to Government Officials, she has arranged locations for countless League events including Candidate Forums. She is always the first person to arrive and the last person to leave League sponsored events. Her contributions to the League are immeasurable. Lyndell can be described by the title of the opera that chronicles the life of Susan B. Anthony, "The Mother of Us All."

Although the League of Women Voters name emphasizes the “voting” part of democracy, we all understand that democracy is about much more than just voting. According to the dictionary, democracy is “government by the people” and a “state of society characterized by formal equality of rights and privileges” (Dictionary.com). Equality of rights and privileges are extended to everyone through organizations and individuals who champion the ideals of social justice, to insure that all of us are given equal opportunity to participate in a free and democratic society.