

3-17-93 Maya on LWV Food and Youth

I wanted to show you this file from 1968 from the Race Relations Center in Reno, that says that we started with Nancy Gomes Eddie Scott and Elmer Rusco. And here are copies of the really great newsletter they did with Kelsey Harding (?) doing the artwork. It's an hourglass with an ostrich and his head stuck in the sand. And there is a world holding up a mirror to itself. They were raising money for it. It was started in November, on the heels of Martin Luther King's assassination. In the brochure we talk about how many people went to the center and how many phone calls they got – a lot. And we asked if people realize that it was to the Race Relations Center that Rolling Thunder had come when they needed help for Indian justice as well as Blacks. And that the Center had received 258 persons visiting it and 293 phone calls in the first three months.

It was set up opposite the University in one of those little houses where the Women's Center is, to the west. And it was just a telephone office, and Eddie Scott coming and going. And the thing that is interesting is that we joined up with the NAACP in trying to get the Governor to call a Special Session of the Legislature so that Nevada might, and this is a laugh, lead the nation by passing Fair Housing legislation (laughs). But it was great that people weren't afraid to proceed as if that were normal.

*I was going to say, is that the kind of thing you did really just to make the point and get some some publicity around the question of Fair Housing?*

Well, I don't know. I suppose that was the NAACP's reasoning. Eddie Scott had been doing all this Civil Rights work on his own, and he was a meter reader for the power company, and he was finding it harder and harder to do both jobs.

The Indian case then was when Stanley Smart and his family were arrested for getting a deer out of season. And they'd need help for taking care of his family for the night, and we'd find ways of doing that. It was interesting that this was a place not just for Blacks, but dealt with Native American issues too.

*Do you remember at that point what the climate was for Blacks in this area?*

Well, it was tense because the whole country was tense over its race relations, and it was an echo of Martin Luther King's assassination felt out here. People were not burning down the city because there never was that big a population of Blacks to make that fear. There had been from a long time back, an audacious NAACP type workplan. Alice Smith and Bertha Woodard worked to do things like picketing the Woolworths in support of the Eastern pickets that were trying to get them to serve Blacks. But there was a lot of feeling in the country that the NAACP wasn't enough – that Blacks needed to strike out and do things on their own, the way that Eddie Scott was doing. The Race Relations Center went on, and I don't really know what's become of it. But it seems to me they could do with it today.

*It seems like 1968 was a big year nationally. Martin Luther King was killed in April. Bobby Kennedy was killed in May. There was the Democratic Convention, and the Chicago 7 trial.*

Yes, 68 was a really turbulent year, there were urban riots, and places like Detroit were going up.

Nevada was connected to the rest of the country – I suppose there was inevitable interchange, because everyone saw everything on the tube. And the riots expressed themselves in that. And then I was in a position to do something about it because of the position I had on the National League Board, which was to chair their Human Resources and study. That involved getting all the materials that came out of all the national places on the relationship of poverty. And of course by this time, the Great Society had been started and one of the things that happened was that Nancy Gomes got a job with the War on Poverty, with the OEO (Office of Economic Opportunity) in Reno.

*So that was federal money that came down to the cities specifically for race relations and economic advancement?*

Yes. There is still an OEO in Reno and Las Vegas. Back to your question about what was the relationship locally of race relations to the national scene. It came by virtue of television and news and newspapers and radio and all, but for us here it also came in the form of our relationship as an organization of the LWV to the national organization, because the league is built systematically on a national, state and local structure and inter-relations with those. I realize that one of the things that for me was frustrating was to be living here in such a beautiful and remote spot and have all these pictures of what was going in with the race relations, with the civil rights movement coming over the television to us. And to feel that there's just no way of being part of that, so that I was always reaching out to try to find a way of becoming part of it.. So during these next years – Nancy Gomes was a really big help in that and we talked about the—at I think, but during these years there was kind of a mutual wave between what we were doing here on the ground and what would happen in Washington, and between the academic, the studios part, and the action part. The League is solidly demanding that people be students of the issues that they take up, and since poverty and race relations were the subject I was the chair of there was an increasing batch of material, like the Koerner Report, to keep up with. The Koerner Commission was commissioned to take a look at the urban riots and their causes and with making recommendations about it. But there was lots of really good reading matter that I never would have encountered had I not been in this position with the League. A lot of it we passed along to local leagues all over the country, but a lot of it was just material which because the office was there in Washington, because the reports were put out there. There was a woman who worked for me as staffer - Helen, was there in Washington, was privy to, and she was a great scouter of materials. She was the staffer for Race Relations and Poverty. There was one for Foreign Policy and one on the Environment.



In 1969 I was representing the National Board at the League's Youth Conference and at the Conference on Hunger, and those are what I want to talk about because they were very important in my development and understanding. Both for how the government works – how the White House was working and how organizations that are trying to change that are operating. Because what you had was the activity generated by the war on poverty. Because to have places like the OEO office dedicated to looking at that meant that you had people who were paid to think about that. Yes, and trying to solve them. And since the government as a whole seemed so intransigent often, there was a lot of confrontation involved in that process.

It was the beginning of Nixon's reign. I noticed that – there's a great headline on a flyer that we had around the White House Conference on Hunger that says, "They're out to kill the poverty program," and that indeed was the essence of what it was. And one of the first signs of that was an accusation by John Kramer who was a lawyer with some of the people working on hunger that the conference was being changed – that the conference was using poverty money to field a conference that was to have been on hunger and that they were changing it to be Food, Nutrition and Health in order to serve the purposes of the food industry. And they did indeed have panels, industry panels and all of that. The \$400,000 that was to have been used for the Hunger Conference, in order to bring to the attention of people in the country that hunger did exist in the United States, and to make people realize the extent of poverty in the midst of riches. Then the National Welfare Rights as they came into this conference was to confront that in an active way as possible. And since I was the Chair of this for the League of Women Voters, I was the person who was representing the League on the Women's Panel, chaired by a woman from one of the churches, the Methodists.

There was a very important moment in that for me, which had to do with the organizers. In the first place, they had a meeting in Chicago called by some of the poverty workers, who were working with Hispanics and Blacks, and with poor Appalachians, They had that in Chicago where there was a lot of discussion about whether they should allow this White House Conference on Food to go forward, or whether they should disrupt it totally. It must have been a very tumultuous meeting, with a lot of internal struggle as well. Struggle between Puerto Ricans and Chicanos from the Southwest, and always – this was part of every one of the meetings – or whether the Indians had been left out. There was a lot of internal struggle but just the report of it was terrifying both to the White House and to the Chair of this Women's Panel. There were about 4 or 5 panels: a Youth Panel, Religious Panel, an Industry panel, and all of them were charged to meet together and then come back with recommendations. And the members of our Women's Panel included, there must have been 15 or so of us – a representative of the PTA, national PTA and of the YWCA and there was Dorothy Hite, who was an old timer with Martin Luther King, who is the head of the National Council of Negro Women, an old time organization. And there was Eleanor Eaton who represented the American Friends Service Committee, and that's where I first connected with them. And there was someone from the Hispanic Community of Puerto Rican Women who was sitting next to me. One of the tactics of the people who were thinking about disrupting the conference was to challenge the President to declare a state of national emergency because there were so many hungry people. It



would have had a very practical effect, which was to release money, emergency money, which could be used for food. Whereas if they didn't use it, it would go back into the general funds and just be used for military or whatever. That was a proposal. And at one point in our deliberations in this women's group, Barbara Bodie, representing the Youth panel, and some guy that was representing the Religious panel came to our meeting and gave this challenge. I should also say, and I'll get back to Barbara's request in a second. But I should also tell you that the National Welfare Rights had set up its tables in the foyer in the lobby of the hotel. It was one of the Hiltons, and they were asking people not to eat the meals that had been provided for them. We were all given – all of the people invited, like me were given rooms and food tickets for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And so what NWRO was doing was asking people not to use their food tickets, but to eat on a welfare diet.

*What a great idea!*

Yeah. And also then privately they came to me to ask if they could use my room and so what I did was just to give over my room to them and I went and bunked with another League person. Of course these were two large double bedded rooms and it was obvious that that was what should be done.

*Why did they come to you?*

Oh well we had already gotten connected at the leadership conference on the Hill – they had a cocktail party one day and I had gone to it for the League and from across the room I saw George Wiley and his dashiki, and he came across the room and over to me because that day they had been discussing the question of Las Vegas, and he wanted to be acquainted with the League of Women Voters and wanted to get their support for their work and so forth.

He was the hired person for NWRO. But that's how I'd known him and gotten connected with also this Maya St Helen ? was very interested in the National Welfare Rights Organization and she had connected me with them. We'd gone over to the office one day.

But back to the crucial event of the meeting. It was so interesting that this rep of young people and rep of the church should have come to the women to ask them to go with them. They wanted a delegation to with them to Nixon to demand that he declare a national emergency on the issue of hunger. And it just terrified this chairperson. I mean she just – you could tell through the references all during the morning that the people who had been in direct contact with the White House were really terrified of having this conference blow up. And then when this came it seemed to be really scary to her. I don't remember her name. Jean Meheur? a Frenchman, was Chair of the Conference. Nixon had made him chair because he was a nutritionist. That cast the meeting in a whole other term. It allowed you to talk about what was a good diet instead of what kinds of grains should be produced by industry. It takes on a whole other thing that people are too poor to buy food, if they just knew nutrition then everything'd be OK. But there was this sort of tremor in the room, and then the chair asked that Barbara and the minister leave and

that we would discuss it among ourselves. So we discussed it, and then voted on it but they voted it down and it lost.

They went around the room to say why and how people felt. They obviously did not feel good at that moment, but she wanted an account, all around the room, and it came to our side of the table to for instance the Puerto Rican woman sitting next to me said, "Well you know I really believe in that" but her problem was that it fed into the other side of the Hispanic controversy. And then the YWCA had another reason. She really thought it was true, but, you know, and then they got around to Dorothy Hite who was almost at the end of this go round of reasons why people had voted as they had I guess people voted as they went. Dorothy always crocheted – she crocheted endless throws in every meeting, and she's just the prototype of the typical middle America Black woman. She sort of put her knitting down and said, "well..." but everyone knew she had worked with King and been part of really decisive meetings with him and so that memory was all freighted onto her, and she said, "Well that's always the way it is. You're always with us until it comes right down to the vote." And that really soaked the people who all wanted to be in the right place. And it seemed as though there was just this awful impasse.

She voted for it. I voted for it and Eleanor Eaton voted for it. And the night before, we had had an all night meeting getting ready for this women's meeting. We had been given some kind of assignment to write up something about school lunches and I don't know what all, so it had taken most of the night, and I had been with this Puerto Rican woman and PTA woman. And I really had gotten to like her. And she said, "As one who voted on the prevailing side, I want to reconsider the motion, and that was a parliamentary procedure that I had never seen work in quite this way. It was very exciting, because then we went around and our side won. And the chair asked for a moment of prayer, so everyone was sort of praying and I formulated a motion that would be a reconsideration. I formulated it in such a way as to empower the Chair to carry with him a recognition of what (Hite?) had said. And part of what I learned from that was that sitting across from the chair at a long table was a very useful device. Here are the names of the people who were on the task force. Pat Young was the chair.

This was the Women's Task Force for the White House Conference on Food Nutrition and Health, which had been changed from the White House Conference on Hunger, thereby changing the slant. The vice-chair was Dorothy Hite of the National Council of Negro Women. And Hirmalia Bitanzas, who was a Puerto Rican development person. And Unita Blackwell from Mississippi (and she's on Emily's list of people who are running). She is now the mayor of Mayorstown, for many years.



3-17-93 Maya Miller on  
National League of Women Voters  
and Food and Youth Conference

Food for all was the organization devised by the Nixon apologist named Choat (?), who had a good deal of money himself, and who talked Nixon into committing like a million dollars to put together this organization that would try to figure out why it was that there was hunger amidst the most agriculturally affluent states in the Union. They figured out which counties – Iowa, Indiana, the central part of the country that's the breadbasket – where there were counties where there were inordinate numbers of people going hungry. Why was that, that that could happen? And was it something in the county commissions? Why couldn't they get food to people?

They need five kind of middle-of-the-road organizations. And the League was one, the American Friends Service Committee. La Raza from the Southwest was one. And Dorothy Hite, of the National Council of Negro Women. There was a doctor who was a nutritionist, and he had helped get WIC (Women Infants Children food program) through Congress. That has been one of the programs of the Great Society that has really lasted, along with Headstart.

So these groups were all part of Food for All. It was an ongoing organization that lasted a couple of years. What it did for the League was to give us a staff person who was very helpful to us. It gave Eleanor Eaton of AFSC a staffperson. Each of these five organizations got someone they could pay to monitor hunger issues. And that was helpful, but it did seem like sort of buying us all off.

*Did you have discussions amongst yourselves about whether you should go for it?*

Yes, and we decided we should. The person who was the Youth staff was Suzanne, last name started with Z, who went on to be very active in hunger organizing. So I guess it was a good thing. It was an interesting week for me. Then the other conference I went to that was exciting and significant, was a White House Conference on Youth in Estes Park, Colorado. And there was also a League of Women Voters Youth Conference in Fort Collins.

The White House conference was huge. There were several thousand people. And it snowed and all these people from the South had nothing but sandals, and the Army brought in shoes and things for them.

The first day we just had plastic bags over our feet and rubber bands to hold them on. But everyone kept slipping and it was so bad they brought in Army boots to substitute. One of the interesting things about that was how debilitating to a conference, to people getting together informally or even formally, weather like that is. It was so different from places where people could sit around on the lawns.

The big issue at that conference was how Native Americans had been left out. So they did a big confrontation on that one. I think it was after the League's one. The League's conference at Fort Collins was fascinating because they had a good round-up of people, I must say, the speakers.

Saul Alinsky was the main dinner speaker. And they had the local Black Panthers from Denver come out and speak to us in the evening, they weren't on the main program. And they had batches of people to speak. But the thing that was most notable was the first night we came to dinner, and I noticed people coming in the other direction, all alarmed. And what had happened was that they had gotten in and there were little fruit cups around at everybody's place. And these had grapes in them. And so the Hispanic contingent who was there just challenged people on the subject, and so the League had to deal with what they were going to do about this.

*Because there was a grape boycott?*

There was a grape boycott. And the interesting thing was that some people just sat down and started eating, some sort of ignorant young people. (laughs) Some of the straight Republicans! And the poor little waitresses didn't know what was up at all. They had never heard of a grape boycott, and all they were trying to do was serve dinner. As the people sat down and started eating down in the lower part of the room, nearer the speaker, it escalated – the feeling escalated. I had decided to leave when I heard this whole table turned over by the Hispanics, because they were angry that a young man who sat down was wolfing his little grapes. (laughs) And so that created a scene, and then they said that we could not patronize this college's dining room, and so that presented a big problem.

One of the people most involved in this conference was Peter Edelman, who was Marion Wright's husband. And he was a staff member, with her, of Bobby Kennedy. And he was also a great friend of the League, and he helped put this conference together. So he and the League, presidents and so forth, spent a long night of hassling out with them what would be a proper response. Dinner was cancelled – there was no dinner that night. But Saul Alinsky went forward and spoke with an example of his own kind of technique at hand (laughs). The dignitaries figured out that they would send the food for the whole conference to the barrio that was not far from Fort Collins. And then we didn't know whether the conference would go forward.

The conference went forward minus food, and then people sort of rustled around. Some people had cars and they went out and got pizzas. And I remember eating candy bars for two days! And what a lesson that was to me because you know your head aches and the possibility of having reasonable discussion and all becomes materially lessened by that.

And that's the same thing that happened in the White House Conference on Hunger for those of us who said "yes" to the welfare diet – I gave my food tickets to someone else – and just ate on the dollar and a quarter or something you were allowed a day. And what that bought, most efficiently, nutritionally, in this hotel, was a piece of apple pie. And I



would also have drinks with friends. Not have drinks, but eat the peanuts and things (laughs), and it helped to make youralize what scrounging is.

*But candy bars, what that kind of an intentional thing on your part?*

Well, no, it was what was there. It was just the machines where there were candy bars. But I didn't have a car and did think that that was sort of not in order. Also, you could put a nickel and dime in and get a peanut or cheese cracker.

*Were people getting short with each other?*

Yes, uh huh. And that night, the Black Panthers came and what they did was to challenge the League President, Lucy Benson, to give them \$75,000 that day (laughs) on the spot. And watching her explain that wasn't possible...

*What did they want it for?*

Oh I don't know. Running their outfit there in Denver. But there was a lot of challenging of that kind. But then that brings you up short, you know. How come is it that you want to use them to teach you what is happening, but then... I'm sure the resource people were paid for their performance. But their contention is that what they're doing year round it they're doing it for you, for society and we were impressed by that (laughs), but not impressed to the tune of \$75,000. I thought that was gutsy!

*Interesting figure.*

Yes

*But it's interesting to me, and maybe you can shed some light on this, that the League of Women Voters was so radical as to bring in Saul linsky and the Black Panthers.*

Well, I think they knew that for young people, you had to have somebody who was not just reading and ... It was a youth conference. It was to reach out to them and give them some awareness. But also to bring together young people so that the League could hear what was on their minds. I don't remember much more about that conference, but Fort Collins has stayed in my mind as an interesting spot. It shows you what can happen with a group of politically savvy organizing people. It was interesting that the League should have been close enough to have gotten that. And that's why it was really useful to me – I mean it was wonderful to be abl to have that job. I see by my notes slo that in 1969 in Atlanta there was something called the Inner City Conference. In November and December there was a municipal conference that Dick went to, and a water conference that I went to. There were lots of conferences. And the people that I was seeing I guess were the Westbrooks, Luth Mack (I lent him \$5,000 for his McDonalds in Reno).



And Rolling Thunder from Carlin. He was challenging the Legislature or something. The Andersons And Dora John, from Pyramid Lake, a Paiute woman. '69 was a really roaring year.

There was a Legislature that year, and stuff like the Bipes Springs and the Conservation Forum. I was still involved with that. The Job Corps, that whole issue was during that legislature. And there was another Water Compact, Tahoe Regional Plan Public Land Law Review, and Race Relations Center. And you were at Putney?

*The things that my little list here that were part of the late sixties also has National Welfare Rights Organization, George Eiley, March on the Strip, lobbying in Carson City, and the Census, which I suppose was 1970.*

Yeah and so was the March on the Strip.

About NWRO: It was really in this '69 period when with the White House Conference on Hunger and all, that George Wiley wanted so much to hook up these middle class women because he saw the League as a real force. Their organizing was really a Saul Alinsky type of organizing, where you do several things at the same time. You carry out law-suits within the governmental structure. And you try to get your point across that way. And you function in the street. You challenge with confrontations that are visible to people and that allow people who aren't lawyers to function and make their points heard. And you enlist allies. The way they did in the Civil Rights Movement. You know, all those pictures of Martin Luther King going across the Bridge and all. They had nuns and people like Nelson Rockefeller and they find allies in the middle class society to come and be with them, to stand with them and that then forms a protection for them from – as much protection as they could get – from the police.

*And was part of it breaking the law, and civil disobedience?*

Yeah part of it was civil disobedience, yeah.

*Being arrested and challenging the legal structure.*

But you see, it's challenging it in several ways, in the courts at the same time. And that will be important when it comes to the March on the Las Vegas Strip, because it was almost a classic operation \_\_\_\_\_.

(Around this time) the March on Washington was really important too. Because Martin Luther King had just been killed, and Abernathy carried forward and there were debates whether they should do it or not, you know. Nut they decided to do it and so I think we talked about what it was like with Nancy to get the Leagehere to support the group that was coming across the country. But that's another way the organizers have of going across, stopping in towns and explaining what they're doing.

*Like a road show, kind of.*

Like a road show, yeah. But then, we had a National League Board Meeting during the tie of the Poor People's March, when they landed in Washington. And it was just terrible weather – they had this terrible rain. And they were camping on the mall – in Foggy Bottom down in that lower part. And there was just mud up to here – it was just one mass of mud where these tents and things that were put up there. And lots of just boards you had to walk on in order not to be totally mired in the mud. The first thing they did was to have an actual march and I really had helped to get the League to support that going on that. And also lots of middle class people were feeling really guilty because Martin Luther King was dead.

It was June and I had this terrible hay-fever and asthma attack. I could hardly sleep all night long, you could hardly breathe in this hotel. And I had tried the night before to cross the street, and hadn't been able. I had to sit down on the curb because I didn't have the wind to cross the street. And I was wanting to cross the street to go to a pharmacy to get something for this. But I remember going over to the League office and sitting in the waiting room and just wondering if I was going to be able to make it! An then Lucy and the other board members got ready and they started striding out and I tagged along and we walked all the way to the Reflecting Pool, there by the Lincoln Memorial. And then that's where the performance sort of was, the speeches and all of that kind of. I was sitting on the lawn just so grateful to sit down (laughs).

And the people were camping in this miserable condition and the press under Nixon, in June. It must have been just before the election around the 1968 convention.

*And the Republicans had their convention in Miami, where Nixon was nominated.*

Oh yes!

Well, we're talk about the Census later. But I think that gives some of the sense of turbulence, and of this structured League organization. That's really an interesting part of it. How do you get from being a suburban housewife in a remote place like Carson City, Nevada, to actually being able to take part in any of what was happening. And I felt so out of it during the Civil Rights Movement. I don't know whether you remember I put up this big magnified picture from the paper of the people who were marching with King across that bridge. And I put a note under it saying, "whose side would you like to be on?" (laughs) Because here were these absolutely awful looking bullies on one side with their clubs and helmets, protecting wherever it was. Brownsville. Oh, Montgomery, wasn't it? And on the other side were all these really free looking intent people. Not only Martin Luther King, but the people that were supporting him – the nuns and all.

*But through these conversations, who were all the influences? I mean, you call yourself middle class and a housewife. There were people locally, like Nancy Gomes, Eddie Scott, Jim Anderson, who were becoming radical, ordinary Nevadans. And then there were all the national influences, like Dorothy Hite, or Barbara Bode, the Black Panthers, coming through from other places. I think part of it was reaching out and connecting yourself*



*with all of those influences and then becoming on your own, a major player in those kinds of meetings.*

Yes, it's sort of fun to think about what all you can do.

END