

Teaching women to campaign—and win

By Mary Abowd

Once an 18-year-old single mother on welfare, Kathy Hayes-McElroy never thought she'd be training to run for political office. "In high school, I may have been elected Miss Congeniality, but I wasn't the one voted Most Likely to Become President," she laughs. Now the African-American community outreach supervisor for the Cook County state's attorney's office, Hayes-McElroy is one of 12 Illinois women who could be destined to do just that.

They are part of the Illinois Women's Institute for Leadership (IWIL), a new initiative to train and mentor Democratic women leaders. "We're interested ultimately in obtaining policy positions in government," says IWIL president Loretta Durbin, who runs a political consulting firm in Springfield and is married to Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin. "Some will start out on county boards and school boards; others may go directly to the statehouse. The key is to get them into the pipeline to run for office."

Two years ago, Durbin and a group of Democratic women came up with the idea for IWIL because, she says, women "are totally under-represented everywhere in government." Indeed, the number of Illinois women who have held statewide office can be tallied on one hand—they amount to a grand total of four—

and of those, only one, Dawn Clark Netsch, who served as comptroller from 1991-1995, was a Democrat. "Women lose elections because they don't know how to give speeches, work a crowd, and fundraise," says IWIL Vice President Margaret Blackshere, the first female president of the AFL-CIO Illinois.

Last year, 50 women applied to be IWIL delegates. The winners, many of whom were already familiar with political campaigns, were selected based on their potential to become political leaders. They ranged from a park district foundation director in Rockford and a legislative aide in Springfield to an attorney at a reputable Chicago firm and a county board member in Peoria. So far, the delegates have attended five of the six institute sessions, which began in January and run through August and are focused on fundraising, public speaking, political campaign organization and public policy. In April, they visited Springfield to "shadow" and learn from legislators. In June, they went to Capitol Hill.

Last winter, IWIL's first session featured an A-list of

political movers and shakers in Illinois, among them Senator Durbin, Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Illinois), state House Speaker Michael J. Madigan and former Democratic National Committee Chairman David Wilhelm. "We've had access to individuals that many, even veteran,

candidates don't have access to," says Hayes-McElroy, who has worked on local political campaigns.

But having the right calling cards is only the beginning. Developing a network of campaign contributors is just as important, says Ann Liston, regional director of Emily's List, a national organization that raises money for pro-choice Democratic women candidates. In April, Liston taught an IWIL fundraising workshop entitled "Love it or hate it, we've got to do it." The reality is, most women don't love it.

"I do tons of fundraising for other candidates and incumbents, but the daunting part is asking for yourself," says delegate Tracy Fischman, director of policy and legislative affairs of the STD/HIV/AIDS division at the Chicago Department of Public Health. "It's about selling yourself and knowing that you are prepared to be a really good elected official. Jan [Schakowsky] calls it 'dialing for dollars.'"

While IWIL focuses on mentoring, another Illinois organization called Women's Voices, Women's Votes, founded in 1994, funds the campaigns of progressive, pro-choice Democratic women running for state legislature. "Our mission is primarily fundraising," says state Rep. Barbara Flynn Currie, a founder of the group. "We've had a track record of helping elect some terrific women." Two women to watch in the November elections? State Senator Lisa Madigan, in her bid for Illinois Attorney General, and Iris Martinez, who, if elected, would be the first Latina in the state Senate.

"There are a lot of women in Illinois who are in the game now; we don't have to be lone soldiers anymore," says Hayes-McElroy. "When people start realizing that women's issues are everyone's issues—labor, family, environmental, medical issues—I don't think you're going to be able to stop us." ■

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the same rules that prevent them from being able to imagine themselves as candidates.

The Dos and Don'ts of campaigning, after all, are almost all about appearances: The appearance of being tough on crime, the appearance of not being able to handle the pressure of a political position. Young people see the emphasis on appearance and assume that even if they could fit into the tight mold of a candidate, why bother? But when the White House Project's interviewers asked young women about issues, and when they were able to make the connection between the issues they care about and the actions politicians take (as opposed to how they look taking them), interest in a political career grew substantially.

Right now, the rules of politics may get a woman elected, but following them too closely almost certainly means there will be fewer women to follow. Only by allowing female candidates to violate the Dos and Don'ts of campaigning will we begin to widen the spectrum of positions available to women. The message we should send to women running for office? When someone tells you something is a Do, Don't. ■

EUROPE CRAWLS AHEAD ...

As Speaker of the Riksdagen, the Swedish parliament, Birgitta Dahl holds Sweden's second-highest political office. But when she was first elected back in 1969, as a 30-year-old single mother, she was regarded as "very odd."

"To be accepted and respected, you had to act like a bad copy of a man," Dahl recalls of her early years in politics. "But we tried to change that, and we never gave up our identity. Now women have competence in Parliament, and they have changed its performance and priorities."

By Megan Rowling

Back then, women of her generation were eager for change. From the beginning, they based their demands on the right of the individual—whether male or female—to have equal access to education, work and social security. And as politicians, they fought hard to build a legal framework for good childcare and parental leave, for fathers as well as mothers. "We got this kind of legislation through," Dahl says, "even though it took 15 years of serious conflict, debate and struggle."

And their efforts paid off. Sweden now has the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in the world, at 42.7 percent—up from just 12 percent in 1969. Two of its three deputy speakers are also women. Other Nordic countries too have high levels of female representation: In rankings compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Denmark takes second place behind Sweden, with women accounting for 38 percent of parliament members, followed by Finland and Norway with around 36.5 percent. (Finland also has one of the world's 11 women heads of state.) These nations' Social Democratic and far-left governing coalitions have made impressive progress toward equality in all areas of society in the past 40 years. But the nature of their electoral systems is also very important.

Julie Ballington, gender project officer at the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), points out that the top 10 countries in the IPU ranking all use some form of proportional representation. This kind of voting system, in which parties are allocated seats in multi-member districts according to the percentage of votes they win, Ballington says, "offers a way to address gender imbalance in parliaments."

With single-member districts, parties are often under pressure to choose a male candidate. But where they can contest and win more than one seat per constituency, they tend to be more willing to field female candidates. And by improving the gender balance on their slates, they widen their appeal among women voters.

Most European countries now use proportional representation or a combination of proportional representation and majoritarian voting, the system in use in the United States and the United Kingdom. In Europe, the widespread use of proportional representation has boosted the number of women politicians—particularly in the past three decades. And in the Nordic countries, where left-wing parties have enjoyed long periods in power and feminism has received strong support, the combination of these factors has led to significant progress toward gender parity in politics.

But even within Europe, some countries continue to lag behind. In Britain, which uses a single-member district plurality system, women members of parliament make up just 17.9 percent of the House of Commons. In the general elections of 2001, the ruling Labour Party stipulated that half those on its candidate shortlists be women. But research conducted by the Fawcett Society, a British organization that campaigns for gender equity, showed that some female hopefuls experienced overt discrimination and even sexual harassment when interviewed by local party members during the selection process.

"You are told things like 'your children are better off with you at home' ... 'you are the best candidate but we are not ready for a woman.' They would select the donkey rather than the woman," said one candidate. Another complained: "They are absolutely adamant they will not consider a woman. ... It was said to me ... 'we do enjoy watching you speak—we always imagine what your knickers are like.' It is that basic." In light of such attitudes, it is not surprising that women candidates were selected for only four out of 38 vacant seats.

Thanks to new governmental legislation, however, the party is set to reintroduce the controversial method of all-women shortlists it used in the general election of 1997. The use of

Several years ago I saw something I've never forgotten. One day my counterpart in a set of difficult contract negotiations was accompanied by his supervisor. The boss wasn't there to step in and cut the final deal, but only to offer moral support to his staff. It was a small gesture, but it was a reminder that leadership isn't always about stepping out in front of others, but knowing how to let others step in front of you.

That's something those in leadership positions sometimes forget, but it's something particularly important for women to remember. Feminism's mission has always been about more than helping women win power; it also teaches us to transform the way it's exercised. Today, when

women gain authority, too often we set aside our skills in collaboration and team building and instead adopt the most conventional approach to leadership. As a result we miss the opportunity to exercise leadership in the most meaningful way possible: by helping unleash the talents of others.

Most women leaders believe in serving as a role model for young girls. That's great, but that's only where our responsibilities begin. It's also our job to help other women into leadership positions. The way to do that isn't by encouraging younger

The Official Word

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women to change who they are to fit the status quo, but to challenge the status quo so others better appreciate the crucial leadership women can offer.