



League of Women Voters of New Jersey Commemorates 50 Years of the Voting Rights Act
Rowell-Bullard Shares Story of Being Freed from Prison by MLK
Haygood Reminds Us to Safeguard and Expand the Vote
Wooten Celebrated for 75 years as a Poll Worker

The League of Women Voters of New Jersey held their 61st Biennial state convention in celebration of the 95th anniversary of the League's founding and the 50 year anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. Civil rights leaders and voting rights advocates, including keynote speaker Ryan Haygood, inspired the organization to continue the vital work defending voting rights.

Ryan Haygood, President and CEO of the NJ Institute for Social Justice, has litigated some of the most important civil rights cases of our time and has twice defended the constitutionality of a core provision of the Voting Rights Act. In his previous role at the NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund, Haygood worked to empower communities of color by facilitating full, equal, and active participation in the political process, fighting for better educational, employment, and housing opportunities, and advocating for a fair criminal justice system. As President and CEO of the Institute, Haygood works to expand access to social justice and economic opportunity.

“In this 50th anniversary year of the Voting Rights Act, we reflect on the tremendous steps toward equality that have been taken since its passage. At the same time, we are sober-minded about the reality that the march toward equality continues. The work of advancing and protecting the right to vote is not self-executing; indeed, it requires our eternal vigilance. In this important anniversary year, we are standing with the League of Women Voters and recommitting ourselves to safeguarding and expanding our right to vote. We urge you to join us,” said Ryan P. Haygood, President and CEO of the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, one of the leading voices for social justice on behalf of New Jersey's urban communities.

Outgoing League of Women Voters of New Jersey President Toni Zimmer of Sparta, the first African-American president of the organization, presided over the event and echoed Haygood's sentiment. Zimmer stated, “The League must act in this time when so many people of color still face such unbelievable inequality. There's too much at stake, too many sacrifices have been made, lives have been given to secure our civil rights. We refuse to ignore such stark differences in opportunity in our country and we refuse to allow anyone to push back on our voting rights.”

Long-time League member Winnefred Rowell-Bullard gave a moving speech recounting a time that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. freed her and her peers from a South Carolina penitentiary after they were arrested for participating in a non-violent, sit-in protest at a segregated movie theater.

Rowell-Bullard, a college freshman at Allen University at the time of the encounter, remarked that she “joined the student government and became very active.” She continued to note that the

student government was “very upset about the segregated conditions in Columbia S.C. and about the way black college student were being treated.”

Rowell-Bullard told the crowd that “two weeks before Christmas, I along with 20 student government members, peacefully walked downtown to the segregated movie, bought tickets to see the movie, and sat down stairs in the white only section. Immediately, the ticket collector ran over and ordered us to go up stairs to the colored only section, but we told him that the ticket did not read sit in colored only section.” They were arrested for their protest and Dr. King, hearing of the situation, came to the prison to free the group. Rowell-Bullard continued, “From that day to this present day I will always remember the day that Dr. King supported us by coming to the prison himself to set us free. His presence added a lasting in-depth meaning to taking a stand for social justice.”

The League was also honored to present a lifetime achievement award to Laura Wooten. Mrs. Wooten has been a poll worker in Mercer County for 75 years. She has worked the polls longer than anyone in New Jersey, and perhaps longer than anyone in the country. The League knows that election days rely on committed and knowledgeable poll workers and wanted to celebrate Mrs. Wooten for her years of dedication.

"What a wonderful event for such an important issue--- voting," Mrs. Wooten stated about receiving the award. "I was truly surprised and honored to be recognized by the LWVNJ for something that I've done for most of my life."

Her granddaughter, Adrienne Hill added, “My grandmother is an unsung hero. She's one of those foot soldiers who is needed to help promote change. She wants nothing in return but to help spread the message that voting is important. I remember sitting with her as she watched Obama's 1st inauguration on television. The look on her face was priceless. I know that she realized in that very moment that she had helped to make a difference. She told me that she didn't think she would ever see such a thing in her lifetime. I wept at the magnitude of that moment.”

Participants left the Convention inspired and determined to continue the work of making sure everyone has equal access to the ballot. In addition, the League has started a “Young People’s Network” that is growing with young leaders that are ready to continue the fight as the organization looks toward their 100th anniversary. To learn more about joining the League of Women Voters of New Jersey, visit their website www.lwvnj.org.

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The League of Women Voters of New Jersey is a non-partisan political organization, founded in April 1920 as a successor to the New Jersey Woman Suffrage Association. Today the League encourages informed and active participation in government and influences public policy through education and advocacy.