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Print Page

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Sparta Independent > Opinion

Women's Equality Day: I hope they danced

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It's hard to imagine the emotions that must have surged through the hearts of American women back on August 26, 1920 — the day they received the right to vote through passage of the 19th Amendment. It may be impossible to replicate those feelings, but what I can do is take you on a virtual trip back in time, to describe how the historic day unfolded in Washington, changed the future for all of us, and where we find ourselves today.

The fate of the 19th Amendment was decided by a single vote, by 24-year-old legislator Harry Burn, of Tennessee, who switched from "no" to "yes" in response to a letter from his mother saying, "Hurrah, and vote for suffrage!" The Secretary of State in Washington, DC issued the 19th Amendment's proclamation immediately, well before breakfast on August 26, 1920, in order to head off any final obstructionism.

Did women kick up their heels and dance in the streets when they heard the news? I really don't know, but they certainly deserved to. Our country had taken a tremendous step forward that could not have been accomplished without the decades of hard work, courage and planning put forth by woman suffrage movement leaders and supporters.

A couple of years before that historic day, leaders of the suffrage movement began to carefully plan for it. They realized that winning the right to vote would be just the beginning of full citizenship for women. As new voters, women would have to be taught the fundamental elements of voting, including how and where to register and vote, how to interpret ballot issues, and how to assess candidates. They would also need to be informed and educated on an array of relevant issues to cast their votes effectively and with conviction. And so, the League of Women Voters was conceptualized, ready and waiting in the wings to step forward on that incredible day as the official organization to help women make the historic transition into the world of the informed voter.

The League of Women Voters of New Jersey joined in the original 1920 effort to launch this successful transition. Today, 91 years after it was officially founded in Newark, the League of Women Voters of New Jersey has grown to include 35 local League organizations throughout the state, and is supported by members who continue to serve the civic needs of all New Jersey citizens. The League of Women Voters of New Jersey registers thousands of voters, defends voting rights, supports women's rights, and actively educates citizens on important issues so they can have an effective voice in government to bring about constructive change.

We are proud and grateful for the efforts of the strong and principled women who sacrificed and fought for so many years to bring equality to all women by standing up and insisting upon the passage of the 19th Amendment. We believe that a secure future depends on citizens learning about the issues, speaking out, and seeking positive solutions to the problems confronting our communities and our country.

Of course, there is still lots of work to be done, but before we continue on, we should take some time off to celebrate Women's Equality Day, as many celebrated this day back in 1920. I hope they danced.

Toni Zimmer is President of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey, a nonpartisan political organization that neither supports nor opposes candidates for office at any level of government. For more information, you can visit their website at www.LWVNJ.org.