

## Interview with Lorraine Fischer

Wednesday, August 21, 2013

Interviewed by Florence Sprague

For some women, being busy isn't enough, if they see a need they step forward to help. Lorraine Fischer is one of those women. While she is no longer sure exactly what year she joined the League of Women Voters of Maplewood at the invitation of her good friend and Maplewood League of Women Voters member, Viv Forsburg, you can understand why. In those years she was raising five children, had a husband whose job could have irregular hours and might take him out of town for days at a time, was serving on church committees and community boards and being a good neighbor to all in her Hillside neighborhood.

Before joining the LWV she knew a bit about its goals and felt that they were in line with hers, particularly in the area of voter service. Unit meetings then were held in homes and organized primarily by neighborhood, because not everyone had a car, and some women did not even drive.

The young city of Maplewood was served by a variety of neighborhood clubs. Local organizations like these were the early sponsors of candidates' forums and, well, let's just say that some were not impartially run. Things had gotten to the point where some candidates did not want to participate. Lorraine's husband, Peter, was on the board of their local community club which wanted its forum to be fair and equitable and have audience input. Pete was to going to be the moderator and, knowing about the LWV, he arranged to have that forum run by LWV rules and standards. Things ran smoothly and some candidates came to request LWV participation. In an interesting twist, at the first Hillside forum the LWV helped with, the club members provided the refreshments, not the women of the LWV. Having fair candidates' forums has always been satisfying for Lorraine.

Before Minnesota had Election Day voter registration, it could be difficult for working people to get to city hall to register to vote. The city would hold voter registration drives at the fire stations some evenings and weekends to ensure that people could register, staffed by League of Women Voters members. When Election Day registration was instituted in 1974, which was the same year that Minnesota began requiring all voters to register to vote, additional judges were needed. (Prior to that date, very small communities were exempt from the requirement for a system of voter registration to which larger communities were held. <http://www.sos.state.mn.us/index.aspx?page=1732> and the versions of Minn. Stat. §201.02 and §204.07 which were in effect prior to 1974) Leaguers were prime candidates for those positions, since they were already familiar with the registration process and Lorraine then began a decades long career as an election judge, giving up her post as head judge for her precinct only recently. One change she noted over the years was that in the early years, women sometimes had to be reminded to use their own first name when signing the voting book, because they were so accustomed to signing other papers as Mrs. John Doe, not Jane Doe.

When asked about other changes over the years, she replied that it would almost be easier to say what had not changed; all parts of society have changed so much. One example Lorraine cited was how 50 years ago women who were divorced and raising a family alone were often looked down upon for not being at home with their children, especially in the kids got into any trouble, even though women needed to return to work to help support their families. Today it is so much more acceptable for

women to be working outside the home, whether married or not, and whether they have children at home or not.

Maplewood originally had Plan A government, with the council responsible for administrative as well as legislative functions. In the mid-1960s Lorraine was on the city committee that studied different options for city government. LWV Maplewood also did a local study about forms of city government. The committee recommended Plan B form of government, with a city manager taking on many responsibilities once held by the council. The League held public informational meetings before the public referendum, which approved the adoption of Plan B government. Lorraine had the impression that some in city government had not expected, and perhaps not been eager for, Plan B to be the recommendation. In the long run, the council members came to value plan B government, but at first they were not happy at giving up authority to a city manager. It was almost a foregone conclusion that the first city manager would not last long, and indeed the first manager lasted only about six months and was fired after being accused of a variety of shortcomings, both personal and work related. People were just going to be critical of whoever had the job. [1968]

As well as working with the LWV, Lorraine served the City of Maplewood for decades. She was on the committee which recommended that Maplewood have a Human Rights Commission (HRC), on which she then served. She left the HRC when she was appointed to the Planning Commission, a job she hadn't applied for, and where she has served for many years and continues to contribute. She was also the Planning Commission's representative to the Housing and Redevelopment Authority. Once when Lorraine was appointed to serve her name was given in the record as Mrs. Peter Fischer. Her husband asked her to have this changed to using her first name to avoid confusion if it should be mentioned in the local paper, since his mother was also Mrs. Peter Fischer.

Lorraine is proud of how the Leaguers were often involved in the community in many ways beyond the League, such as with the Friends of the Ramsey County Library, the schools, and their churches. LWV members were from both parties and worked for community betterment, not being strictly politically motivated.

Ensuring equal access to voting for all is one of the most important things LWV does. Lorraine feels that it is not always easy or automatic for those in the oldest generations to have picture id. In earlier generations people paid cash, used public transportation, and women in particular might not have had driver's licenses. Candidates' forums continue to serve a particularly valuable function. Attendance may vary from year to year depending on what local controversies are brewing, and there are always some attendees who thank you and some who grouse, but the forums provide a valuable public service.

Through the League of Women Voters Lorraine became more engaged in regional issues. She was a longtime representative to CMAL and followed the work of the Met Council. She says it began as primarily a planning commission for the region and notes that local planning commissions are appointed, not elected, in line with the CMAL position supporting an appointed Met Council. One time CMAL did a study on the adequacy of services for the aging in the metro area. They could not find enough information in many areas to make a determination of the degree of adequacy. The feedback to agencies from CMAL may have contributed to the subsequent creation of the Senior Linkage Line.

The LWV can't do all of the things it once did when it had greater membership and most of the members were not employed, but it still does important work. We have to be realistic and focus on our

primary mission. Equal rights and voter rights will always be important to Lorraine and they cannot be taken for granted and this makes Lorraine Fischer and the League of Women Voters an enduring match-up. Thank you Lorraine for all you have done.