

ON THE SCENE: Holding up half the sky



Sandra Weber and Lorraine Duvall (Provided photo — Naj Wikoff)

Much attention of late has been garnered by a U.S. Treasury Department decision to put a female on the \$10 dollar bill, replacing Alexander Hamilton – in a reprieve for President Andrew Jackson on the \$20 who had been slated for replacement.

A letter that 9-year-old Sofia sent to President Barack Obama asking why a woman appears on U.S. currency sparked the decision. The president felt he had heard a good idea and urged treasury to follow

up. Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman and Eleanor Roosevelt are now top contenders.

No question that honoring a woman in such a manner, ideally several, is long overdue. Yet this will not address other pressing issues: ongoing gender pay inequity; absence of women in leadership roles in politics, business, science, art and entertainment; the onslaught against women's bodies in sexual assault in civilian and military life; child prostitution; and the media's holding up physical images few could meet without severe dieting, extensive surgery or the physical exercise programs of professional athletes.

Many challenges are more subtle, such as the challenges women have, sometimes since a young age, asserting themselves as both authentically similar to and different from men.

Challenges facing women was the theme of the Saturday, June 27 symposium at the Tahawus Center in AuSable Forks, " *Holding Up Half the Sky: Being a Woman in the North Country.*"

Lorraine Duvall, who recently published her memoir "And I Know Too Much to Pretend," proposed and co-organized the symposium with the Center's co-founder, Rebecca Kelly.

"This began at an environmental symposium last summer," said Kelly. "Lorraine was a guest. As we discussed high points, she asked, 'Have you ever considered hosting a feminist workshop here?' I answered, 'Well, yes!' We've bantered the idea about last fall and it evolved from there."

"All my life, I've felt a need for women to gather, share stories and support each other," said Duvall. "It's as relevant now as it was 40 years ago."

"Women define empowerment differently than do men," said Patricia Tidwell, a psychotherapist specializing in women's achievement and success issues. "Men tend to focus on command and control, being in charge. Women like to make things happen by connecting with others,

bringing people together, moving forward from consensus. Sometimes it's about vocabulary and understanding difference. Often one gender doesn't appreciate the other's different perspective. And there is a difference! Women have their own minds, their own ways of working."

The day opened with a panel discussion between author Duvall, self-described professional volunteer Marie-Anne Azar Ward, author/performer Sandra Weber, and Keene Central School senior Liza Amirault. An empowerment workshop with Tidwell followed. A presentation by Guerrilla Girls' co-founder Frida Kahlo closed the day.

The well-attended symposium sparked lively dialogue and the sharing of personal stories and experiences. Duvall opened the first panel reading excerpts from her memoirs reflecting back on career blocks not faced by her male counterparts.

"Let me provide some perspective on what it was like growing up from the '60s through the early '80s, how the feminist movement was part of my real life," said Duvall. "Younger women may take what we helped change for granted, not seeing that there is still a long way to go."

Duvall's passion was mathematics, still an unusual career choice for women. She soon learned that jobs were considered to be "for girls" or "for men," with much of the work environment's social structure built around men. In the early '60s, the computer programming jobs she sought were listed under "men wanted." Think of Kathy Switzer, the first woman to run in the Boston Marathon, was only able to enter back in 1967 by using her first initial: K. Switzer. When she was discovered, the race organizer tried to drag her out of "his race." Switzer entered neither to make a political statement nor to change the sport but because she wanted to run a marathon.

Similarly, Duvall sought employment to use her mathematical skills. She told of meeting to discuss her job with her new boss in the cocktail lounge of a Chicago hotel at which he was staying. As they sat to discuss her responsibilities, they were told to leave. The lounge did not serve women. The subtle message was that she would not be able to

meet clients in common social environments and that hiring a woman would handicap the company's ability to conduct business. Duvall shared learning from a black woman colleague, among the first integrated into an all-white Little Rock high school, that this colleague experienced greater discrimination for being female than black.

Ward spoke of her challenges growing up as a Lebanese-American in the North Country while finding her place as a woman. She mentioned an advertisement seen in her youth featuring a woman exclaiming happily, "I can bring home the bacon and fry it up in a pan!" the message being that, after women moved into the workforce, they were expected to also do the work of a full-time homemaker.

Amirault shared her arresting story about dealing with the ideal body image held up by much of society and her own hoped-for career of stay-at-home mom.

There was general agreement about what is needed: full and equal partnership, shared responsibility, trust, and respect between women and men, with new approaches allowing everyone more freedom and authenticity. It was agreed that we still have a long way to go.

"It was great to be a part of. I don't usually get a chance to join such events with women who are older and more experienced than I," said Amirault.

"I am so proud of her!" said Kim Frank of her daughter Liza's presentation. "She always amazes me."

"I think it's really very interesting to see the spectrum of women attending and hear their different perspectives," said Olivia Haller. "I am so enthusiastic that it is taking place here in AuSable Forks."

"I feel enlivened by a great discussion," said Duvall at day's end. "Many people expressed their own opinions. That's what we wanted."

Expect more such discussions and programming at Tahawus Center and to see Duvall in other regional forums. A timely issue was raised in a discussion that deserves to continue.