

AAUW Covington-Mandeville Branch History

By Eileen deHaro

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The Covington-Mandeville branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) began in 1964 as the Covington branch, Louisiana's 15th branch affiliate. In 1988 the name was changed to the Covington-Mandeville branch to reflect its relationship to West St. Tammany Parish. Currently one of six branches in Louisiana, it is the state's second largest branch. Membership now draws from St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, and Washington parishes and includes one charter member (a member since its inception in 1964), four former state presidents, the Southeast Central Regional Director, and one Honorary Life Member (a member of AAUW for over 50 years).

One of the AAUW Educational Foundation endowments, the **Auril W. Phelps Research and Projects Endowment**, was begun by Louisiana AAUW members in 1990 and fully funded by 1993 to honor *Auril W. Phelps*, a member of the Covington-Mandeville Branch, and a former state president. The Covington-Mandeville branch has also been the recipient of Educational Foundation grants. In 1995, branch President *Sharon Vercellotti* received a Community Action Grant for the branch's second Visions 2000: A Career Fair for Girls and their Parents in which 4-5th grade girls were offered mentoring in nontraditional careers. The first Visions 2000 Career Fair in 1992 was funded primarily by the branch. In 1998, branch President, *Eileen deHaro*, received one of ten Sister-to-Sister \$500 grants to host a Parish-wide Sister-to-Sister Summit.

The Covington-Mandeville branch has also acted on AAUW Educational Research initiatives. In 1993, following release of *Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America's Schools*; The Slidell and Covington-Mandeville Branches formed a coalition to approach the St. Tammany Parish School System with AAUW's Sample Sexual Harassment Policy. Members of both branches worked with school officials on guidelines for this policy. The result was the development of a Sexual Harassment Policy for the parish schools, enacted in February 1994. *Sharon Vercellotti* (Covington-Mandeville Branch) presented this work in 1995 at the AAUW Convention in Orlando, Florida in a workshop entitled *Changing School Climate*. AAUW was again called to assist in the revision of the St. Tammany Parish School System Sexual Harassment policy in 1997. The original efforts and the revision of the policy were presented at the 1997 AAUW Convention in Anaheim, California, in a workshop entitled *Baby It's Cold Inside*. *Eileen deHaro*, President of the Covington-Mandeville Branch, and *Beverly Stubblefield*, member of the now-disbanded Slidell Branch, served on the panel in this workshop which was chaired by *Freddie Landry* of the Metairie-Eastbank Branch. In 1993-1994, work toward a Sexual Harassment Policy for St Tammany schools was one of fourteen Sexual Harassment Awareness Initiatives presented by branches in Louisiana. Press coverage was phenomenal on this issue and included a panel discussion on the topic on the Angela television show airing in the New Orleans Metro area. In addition, *Beverly Stubblefield* (Slidell), *Sharon Vercellotti* (Covington-Mandeville), *Stacy Brown* (Covington-Mandeville), and *Joan Doolittle* (Covington-Mandeville), were featured in the Winter 1993 Leader in Action for visibility on sexual harassment and gender equity issues.

In response to the AAUW Educational Foundation (EF) research *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*, the Covington-Mandeville branch partnered with the St. Tammany schools to host a panel discussion on teacher responses to girls versus boys in classrooms. After the release of the AAUW EF research on the topic, the branch hosted a Women in Transition Workshop to encourage women to return to college to finish uncompleted degrees or to attend universities for the

first time. In the early nineties, *Charlene Sanders* initiated a study on Children at Risk in the state, looking at factors such as drugs, alcohol, sexual activity, sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, etc. An AAUW husband and wife team was instrumental in the formation of the Parenting Center at Covington High School which teaches new teen mothers parenting skills while allowing them to remain in school and get their high school diploma.

In 1998, AAUW EF promoted Sister-to-Sister Summits nationwide as a means to gather data for a new research project. Although three Sister-to-Sister Summits were held in Louisiana, the Covington-Mandeville branch was the only branch to be mentioned in the final report *Voices of a Generation: Teenage Girls on Sex, School, and Self* which was released by the Educational Foundation in 1999. In 2005 a second Sister-to-Sister Summit was held and Miss Teen USA was the keynote speaker.

Our branch has actively raised funds for Educational Foundation efforts by silent auctions at events such as our annual Salad Supper, at Belk Charity Days Sales, etc. Our most popular EF Fundraisers have been our International Dinners at which we serve authentic cuisine of a country or region with a related speaker. We have “visited” China, Indonesia, France, India, the Balkans, Greece, Native American Culture, and an African “Safari to Timbuktu”, to name a few. These have been well attended by the membership and the public at large. Recipes from some of these dinners are featured in our branch cookbook: *Our Favorite Recipes*, an Educational Foundation fundraiser published by the branch.

The Covington-Mandeville Branch has served on several pilot programs offered by AAUW committees. In 1999, our branch was one of eight branches nationwide participating in a pilot study of the Gender-Fair School Recognition Program which was released as *Tech Check* at the National Convention in June 1999. In 2000, Covington-Mandeville was one of thirteen branches chosen to participate in the two-year Young Professional Pilot Program and was paired with the Anderson, Indiana as their mentor branch.

Because of the activities and programs offered by the Covington-Mandeville branch, it has been the recipient of various recognition awards both nationally and statewide. The 5 Star Recognition Program, begun in 1993, encouraged branches to earn five “stars” out of a potential seven. The Covington-Mandeville branch earned 5 star recognition 1993-1995 and 1996-1997 (no application was made for 1995-6), 6 stars 1998-2000 and finally gaining the ultimate 7 star status 200-01. The 5 Star Recognition Program was replaced by the 21st Century Recognition Program in 2001 and the Covington-Mandeville branch has been awarded the top accolades as a “Platinum Branch” under this recognition program since its inception.

The Covington-Mandeville Branch has participated in Community Outreach by hosting open general meetings with interesting speakers offering diverse topics. Additionally, from 1990 to 1993, a yearly Pathways program was provided offering diverse workshops in a day-long event. Our branch has also offered the Foreign Policy Association program *Great Decisions* as a community outreach since 1973. In fact we are the longest running association with this FPA program as an AAUW branch in the nation! Our branch often works in coalition with the St. Tammany League of Women Voters and other organizations to offer Issues Forums for candidates in local elections.

In our efforts for “lifelong learning” as part of AAUW’s former motto, the Covington-Mandeville branch members and guests have had some memorable field trips as AAUW adventures (formerly called *Annette’s Adventures* in honor of *Annette Doskey-Williamson*, the member who served as coordinator of these trips for 17 years). All of the excursions include a stop for lunch in addition to

a great opportunity to learn. We have canoed in Bayou Savage, taken two trips to the mouth of the Mississippi by boat, gone to Bellingrath Gardens in Alabama, and taken Alligator Anne's Swamp Tour as well as a tour of the Honey Island Swamp. We have visited Ponchartrain Vineyards to learn about winemaking and the Audubon Species Survival Center to learn about their efforts to save endangered species. We have visited the Louisiana Rural Life Museum and included a side trip to the Louisiana Mud Painting studio to see the artist painting in watercolors made from Louisiana mud. We have seen the Phantom of the Opera and Cirque du Soleil's Allegria. In other words, we have had fun!

Our branch currently hosts 2 book review groups and has hosted several special book study groups on topics such as oil (The Prize) and the Enron scandal. We are in the process of initiating additional interest groups to accommodate our member's interests.

The Covington-Mandeville branch has been lucky enough to receive excellent publicity coverage in several newspapers on a regular basis. Additionally, we were featured in a story in Inside Northside magazine's Fall 2000 issue. This visibility success is the result of the efforts of our member **Judy Martin** who serves as Publicity Chair and co-Newsletter editor. Our newsletter, News Notes, is now being sent electronically as well as by "snail mail" to members without email access.

This history of our branch is just a short synopsis of the many activities, programs, and events hosted by the Covington-Mandeville branch over the years since the branch was founded. It has been our goal to strive for programs that will educate and inform our branch members and the community.