

ICW thanks outgoing members for their service

As we begin our new fiscal year, the Indiana Commission for Women would like to wish *Senator Vi Simpson* (Bloomington), *Rep. Suzanne Crouch* (Evansville), Janie Craig Chenault (Bedford), and Melissa Martin (Indianapolis) the very best as they depart our Board of Commissioners. We thank them for their many years of service to the ICW. Both Sen. Simpson and Melissa Martin have been instrumental in the establishment of the Commission and have been active on our Board since 1996.

ICW: You were most recently the chair of the commission, what positions did you hold prior to that?

Melissa Martin: I was first appointed by Governor Bayh to the Indiana Women's Commission in 1992. He created the commission through an executive order to help remove barriers that kept women from full equality. Despite that *not* being a long time ago, and although it was twenty-some years from the onset of the Women's Movement, there were still many arenas where women were not considered. It was unusual to find a company with a woman at the helm; there were only a handful of women involved in government leadership; and to have a woman on the board of a publicly held company was an anomaly. On the health front, a diagnosis of breast cancer was nearly always fatal and there was little recognition among the health care community that women had *many specific* health needs. While women in the business community had made great strides, there was still much work to be done. With the assistance of a number of organizations and many willful women we launched a campaign to make the commission a statutorily-created entity. We succeeded. I was then re-appointed to the Indiana Commission for Women by three successive governors: Governor Frank O'Bannon, Governor Joseph Kernan and Governor Mitch Daniels.

ICW: Did you hold any officer positions while on the commission?

Sen. Vi Simpson: I co-authored legislation which created the commission in 1996 and then served on the commission.

Janie Craig Chenault: Most recently, I served as the treasurer of the board.

ICW: What is your fondest memory of the commission?

Melissa Martin: Of course, I have several "fondest" memories, not just one. What I will always carry with me are the wonderful friendships that I have made with so many outstanding Hoosier women, especially those with whom I have served as a Commissioner. There is nothing like a common sense of purpose to bring diverse personalities and backgrounds together. Helping women break through barriers has been an exhilarating experience for all of us. We may not speak of it in day-to-day conversation, but all members of the Commission are aware of where progress has been made.

Sen. Vi Simpson: We believed a state commission for women was important to address a number of inequalities, and disadvantages, that prevented women from reaching their potential. Among other responsibilities, the commission was charged with promoting the full participation of Indiana women in leadership positions in all aspects of society, including government, business, education, health care, and the justice system. This is one area where Indiana has seen great improvement, with accomplished women now serving as our top CEOs, judges, and university presidents.

Janie Craig Chenault: My fondest memory can't be narrowed down to one, alas. I met so many dedicated, brilliant, successful and outstanding women, I was in constant awe!

ICW: What do you feel was your greatest accomplishment while serving on the commission?

Melissa Martin: There are several accomplishments that I believe have truly changed the lives of women in Indiana. The first is the work the Commission did to encourage women to reduce their risk of breast cancer with annual mammograms, and as part of that initiative encourage insurance companies to honor claims for “preventive” breast exams. The second is the work the Commission did to help create the Office of Women’s Health within the Indiana State Department of Health. By creating awareness that women have unique and particular “health issues” we also created a platform from which women began to take on more responsibility for their own well-being. The third accomplishment of which I am proud is leading the Commission in the development of Indiana’s Salute to Women: The Torchbearer Awards. By honoring the achievements of incredible Indiana women we raise the bar-- not only of what is possible-- but also of everyone’s impression of the amazing talent pool we have in our state. The result is a home run for Indiana!

Sen. Vi Simpson: I was very proud of the small grants that we provided to local women's programs to serve women in need. We supported organizations that continue to provide services to improve women's health, prevent domestic violence, and promoting self-sufficiency.

Janie Craig Chenault: I did not have a personal greatest accomplishment, but as a commission we did some great outreach work with the grant for fuel vouchers [for women’s shelters] at a time when it was really needed. I am pleased to be able to call L.G. Becky Skillman my friend and introduce her at our reception a year ago. We had an impact in legislation that helped our commission and we, as a group, chose a new Executive Director [Kristin Garvey] that we believe is going to be exceedingly good for the future ICW.

ICW: In your words, why do we still need a commission for women?

Melissa Martin: As with all segments of our population, there continue to be issues that dog policymakers and prevent some women from reaching their potential. Poverty, low-paying jobs, wage gaps, sexual assault, inaccessible or unaffordable childcare and healthcare, as well as having primary responsibility for raising children and caring for

aging parents-- dampen many women's hopes for a life they have dreamed. Helping women achieve economic stability so that they are able to pursue their dreams is a goal I have for the ICW. That pursuit should not be gender-sensitive, yet we find a disproportionate number of women living in poverty—young single mothers, middle-aged divorcees, elderly widows who all need help...and hope. Bodies like the ICW can make a big difference in affecting public policy and build coalitions to bring about change. Because we are not a "single issue" group and because we represent diversity we can reach out to so many others for ideas, solutions, and new ways to frame the issues-- and then bring it back to the policy makers. It's a unique and much-needed perspective. I have been honored to serve with my fellow commissioners and will always hold dear the time we gave to help Indiana women. Women's issues affect everyone.

Sen. Vi Simpson: Thirteen years after the inception of the commission, the wage gap continues to limit the earning potential for women and their families. Hoosier women make 72 cents for every dollar that a man earns. Until women reach economic equity in our society, there will be a need for a commission for women.

Janie Craig Chenault: I had hoped that in my lifetime I would see women on a level playing field, it has not happened. I believe the ICW is successful, this year more than any, in getting remarkable women and their accomplishments in front of the entire state! I believe women tend to go out and "get a job done," with little acknowledgement or attention to the phenomenal things they are accomplishing. The ICW, through the Torchbearer, gives these women a rare opportunity to be recognized for their contributions. Huzzah!