

**LWVC CONVENTION
MAY 13, 2011
PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

I want to start my remarks today with a sincere “thank you.” The work that we do at the state League level would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of many people, including the officers and directors, our staff, and our volunteers, including our various off-board program directors, legislative consultants, and committee members.

We owe particular gratitude to all of our local League members and leaders throughout the state. The state League owes its existence to our grassroots members. Without your hands-on work in our communities, we would not be able to accomplish our mission of encouraging informed and active participation in government. Without your support, we would not have the resources to accomplish our work. Thank you.

I'd like to preface my speech by noting that each local League will receive a copy of the Biennial Report, which contains the detailed reports of all the state League officers and directors about our work from 2009 through 2011. It will also be posted on the members only website. Since you will be able to read my written report later, I want to take this opportunity to go beyond a recitation of what we've done in the past two years.

This convention is the end of the biennium, but it also marks my last few weeks as president of the League of Women Voters of California. It's been four years since I was first elected president at the 2007 state convention in Bakersfield. Two years since I was elected to a second term in Long Beach. The circle is about to be closed. So this feels like the right time to share some of my personal thoughts about the League.

In my convention speech four years ago, I noted that the tone of public discourse had coarsened and degenerated, there was a widespread lack of trust in government, and the issues facing us, such as climate change, immigration, and civil liberties in a post-9/11 world, had become ever more complex. If possible, that is even truer today. Extreme political partisanship seems to be the new normal. Incivility in public discourse seems to be more often applauded than chastised; shouting all too often substitutes for discussion. People are quick to impugn the motives, the intelligence, and even the patriotism of those who disagree with them. Those thorny issues such as climate change are still with us, joined by problems such as the prolonged recession that was only beginning to set in four years ago.

I said back then that the League has a unique and valuable role to play in this environment. That we stand for integrity, accountability, and informed decision-making. That our name is the gold standard when it comes to good government, voting, and elections. And that we provide a safe forum for civil discourse and for fair and open

debate on issues of public concern. Today, I strongly believe that the need for what the League provides is greater than ever.

After the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Arizona, I was struck by the words her brother-in-law, astronaut Scott Kelly, said from his post on the International Space Station: "These days, we are constantly reminded of the unspeakable acts of violence and damage we can inflict upon one another, not just with our actions, but also with our irresponsible words. We're better than this. We must do better." The League is an organization that is based upon the idea that we can "do better." We not only hold up an ideal of shared civic responsibility, civil discourse, and community engagement, we put it into practice. And we've been doing it for over 90 years.

In our advocacy, we only take action on issues based on positions adopted through our careful process of study and consensus. That is one reason why the League is so respected in the public policy arena. People know that when we take a position on a ballot measure or a piece of legislation, we do so only after thorough study and consideration — that we do not make our decisions lightly and that we've looked at the issue from every angle. In our voter education efforts, we strive to provide accurate, thorough, scrupulously fair information. People look for our voter information — whether through SmartVoter.org, our printed and online materials like the Easy Voter Guide, or candidate forums and ballot measure pro and con presentations — because they know they can rely on the League to give them information they need to make informed choices.

Unfortunately, our work sometimes makes us a target. Some people don't understand the "political but not partisan" nature of the League — that we never support political parties or candidates, but we do advocate on issues. Others don't understand that the League has two arms — education and advocacy — that we keep scrupulously separate so that our issue advocacy and our policy positions do not affect our voter information and community education activities. And some simply do not believe that an organization could or would take positions on political or public policy issues without somehow being motivated by partisanship or ideology.

In the current atmosphere of partisanship and cynicism, even conducting a candidates' forum, a traditional League service that gives voters the opportunity to see and hear candidates for themselves and make up their own minds, provides fodder for attacks by those who choose to read ideology into whether the Pledge of Allegiance is recited at the event.

But I think there is something more. The work that we do in the League is, in a sense, deeply subversive, and I mean that in the best possible sense. Why? Because by informing and educating the public we are providing people with knowledge, and the ability to make informed choices. Our insistence that voters need to be informed about the issues and candidates they are voting on threatens those who would prefer an ignorant and compliant public. By encouraging people to exercise their right to vote and

removing barriers to participation, we are putting power in the hands of the people, because a vote gives you a voice. It is an instrument of change. That is why those in power, throughout history and around the world, have jealously guarded the right to vote, reserving that privilege for certain groups or classes of people, and excluding others. By taking principled action on our public policy positions and fighting for open and accountable government, we make ourselves an irritant to the powers-that-be, to those who operate behind closed doors, to those who take a more expedient or cynical approach. So perhaps it is not surprising that people might look with suspicion the League and what we do.

One of the proudest moments for me was when we faced tremendous political pressure to support the budget-related propositions on the May 2009 special election ballot. Two years ago I described for you the tense meeting we had with state political leaders in which they tried to convince us to change our minds. I said it before and I say it again: We did not back down. We stood up for our process and for our positions, because the League is not an organization that bases its actions on political expediency, or out of fear. We are truly nonpartisan and speak for the common good. We act only after thorough study and deliberation. We call it as we see it, and stand up for what we believe is right. And that is why we have longstanding credibility, integrity, and respect. That is what makes us the League of Women Voters.

I'd like to share with you a bit of personal history. Let me start by telling you about my middle name. My full name is Janis Renko Hirohama. Some of you may have noticed that I always use my middle initial of "R" in my League work. The ballot measure arguments I've signed on the League's behalf, our letters supporting or opposing legislation, my op-ed articles — on all of them my name appears as "Janis R. Hirohama." It would have been a lot easier not to insist on using my middle initial. I can't tell you how many times I've had to insert it when it's been omitted. And, I suppose using the middle initial might seem pretentious or overly formal. But I have a reason.

My name came from my maternal grandfather. His name was Ayaka Takahash. On May 1, 1960, a month before I was born, he wrote this letter from Los Angeles to my parents, who were then living in Japan. "Replying to your recent request for Japanese names for the baby to be welcomed very soon, I would suggest the following name for a girl: Ren-ko. Ren means a person of stern (spotless) integrity or a person of pure heart and clean hands. Ren-ko makes a very very good girl's name."

When I was younger, I didn't like having a middle name that was so hard to pronounce, and that seemed so unusual and "foreign." But I came to embrace it. Now, I see my middle name of "Renko" as a legacy from my grandfather. I use it not only because it is a reminder of my Japanese heritage and my family's history, but also because the meaning of the name is an aspiration to live up to, although I am all too aware of the times when I fail to do so.

But my middle name is not my only legacy from my grandfather.

My grandparents' grave marker one at Evergreen Cemetery, in Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, has an inscription on the back, in Japanese. There is my grandfather's name, Takahash Ayaka. The first sentence says: "A native of the prefecture of Ehime, the city of Matsuyama, the town of Takahama." The second sentence reads: "Arrived in America in November 1903." The third sentence says: "Naturalized on August 5, 1954."

This is what my grandfather wanted as his epitaph: the place where he was born, the year he immigrated to America, and the day he became a United States citizen. As you can tell, he was a man who deeply loved America. America, however, didn't always love him back.

Some of you may remember me mentioning my grandfather in my speech at the 2007 League convention. I described how he came to this country in 1903, but could not be naturalized because of the discriminatory law that classified Japanese immigrants as "aliens ineligible for citizenship." I noted that it was not until 50 years after my grandfather's arrival in America that the Walter-McCarran Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 repealed that law and allowed my grandfather, at last, to become an American citizen at the age of 72. I marveled that I could become the president of the League of Women Voters of California — I, the granddaughter of California residents who in 1920 were so despised and disenfranchised that they could not become citizens, could not vote, could not own land, and could not marry Caucasians.

My grandfather was very aware that he was barred by law from becoming a citizen. In a statement that he wrote for his application to the Justice Department for a certificate of alien registration, he wrote: "I owe too much to this country to be disloyal. Therefore I have always thought and acted as an American Citizen (although I have never acted legally in the capacity of a citizen because I know that I am discriminated to that privilege by law). I may not be able to be classed as the best citizen; however I am inclined to believe that I am pretty well qualified to be called 'a good citizen.' The only difference between those good citizens of European nationals and myself is the possession of one sheet of Naturalization Paper." He wrote that statement in 1941.

The next year, he, his wife, and children were among the 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry sent to internment camps. Remarkably, he emerged from camp in 1945 with his faith in America, and democracy, unshaken. He started over, going into the hotel business. He called his first hotel The Washington, and the next was called the Lincoln Hotel. He became a U.S. citizen when finally allowed to do so. He diligently exercised his hard-won right to vote.

So, in my own family history I have seen the shameful depths to which our country can sink, but also the promise of the American dream and the power of belief in democracy. My legacy from my grandfather includes not only my name, but his story. It is his story that inspires me. I value the privilege of citizenship because it was once denied to members of my family. I believe in the power of the vote, because I know that without a vote, you don't have a voice. I believe that a healthy democracy is the best

protection against injustice and tyranny. That is why I am passionate about the work that the League of Women Voters does, and about what we stand for.

That is my story. Each of us has her or his own story. There is something that inspired you to devote yourselves to the League's mission of encouraging informed and active participation in government through education and advocacy. There was some spark, some moment of inspiration, some flash of enlightenment. It might have been seeing some injustice that you wanted to see righted. It could have been a person in your life who showed you the importance of the right to vote.

We don't become active League members because of devotion to some merely abstract notion of democracy. We do this work because we believe deeply in it, because it is real to us. It is what makes us willing to do the hands-on effort in our communities, going about the hard, sometimes frustrating, task of making democracy work — conducting candidate forums and pro and con presentations on ballot measures, registering voters, observing and reporting on city council meetings, fighting to get campaign finance reform.

So how would I sum up four years as League president? There are not enough words. It's been the most incredible four years of my life. I faced down governors, I was quoted in the New York Times, and I even had a supporting role in a movie (the documentary "Gerrymandering"). This job has drawn out of me abilities I never knew I had. It pushed me to do things I'd never done before. It's been exhilarating, it's been exhausting, and yes, sometimes it's been frustrating. But above all, it has left me with an abiding and unwavering faith in the importance of the League's mission, in the strength of our grassroots, and in our ability to make a difference in our nation, our state, and our communities. Thank you for allowing me the honor and privilege of working with you.

Janis R. Hirohama
President