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Higher Wages, Healthcare, and Violence Against Women Top Concerns at Women's Conference

Economic self-sufficiency, access to healthcare, and violence against women are three of the top issues facing women in this state, according to participants at a recent political conference.

The Wake County Women's Agenda Assembly was held Saturday, November 20 at the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) building in downtown Raleigh. The forum, held every two years, gives women throughout the county a chance to come together and voice their public policy concerns.

The event took place just weeks after state and national elections and during a time when many lawmakers and political activists are expressing concerns about the future of women's rights. Anne Mackie, head of the assembly planning committee, addressed some of these concerns in her opening remarks. "People will tell you that the women's movement is dead. I just say they're dead wrong," Mackie said. She praised the efforts of young women activists, whom she described as "committed, full of energy, and ready to build up the women's movement in new, exciting ways."

Mackie cautioned women not to organize "around fear and anger" and asserted that social change begins with hope and building mutually beneficial alliances. To underline her point, she told the story of five female indentured servants in the 18th century who, with the help of a schoolteacher, successfully rebelled against sexual abuse by their masters by writing up a list of demands and presenting them to their masters' wives.

Shortly after Mackie's speech, the assembly participants broke off into small groups to discuss their social policy concerns. Members of each group identified what they considered their top issues, ranked them on a scale of one to five -with five representing "most important"- and recorded the rankings on poster-size sheets of paper. Economic self-sufficiency, access to healthcare, and violence against women were the issues that garnered the most points. Other top concerns were women's participation in politics and educational opportunities.

Later, state Representative Jennifer Weiss and political lobbyist Audrey Galloway counseled the women on how to be political advocates.

Weiss stressed the importance of communicating with legislators through concise and focused emails, phone calls, and letters. She urged the women to be diligent lobbyists in the years ahead, saying, "Every aspect of choice is going to be on the line." (*continued*)

Political lobbyist and former schoolteacher Audrey Galloway told the women, “If you have a passion, you’re already on your way to being an advocate... [Your legislators] are there to do a job for you and you should enforce that.”

The Wake County Assembly was one of 15 held across the state as part of the North Carolina Women United (NCWU) Women’s Agenda Program. NCWU works to empower women through grassroots activism, community organizing, legislative advocacy, and engagement in the political process. Agenda assembly discussions form the basis of the Women’s Legislative Agenda pursued by NCWU during the North Carolina General Assembly’s long session.

Polly Williams, who coordinated the speakers for the event, said this year’s assembly attendance was nearly double that of the 2002 assembly. She also noted an increase in the number of young women and first-time attendees.

One of those first-timers was Jude Davis, a technical writer who came to the event at the urging of a friend. She was inspired by what Mackie, Weiss, and Galloway had to say about politics and, in particular, lobbying. Said Davis, “[I came] away with a real sense that I can do this.”

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