

History of League of Women Voters of Cortland County

Women in Cortland County met in May 1952 at the Cortland Free Library to learn about the history, purpose, policies and programs of the League of Women Voters (LWV). Mary Ruth Jacobus was elected temporary head of the group. One year later, the group began organizing a local League, meeting at the YWCA. After several years as a provisional league, in 1957 the LWV of Cortland gained official status and the authority to send delegates to national and state LWV conventions.

The League of Women Voters of Cortland County (LWVCC) has two separate and distinct roles: Voter Services/Citizen Education and Action/Advocacy. Within the area of Voter Service/Citizen Education, the league presents nonpartisan information about elections, the voting process, and issues.

We register voters and inform voters when and where to vote. Within the area of Action/Advocacy, the league studies issues, develops nonpartisan positions and then advocates for or against particular policies in the public interest. We collaborate with other nonpartisan organizations with similar goals.

Membership in the Cortland LWV has ranged from about 25 to 45 members, including men as early as the 1980s. Each year, the Cortland League adopts programs for study and advocacy on local, state, and national issues. We appreciate the community's generosity in providing program venues such as the Elks Lodge, Cortland Savings Bank, SUNY Cortland on Main Street, YWCA, First National Bank Building, Community Restaurant, 1890 House, Cortland Free Library, and Local Food Market.

The Cortland LWV's early studies included the NYS judicial system, with trips to local courts and



Unit leaders are shown here planning a program for the League of Women Voters. Shown are from the left:—Mrs. Edward F. Higgins, Cortland, education finance unit; Mrs. Harlan C. Metcalf, Cortland, water conservation; Mrs. Lawrence Resnick, Cortland, United Nations; and Mrs. William Riley, Cortland, economic foreign policy.

recommendations for judicial reform. NYS and local leagues played a significant role in education, outreach, and policy formation that led to a Constitutional Amendment, approved by voters in 1961, creating the Unified Court System of New York State.

Among national issues studied during the 1950s and '60s were conservation of water resources and the balance of national security and individual liberties. That balance was reexamined in 2004 by a local LWV-sponsored panel on the USA Patriot Act, which was enacted in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorism.

During the early 1990s, when federal health care reform was attempted under the Clinton administration, our league participated in the NYS League's study of health care financing. Linda Eberly was active on this topic; Nancy Kroot, Sharon Stevans, and Mary Ann Discenza contributed to a local assessment in 1991. Study of local government has been ongoing throughout our history, along with local environmental issues.

Studies and educational programs have covered a broad range of topics, such as: pros and cons of establishing a mental health clinic in Cortland (1950s), planning and zoning (1981), aquifer (1980s), role



January 1963, The Seven Valley Villager

Pictured here is a typical study group with new members. From the left: Mrs. Adeline Cotten, Homer; Mrs. Fred Green, Homer; Mrs. Marsland Perkins, Cortlandville; Mrs. John Crowley, Cortland; Mrs. John Hagler, Cortland; and Mrs. Theodore Miller, Cortland.

of federal government in agriculture (1988), positive campaigning (1991), school financing (1996), criminal justice system (2000), capital punishment in NYS (2004), replacing an elected county treasurer with appointed comptroller (2004), NYS Constitutional Convention (1996 & 2017), government consolidation (2010), redistricting (2014), money in politics (2015), fluoridation (2016), fake news (2017), and death with dignity (2018).



May 13, 1976, Cortland Standard

LOCAL GOVERNMENT: Our league's first local program was a "Know Your Town" study of the City of Cortland, followed by a study of county government and publication of "Know Your County" in the early 1960s. In the late 1970s, the Cortland LWV participated in a nationwide study of cities' financial problems, needs, and potential solutions, working with the Chamber of Commerce.



February 23, 1979

The league's research on the Cortland County Legislature and other county government continued during the 1970s. In the early 1980s, the Cortland league urged county legislators to study creation of an administrative position for the county legislature. Anna Hilton reiterated the League's support in a letter to the editor published in the Cortland Standard on October 5, 1991. After resolutions failed in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 1997, the County Legislature created the position in 2002 and hired an administrator in 2003.

After sponsoring a panel on the county administrator question in 1993, the LWVCC did so again in 2016 after the position had been vacant for two years. Homer Mayor Mary Alice Bellardini participated in the 1993 panel and a new LWV study committee in 2016. The committee concluded again that

hiring a county administrator was the right action. In a July 6, 2016 editorial, the LWV committee addressed past problems in finding the right candidate and advised the legislature to tap community experts for its hiring committee (Cortland Standard). In 2018, the County Legislature again approved hiring a County Administrator. After an unsuccessful hiring attempt that year, the Legislature expanded its search committee to include community experts in 2019, as recommended in a July 2016 editorial by a Cortland League study committee (Mary Alice Bellardini, Suzanne Etherington, Alison King, Susan Morgan, Lenore Schwager, and Robert Spitzer).

VOTER SERVICES & ELECTIONS: Dedication to voter services started early, with study of permanent personal registration in the mid 1950s. Over half a century later, modernizing remains a challenge at all levels of government. Following decades of advocacy by state and local Leagues, New York moved forward in January 2019, enacting laws that ensure portability of voter registration and facilitate absentee and early voting.

In 1986, the Cortland League partnered with five other women's organizations to form the Women's Coalition of Cortland County and sponsor candidate forums for state and national offices. The Coalition included the YWCA Cortland, American Association of University Women, SUNY Cortland Women's Studies Committee, and Zonta Club of Cortland. The Cortland LWV continues to sponsor live "Meet the Candidates" forums for local elections along with educational programs on How to Run for Office.



The LWV conducts voter registration at schools, businesses, and public events. Charlotte Farris merits kudos for training many

League members and energetically managing our voter registration booths.

Sheila Cohen and Charlotte Farris register voters on National Voter Registration Day, September 2018

ENVIRONMENT: Leading studies of land use and groundwater, Charlotte Angell, a founding member of the league, contributed a commitment to action on natural resource management for decades. In the 1950s, the Cortland League adopted the US LWV's study of water conservation, expanding into water protection after publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. Protecting land, air, and water has remained a local priority.

During the mid- to late-1900s, study and advocacy focused on clean-up of visible pollution and planning to ensure water quality. In 1980, the Cortland LWV formed a coalition on water management and conducted public meetings to inform the community about its water supply, through a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Speakers provided perspectives from town and city government; business, including the importance of water quality to farmers and realtors; county health department; and the U.S. Geological Survey.



During the 21st century, as the fields of toxicology and environmental science advanced, the Cortland League's focus shifted to protecting against chemical and biological pollutants. Interest in the aquifer and water supply continued through the 1980s, heightened in 1986 by detection of trichloroethylene contamination in groundwater. Public concern resurged in 2014-2016 when the County Legislature proposed importing incinerator ash to the county landfill. The League sponsored educational forums on the landfill and later on the economic and health impacts of importing ash. After a year of in-depth study, the LWVCC opposed the proposal on the grounds of potential adverse health effects of toxic ash. The proposal was defeated in 2016.

We learned about problems with local environmental reviews the hard way, through experience. The Cortland League used the Freedom of Information process to uncover lapses in good government practices, working with the NYS Committee on Open Government. Our experiential learning led to 2018 submission of comments on proposed reforms to the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) regulations. Comments were written by Alison King, the Cortland League President, and endorsed by the LWV of New York State.

YOUTH SERVICES: The Cortland League works with area high schools and colleges to register students to vote and enhance civic understanding through activities like mock elections and distributing Facts for Voters. In 2018, the League added several students to its board of directors and collaborated with SUNY Cortland's Institute for Civic Engagement in encouraging civil discourse among people of diverse viewpoints through deliberative dialogues.

Under Linda Frank's leadership, in 2014 the Cortland League began sending two students each year to the interactive *Students Inside Albany* conference at the state capitol. This conference is best described by a participant. In 2018, Homer High student Reed Cleland wrote: "The conference was absolutely amazing! It was really a once-in-a-lifetime experience. ... We listened to all sorts of speakers, including media representatives and environmental and education advocates, shadowed the senators, met with our assemblymen, participated in a mock debate over gun control, went bowling, and more!"

Students sponsored by the Cortland LWV, with help from the Zonta Club of Cortland and the Cortland chapter of American Association of University Women (AAUW):

2014: Kennedy George, Homer High School, and Alice Jenkins, Homer High School

2015: Harmony Johnson, Homer High School, and Charisse Farley, Cortland High School

2016: Julia Marshall, Cortland High School, and Samantha Oakley, Marathon High School

2017: Abigail Bowker, Cortland High School, and Emma Murphy, Homer High School

2018: Reed Cleland, Homer High School, and Josephine Williams, Homer High School

2019: Andrew Cihocki, Cincinnatus High School, and Santana Deckard, McGraw High School

CELEBRATIONS: The Cortland League also celebrates successes and milestones.

In



July 14, 1990 Cortland Standard

High Tea Chapeaux

Peg Bentley, left, and Christine Buck model the hats they will wear to Sunday's 5 p.m. high tea at Anna Hilton's Homer home in observance of the 35th anniversary of the Cortland League of Women Voters and the 70th anniversary of the national LWV. The price of admission is wearing a vintage hat.

Wayne Hansen/staff photo

CS 7-14-1990

July 1990, Anna Hilton hosted a High Tea to celebrate anniversaries of the U.S. and Cortland Leagues. Attendees arrived in vintage hats for the occasion.

Skipping ahead a quarter century, in 2017 the League joined other members of the Women's Coalition in celebrating the Centennial of Women's Suffrage in New York State. The Coalition secured proclamations by the County Legislature and City Common Council and turned out in white at the June Dairy parade. We marched through downtown Cortland accompanied by an Inez Mulholland look-alike on horseback.



Cortland Dairy Parade,
June 6, 2017



Cortland Dairy Parade, June 6, 2017

RECOGNITION OF VOLUNTEERS: The Cortland League's participants are too numerous to name. Lenore Schwager, Charlotte Angell, and Linda Eberly are 50-year members who have all served in multiple capacities, including as President. Prominent contributors included Anna Hilton, Peg Bentley, and Christine Buck. Anita Wright deserves special attention as League historian and fastidious timer for candidate events.

In 2008, the League instituted an annual Alice A. Walker award to honor a member of the Cortland County community whose volunteer leadership demonstrates:

- a commitment to community service
- an independent spirit and outlook
- a clear sense of justice, and
- an ability to focus on an area of need in the community.

Past awardees were:

- 2008 Jamie Dangler
- 2009 Anne Doyle
- 2010 Sharon Stevans
- 2011 Cindy Lewis
- 2012 Mary Jane Uttech
- 2013 Sheila Cohen
- 2014 Bonnie Heath and JoAnn Wickman
- 2015 *Not Awarded*
- 2016 Mary Alice Bellardini
- 2017 Dorothy Hopkins
- 2018 Pamela Jenkins and Sandra Price

We hope to inspire future generations to be active, informed citizens and look forward to many more years of serving our community.