

Taking the Lead:



Women Who Have Made a Difference in Manitoba

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH AND WOMEN LEADERS IN MANITOBA

Since 1992, women in Canada have celebrated Women's History Month in October. During this month, we recognize and honour women's accomplishments throughout our country's history. Their achievements mark a path for us to follow, and serve as strong examples for us to continue their work.

Why October?

October was chosen as Women's History Month in recognition of the Persons Case ruling issued on October 18, 1929. Prior to this ruling, women could not serve in the Canadian Senate because appointments were only open to "qualified persons" under section 24 of the *British North America Act, 1867*. Canada's Supreme Court had ruled that women were not "qualified persons" and were ineligible to serve as senators. Five women, known as the Famous Five, appealed the decision to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England and won! On October 18, 1929, the committee ruled that women were included in the term "qualified persons" and eligible to be appointed to the Senate.

WOMEN TAKING THE LEAD AND WORKING FOR CHANGE

One of the Famous Five, Nellie McClung, is well known for her role in the suffragist movement in Manitoba. As an early social activist for the rights of women, McClung confronted the prevailing attitudes of the time and lobbied for women's right to vote. Her mock parliament, a tongue-in-cheek play about the dangers of giving men the vote, was a turning point in women's struggle for suffrage.

From early pioneers like Nellie McClung, to the trailblazers of today, women have made lasting contributions to matters of importance to Manitoban women. The five women featured in this publication are some of today's leaders – women who have advocated for changes to improve the quality of life for generations to come. These women have worked in social housing, legislative reform, arts, food and economic security, and child care. All share a genuine commitment to improving the quality of life of others.

Manitoba Status of Women is pleased to recognize these women for their groundbreaking work. They are part of a long legacy of women with the courage and determination to work toward social change. Edith Regier, Diana DeLaronde-Colombe, Dr. June Marion James, Karen Busby and Myrna Phillips are examples of our own potential and the potential of communities to come together for a shared cause.



As Minister responsible for the Status of Women, I am pleased to welcome you to this publication. I am personally inspired by the many Manitoba women committed

to realizing social change. Such change would not be possible without these visionaries, who not only foresee a better future, but actively work toward it.

In this publication we showcase the accomplishments of five Manitoba women who have worked hard to make our province a better place to live. Each of them has chosen to forego the conventional expectations about a woman's place in society. They have helped to rewrite the rules and norms about women's work.

A common thread between these women is the commitment to engaging and collaborating with their community. These women are committed to ensuring that community members' voices are heard, including those who are at the margins of society. The women profiled in this publication demonstrate that women and men can successfully work together for the benefit of their families and their communities to meet the challenges of the 21st century. They have shown us, through their work, that challenges related to gender and race can be overcome.

Please join me in honouring these female role models of achievement and dedication. I hope that their passion and energy will encourage and inspire other girls and women to work toward social change locally, nationally, and globally.

Nancy Allan

Minister responsible for the Status of Women

EDITH REGIER



“There are things that people need to be healthy, and one of them is to communicate,” says Edith Regier, founder and director of the Crossing Communities Art Project (CCAP).

In 1996, Regier founded the Portage Art Project as a series of art studios in the Portage Correctional Institution for Women. Originally, she researched art by youth in detention centres with the intention to exhibit their art. However, when she saw the restrictions placed on the youth’s imaginations in institutions, Regier decided to focus her efforts on developing art studios that linked artists on the outside with women and youth in prison.

“I’d learned the importance of our imaginations to heal the past and have hope for the future, and the importance of not losing that in prison,” she says. Determined to open up real communication, Regier began working closely with the Elizabeth Fry Society, offering the program within prisons as a volunteer. Under Regier’s leadership, the project evolved into the Crossing Communities Art Project, where artists meet to create art with women and youth who have been, or are at risk of being incarcerated.

Regier notes that the artists and members of CCAP come together to create art collaboratively in a non-hierarchical environment. The project’s success relies on “building friendships and, through these, opening up creative thought,” says Regier. When asked how this work has changed her perspective on art, Regier states that she is more convinced of the value of creating art together rather than alone.

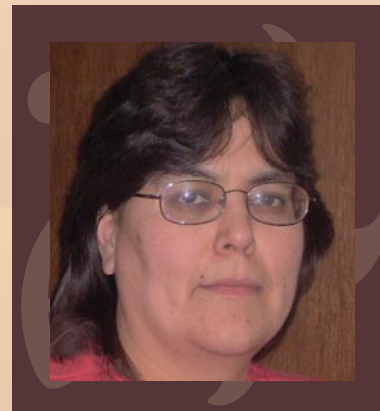
Now based in Winnipeg, the program has a considerable affect on the lives of participants. Regier notes that CCAP members have said that art fills some of the same needs as their own self-harming behaviour – it’s a way to communicate. One of the greatest rewards of her work, says Regier, is “seeing members grow from marginalized positions in society and experiencing violence and addictions to completing degrees in fine art and being accepted into pre-medicine.” She notes that the skills learned in making art, such as problem solving and communication, can be applied to many jobs and educational fields.

Regier says the project also focuses on creating discussion between marginalized women and society at large, with the goal of transforming society. Creating art gives members an opportunity to have a voice in social change. For example, CCAP recently released *Pictures of Self-Harm*, a short film, accompanied by group discussions led by CCAP members. The film examines “the broad range of self-harm including self-injury, drug addictions and violent relationships and how we can change our systems, our way of living together to have less people self-harm,” says Regier. “The women in the project have contributed a huge amount to society’s understanding of self-harm.”

Edith Regier has been recognized for her work with CCAP with a national award from the Kaiser Foundation for Excellence in Aboriginal Programming (2007), and the National Crime Prevention Strategy Award (2005).



DIANA DELARONDE-COLOMBE



Diana DeLaronde-Colombe is known for her grassroots work in Manitoba’s north, demonstrating the incredible impact one person can have on a community.

In 2001, DeLaronde-Colombe, an Aboriginal woman, began working as the community development officer for the Wabowden Community Council. Because it was difficult to get funding for projects in one small community, she says they formed a regional roundtable to work toward common goals.

“We thought, with more collaboration, we would have more success,” she says. She led the Bayline Regional Roundtable (BRRT), which supports communities along the rail line – from Ilford to Cormorant – through the process of board development and incorporation. Now in the role of the community animator, she has continued to work with these communities and First Nations to address issues such as food security, access to health care, job training, transportation, and housing.

The main focus of the BRRT in recent years has been food security. DeLaronde-Colombe has worked to promote local food production (ex: raising chickens, community gardens), processing food (ex: canning, freezing, smoking meat), and traditional foods. She has led the northern freezer-purchase program, which helps families save money by freezing locally grown, hunted or gathered food, and food from shopping trips to major centres.

DeLaronde-Colombe has also championed projects such as the Northern Healthy Foods Initiative and Manitoba Food Charter. She is proud of what the BRRT has done for the communities it represents. She says that the BRRT is successful, “because we are animating, motivating, empowering – not directing.” She also notes the importance of the great work and support of the community members and partner organizations/businesses. The support has been so strong, she says, because “we are rolling up our sleeves and getting things done. People can see the results.”

Without the support of her family, DeLaronde-Colombe says her position would have been a nine-to-five office job. But, because of her family’s support she has been able to expand the role of community animator and travel to communities regularly to advise and guide them. Balancing work and family life has been a challenge at times. “Because of my passion for my work, sometimes the balance is not always there,” she says, “then I have to go back and ensure I have time for family.”

DeLaronde-Colombe is also active in the community in other ways, fundraising and helping start new recreational opportunities for children and youth. She feels that it is important to be a role model for her children, who are now starting to become involved in the community themselves. “Women should know that the community needs us. No matter how much or how little we do,” she says. “It is to the betterment of the community. I would encourage all women – girls and grandmas – to get involved.”

Diana DeLaronde-Colombe received the Women’s World Summit Foundation Prize for Women’s Creativity in Rural Life (2007), and the 2007 Capturing Opportunities – Outstanding Community Leadership Award from Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives.



DR. JUNE MARION JAMES , O.M., FRCPC, FAAAAI



Dr. June Marion James has made a mark in both her medical career and the non-profit sector.

Born in Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. James moved to Manitoba in 1960 and became the first black woman admitted to the University of Manitoba’s Faculty of Medicine.

She received her M.D. in 1967 and went on to earn Specialist Certificates in Paediatrics and Allergy and Clinical Immunology. Dr. James began her career as a specialist in the Department of Allergy and Immunology at the Winnipeg Clinic in 1976, where she continues to practise today.

Among her professional accomplishments, Dr. James was instrumental in founding Manitoba’s Family Allergy Program and has served as a councillor of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Manitoba, and later as president. Having demonstrated that a woman can excel in the role of president, she takes pride in the work that was accomplished during her tenure. As an assistant professor at the University of Manitoba’s Faculty of Medicine since 1980, Dr. James has shared her expertise with the next generation of physicians.

Having served on over 20 boards and committees, Dr. James’ contributions to the community are impressive in their breadth and depth. Groups benefiting from her involvement include the Winnipeg Foundation, United Way, International Centre, Congress of Black Women and the Manitoba Museum. Dr. James is most proud of her instrumental role in founding the Harambee Housing Co-op. It provides social housing and affordable, market-driven units to a culturally and racially diverse population. Dr. James is proud of the fact that “all of those who live there are treated the same.”

Guided by her philosophy that creating change is a collaborative process, Dr. James enjoys working with others toward that goal. She notes it is important to be open to others’ points of view, to changing course if something isn’t working and to be willing to ask for help.

Dr. James credits the support of her late husband and her two sons with making it possible for her to serve the community. Her husband encouraged her to “get out and see the other side of life” beyond medicine.

When asked what advice she would have for other women wanting to make a difference in their communities, Dr. James says to “be confident of who you are and where you want to go. It is important to focus on your personal life – your family, and your career. Don’t be deterred!”

Dr. James has received numerous awards, including the Volunteer Centre Award for Outstanding Community Leadership (2005), the Order of Manitoba (2004), Honorary Diploma from Red River College (2004), The Queen’s Golden Jubilee Medal (2002), the Award of the Yam Dinamba Society of Nigeria (2002), Physician of the Year Award from the Manitoba Medical Association (2000), Citation for Citizenship from the Federal Government (1993), The Canada 125th Anniversary Medal (1992), and the YWCA Woman of the Year (1981).



KAREN BUSBY



Karen Busby knew she wanted to become a lawyer and a law professor from the time she was a teenager. “I was a young teenager when my parents separated. I was struck by the gross inequities of separation and divorce laws, and their impact on women and

children.” Another inspiration for her to enter law came from her concern about the street violence she saw taking place against women and girls.

As a woman coming from a low-income single parent family, Busby was not the typical law student in the early 1980s. She notes that it was challenging to hold onto and financially support her dream. Busby credits her success to the encouragement of those who believed in her. She says, “my mother, who recently passed away, was very influential in my life. She was a solid rock of a person who always encouraged me.”

Throughout her 30 years as an activist and 20 years as a professor of law at the University of Manitoba, Busby has lived by her mother’s words, “much is expected from those

to whom much has been given.” She is most proud of her work to change sexual violence laws (use of personal records, definition of consent), and her involvement with the equal marriage for same sex couples campaign. Busby takes pride in having led a lobby advocating change to Manitoba’s laws that discriminated against women, gays and lesbians. This work resulted in Manitoba having the most comprehensive changes to legislation aimed at ensuring equal rights in Canada.

Busby also notes that it was a sense of social responsibility that prompted her to come out as a lesbian in 1993. It was at a time when doing so in the private sector would have surely been career suicide.

“As an academic with the protection of tenure,” she says, “I was coming from a place of financial security and respect, and therefore I felt it was relatively safe for me to come out compared to the vast majority of women.”

Busby’s community involvement has included membership on the board of Egale, a national organization that advances equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-identified people and their families. As well, she was a board member of the National Legal Committee of the Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), and subcommittee member on various LEAF cases. She is also active in the arts community, having served as a member for various non-profit organizations and currently serving on the board of the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

When asked what advice she has for young women, Busby recommends finding ways to serve the community as a volunteer. “It develops a sense of public spirit, keeps you in touch with your community, and is a tremendous way to get experience.” She suggests taking time to consider your strengths and dreams, and then to go after them. “Work takes up one third of your time on earth, so do something you love and find meaningful.”

Karen Busby has received numerous awards recognizing her work, including the YMCA-YWCA Woman of Distinction Award (Business and the Professions; 2007), Manitoba Bar Association “Pro Bono” Award (2005), Canadian Bar Association’s Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Conference “Hero” Award (2004), LAMBDA Magic “Community Changer” Award (2002), and the University of Manitoba Community Outreach Award (1996).



MYRNA PHILLIPS



Speaking with Myrna Phillips, one quickly gets a sense of the energy and camaraderie of the early decades of the women's movement.

She says her introduction to feminism happened in the 1960s while she

was living in Brandon. At the time, she was a wife with three small children and president of a community club. One day, her neighbour gave her a copy of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan.

The book helped explain why she and her friends felt unfulfilled, even though they were doing what good wives did in those days. After reading it, she says, "there was no way I could go back to making gingham curtains."

Phillips describes the 1970s as, "a decade of enthusiasm, change, and intellectual debate. We were focused on learning how things worked so that we could make change from within." During these years, she and like-minded women worked tirelessly advocating for greater equality for women.

Much of this work was done through the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the labour movement. The women brought forward resolutions at provincial NDP conventions on issues such as family law, pensions, child care, and pay equity. Once adopted, these became party policy, and later formed part of the election platform.

Phillips hadn't intended to seek political office. She describes her early role within the women's movement as an organizer, in the background, helping other women out front. Eventually she realized that sometimes it is "easier to get out there and do it yourself," and her political career was born.

Phillips was elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) in 1981, serving until 1988. She was Speaker of the Assembly from 1986 to 1988. During her time in office, she contributed to important advances in child care, pay equity, family law and other issues critical to the women of Manitoba. Phillips is most proud of her work on child care and pensions. She was instrumental in creating and passing child care legislation and regulations, and led an extensive consultation process across Manitoba.

Her work on pension legislation gave Manitobans spousal benefits, equal pension payouts for women, and pro-rated coverage for part-time workers. When describing her motivation and that of the four other female NDP MLAs elected in 1981, she notes, "we weren't thinking of the prestige of the position; we had a vision."

After serving as an MLA, Phillips resumed her career with the provincial government, working to connect individuals with employment training until her retirement in 2001. During these years, she was active in the Manitoba Government Employees Union (MGEU).

Phillips enjoys travelling and spending time with her children and grandchildren, and continues to be active in social causes. From 1996 to 1998, Phillips worked as Director of the Legislative Council Program in Palestine. She worked with the first elected Palestinian Legislative Council to help set up their parliamentary procedure, rules of order, committee structure and constituency offices. She currently serves on the Manitoba Liquor Control Commission's Board of Commissioners, and remains active in the NDP and the Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

Myrna Phillips was recognized with a Women of Distinction Award in 1987, and received an Honourary Life Membership from the MGEU.



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